

Technical Report No. 38

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January, 1990

Also appears in *Rhetoric Review*, 7(2), 272-288.

Theory Building in Rhetoric and Composition: The Role of Empirical Scholarship

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Since the mid 1960s empirical approaches to scholarship in rhetoric and composition have emerged.¹ The use of empirical approaches can be seen in much of the work of scholars who study reading, writing, and literacy, their interconnections, and their relation to thinking and learning. Given the relatively high profile of empirical approaches over the last three decades, most people in rhetoric and composition have some understanding of their nature. However, given the rise of recent challenges (Berlin; Irmscher; North), it seems important to begin a discussion about the assumptions which inform empirical inquiry. This paper is aimed at initiating such a discussion;¹ and in particular, it is concerned with characterizing theory building in empirical scholarship and research within the context of humanistic inquiry. In this way, I hope to show that empirical practices in rhetoric and composition can be important for-provoking better rhetorics of inquiry (Nelson 430).

Empirical scholarship and research in rhetoric and composition grows out of a tacit assumption that knowledge in our field is probabilistic and contextual. In its broadest sense, empirically based theory building is aimed at understanding and evaluating existing knowledge and at generating new knowledge about language-using in society. Empirical inquiry in rhetoric and composition is a humanistic activity that is built on the premise of the epistemic, dialectical, and generative nature of our knowledge. (See Scott's three essays for a sustained discussion of rhetoric as epistemic). As with other kinds of knowledge-making, empirical knowledge is a product of a dialectic which takes place among a speaker, an interpretive community or social group in which the speaker is trying to contribute, and the historical, political, material, ideological, and situational context in which the speaker is working.

For example, say that one is interested in exploring the role of sophistic rhetoric on Greek and Roman thinking through case histories of early rhetors such as Gorgias. While uncovering the evidence to create case histories of Gorgias' thinking can place one in a position to make a contribution to public knowledge, having found persuasive evidence to support an argument is not enough. Influencing one's intellectual community is a complex function of the way one structures arguments for the community of scholars who are already working on a similar matrix of problems. Making a contribution to knowledge is not only dependent on the kind of evidence used to build a case, but on the limitations one admits in presenting the case, the unique political and social characteristics of the community, and the situational (and material) context of the larger community of rhetoricians. See, for example, Vitanza's argument that philosophical rhetoric has been employed "to denigrate the 'harlot' Sophistic rhetoric" (50). Whether "knowledge" gets noticed at all is partly a matter of whether the community is ready and willing to listen. Everyone in English can think of examples of "knowledge" that went unheard by the community; for example, Louise Rosenblatt's work was marginalized for years before the community embraced it.

All empirical work is a subjective and social act, influenced by particular communities' belief systems, work agendas, and assumptions about what is important to study. Research questions that scholars form are influenced "implicitly or explicitly by the personal experiences (Peshkin) and philosophies (Apple and Weis) that shape their interests and the way they think. Not surprisingly, researchers may be attracted to a particular theory on the basis of its compatibility

with conceptual frames and references the already have” (Goetz and LeCompte 41). Like other scholars in English studies, empirical scholars make subjective decisions about what is interesting to study, what evidence may be appropriate (or appropriated), how evidence may be evaluated, and what inferences to draw from evidence. The language used to interpret, summarize, and draw inferences from empirical work is not a neutral sign system, but is rich with metaphor and loaded with the deep tacit history of a complex discursive paradigm (see, for example, Bazerman, on the codification of the social scientific style). Indeed, the discursive practices of empirical rhetoric position us in relation to other inquiry in the field. Moreover, empirical work is a complex rhetorical act in that we use evidence to convince each other of the plausibility of assertions about evidence.

The formulation of research problems and decisions about what evidence is viewed as compelling are culturally situated. Goetz and LeCompte illustrate how value positions and moral dilemmas pervading a cultural milieu affect what researchers define as significant (42). In discussing ethnographic work in sociology and anthropology, they point out that

[i]n Great Britain, where social class distinctions are socially salient, analyses of class stratifications and its effects are common. Such studies are less frequent among researchers in the United States, where cultural ideology dictates widespread belief in the existence of a classless, egalitarian society. The reverse is true of studies of race relations. Except in the context of class analysis, researchers in Great Britain have devoted little time to what has been a prominent social dilemma throughout the history of the United States. Hence, research on race relations has not been abundant there. (42)

In addition to the political, material, and cultural factors that constrain the making of knowledge, the ethical dimension of structuring and selecting arguments is central to empirical scholarship (in addition, of course, to the obvious importance of ethics in conducting research). Those who employ empirical approaches are concerned that their claims do not extend too far beyond the evidence collected. In fact, the empirical community is quite skeptical of those who overextend their claims, do not admit the limitations of their work, or ignore contradictory evidence in their own or in other's related work. A “good read” in empirical work is one which carefully negotiates “the play” between past and present arguments, between the intertextuality of the evidence. This rhetorical stance of guarded claims and qualified conclusions may leave some readers in English who are looking for the “immediate teaching implications” or the “move to grand theory” a bit frustrated or even bored. But such “good reads” remind us to avoid sloganizing our findings and that conclusive pronouncements are not possible, nor even desirable.

Like others in English, those who are developing empirical theories in rhetoric and composition constantly grapple with the uncertainties of employing any particular way of coming to know, with the difficulties in gathering and selecting evidence, and with finding language that best captures what was observed. In short, empirical scholars recognize the importance of admitting our rhetorical limits. Despite the difficulties associated with understanding the complexities of reading and writing, empirical scholars in rhetoric and composition look for ways to be relatively more certain about the nature of human communication.

It is easy to see why some people misunderstand the discursive practices of empirical scholarship. The words “empirical” and “empiricism” have a rich negative political past. In his fascinating book, *Keywords*, British cultural critic Raymond Williams describes the evolution of the words “empirical” and “empiricism.” William explains that

empirical and the related empiricism are now in some contexts among the most difficult words in the language . . . Empirical came into English from the Greek “empeirikos” -experience, trial or experiment. But this general development was radically affected, in most early English uses, by a specialized use of the term within Greek medicine, where there were contending schools of Empiriki, Dogmatiki and Methodiki; the Empiriki had depended on observation and accepted methods, and were skeptical of theoretical explanations. This use was repeated in English, mostly in medical contexts, and in addition to its neutral sense gained a strong derogatory sense: “mountebanks, quack-salvers, Empericks” (Browne, 1621). This derogatory sense was then extended to other activities, to indicate ignorance or imposture, and empiricism was first used in this generally unfavourable sense.

The broader argument, which eventually affected the modern meanings of empirical and empiricism, is part of an exceptionally complex philosophical and scientific movement. The simplest general modern senses indicate a reliance on observed experience, but almost everything depends on how experience is understood. Experience, in one main sense, was . . . interchangeable with experiment—from the root, to try, to put, to test . . . From the 16th century, it took on a more general meaning, with more deliberate inclusion of the past . . . to indicate knowledge derived from real events as well as from particular observation . . . But the word became complicated by two factors. First the specialized sense of the Empiriks, and the derived English sense of untrained and ignorant, indicated not only a reliance on observation and experiment but a positive opposition or indifference to theory. Secondly, a complicated philosophical argument, about the relative contributions of experience and reason to the formation of ideas, produced as a description of one side of the argument the terms empiricism and empiricist to indicate theories of knowledge as derived wholly from the senses—that is from experience (not experiment) . . . understanding the development of the word. . . from the favourable “fit observation” to the unfavourable “mere” or “random observation,” without directing principle or theory . . . This difficult distinction sometimes leads to a loose use of empirical to mean atheoretical or anti-theoretical. (115-117)

Williams' discussion is helpful in that it describes at least part of the confusion with the term “empirical.” His last point about equating an empirical orientation with an atheoretical or anti-theoretical approach appears to be a central misunderstanding in some recent discussions in our disciplines' journals.

One criticism of empirical scholars is that their focus of attention, unlike those, say, in literary theory, is not on elaborating assumptions. In presenting empirical work, there are two central reasons that publications do not elaborate assumptions and theoretical positions (although it is conventional to discuss limitations). First, interpretive communities have developed around many areas of investigation in empirical studies in rhetoric. Members of these communities, like those in other areas in English, share so much in common that they tend not to specify the assumptions that underly their investigations. Second, we sometimes present our work using the conventions of the social sciences. When writing for a journal which uses a social science format, it is considered more important to stress analysis and implications. This does not mean that underlying assumptions are not present. It means that the primary audience is not interested in arguing with assumptions (which are generally empirical), rather they are interested in questioning the manner in which the study is designed and executed. But most important, the audience is concerned with how the author draws inferences from evidence.

On the Nature of Empirical Inquiry in Rhetoric

It is important to explore the nature of empirical inquiry in order to understand what rhetoricians are trying to do in conducting empirical scholarship. Broadly speaking, the empirical tradition involves examining ideas by placing them in the context of human experience; that is, by considering ideas in light of casual or systematic observation. Since there is no single way of knowing that addresses all the problems empirically oriented rhetoricians need to solve, we are methodologically eclectic and pluralistic. In case-building and structuring argument, we draw on the discourse conventions of the humanities and/or the social sciences. Neither is seen as better than the other, although choosing either set of conventions (or some mix thereof) locates the author's ideas about who will be reading the text. Furthermore, since the conventional disciplinary structure of a university is dis-integrated and since our problems, the difficult ones anyway, are integrated, our research community is multi-disciplinary. We aim to fuse theories of rhetoric, writing, reading, cognitive psychology, information design, history, and discourse analysis (among others). These interpretive communities, of course, have different value systems for how one argues, for what evidence is seen as appropriate, and for how one gains public adherence for those arguments.

While most approaches to inquiry in English studies value internal consistency as a standard for argument and evidence, empirical approaches are concerned with evaluating arguments both for internal consistency and for how well they fit external observation. In taking an empirical approach to research and scholarship, we develop and refine our ideas by evaluating their correspondence to existing experience and observations and by collecting new observations, that is, data. Our arguments, then, are evaluated by several criteria: internal consistency, consistency with prior knowledge, and correspondence with experience.

We scrutinize our speculations by examining them in the context of public evidence, ranging from historical artifacts to observations, examples, texts, events, behaviors, and reports of experiences or thinking. With such evidence, we typically describe, relate, or predict. Thus, inferred relationships can be descriptive, correlative, or causal. Most work in rhetoric and composition up to this point has been descriptive or correlative. For example, there is a growing number of descriptive studies that characterize what writers of varying experience levels do when planning, writing, or revising for an audience. There are also studies that identify correlations between such variables as age and writing skill, writing success and writing anxiety, or reading ability and writing quality. We value evidence that has been evaluated by using methods (when appropriate) that allow one to draw inferences about the reliability and generalizability of the evidence. Appropriateness of using such methods is relative to the question(s) under study, the kind of data collected, and the goals of the study.

We speculate and make claims about patterns, trends, or differences in evidence, asking whether the same claim about the evidence could be arrived at by other scholars. Put differently, empirical scholars are concerned with moving their speculation beyond personal judgment and internal coherence to public judgment and external correspondence. Empirical scholars judge one another by the nature of evidence put forth and on the extent to which evidence is convincing within the community. Thus, empirical approaches are similar to others in English in the speculative nature of claims, but are different in the values and expectations it places on the nature of acceptable evidence and inference from that evidence.

Although scholars with an empirical orientation aim to move beyond personal judgment, the judgment which motivates their inquiry and the evidence they seek is not objective. Empirical scholarship in our field is not engaged in looking for absolute Truth. We assume that all statements are corrigible (see Polyani). Our tradition does not include the search for logical proofs or

deductive inferences. We do not subscribe to the positivistic belief that if something cannot be observed, it is nonsense. We do not assert that everything can and should be quantified.

While one can be a positivist and an empiricist, not all empiricists are positivists, and I cannot think of any positivists in composition and rhetoric. One of the most outspoken supporters of positivism was A. J. Ayer in his *Language, Truth and Logic*, now taught in many contemporary rhetorical theory courses as a text to be read before Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric*. In Ayer's first edition in 1936, he held what has been called the strong form of the “verifiability criterion” which argues that “the verifiability of a sentence or a proposition is regarded as a necessary condition of its having meaning. Unverifiable sentences or propositions are regarded as nonsense” (Reese 611). In his second edition in 1946, Ayer adopts a weaker form of the verifiability criterion which insists merely that assertions should be “verifiable in principle.” From my understanding of positivism, it has been dead for at least forty years in philosophical circles and was never a working doctrine in rhetoric or composition.

This does not mean, however, that there is not an important argument to be discussed about the ambiguity behind the empiricist use of the terms “observer” and “observation.” Clearly, we have much to consider about the location, role, and perception of the observer in empirical inquiry. But in focusing on the term “positivist,” when as Raymond Williams has pointed out, “it has been dropped by those who actually defend the position being attacked, is often to distance the real conflict, or even to prevent its clarification. It becomes a swear-word, by which nobody is swearing” (239).

Albert Einstein, in his *Philosopher and Scientist*, can help us understand why some people confuse empiricism with positivism. He argues:

[A] practicing scientist may appear to an outsider 'as a type of unscrupulous opportunist': he appears a realist, insofar as he seeks to describe the world independent of the act of perception; as idealist insofar as he looks upon the concepts and theories as the free inventions of the human spirit (not logically derivable from that which is empirically given); as positivist insofar as he considers his concepts and theories justified only to the extent to which they furnish a logical representation of relations among sense experiences. He may even appear a Platonist or Pythagorean insofar as he considers the viewpoint of logical simplicity as an indispensable and effective tool of his research. (684)

Inductive Inferencing in Empirical Inquiry

In their book, *Induction*, Holland, Holyoak, Nisbett, and Thagard—who discuss the processes of inference, learning, and discovery—raise the issue that

the presence of terms denoting nonobservable objects has caused great consternation among philosophers of science and even practicing scientists. The logical positivists and their behaviorist cousins in psychology asserted that there could be no respectable place in science for such postulation. Although it is clear that these qualms must be ignored in the face of the impossibility of science without theoretical postulation, a serious problem arises for the study of scientific discovery: How could scientists ever arrive at concepts concerning things—such as electrons, black holes, and neutrinos—that they could not observe? Hume (1739/1888) proposed that ideas could be derived only from sense impressions or from definitions in terms of other ideas, but concepts from Newtonian force to genes to mental models clearly require more complex processes of formation. We will

argue that analogy is the primary means of theory construction, and that conceptual combination is the primary means for generating theoretical concepts. (326).

Inductive inference is the primary method of empirical scholarship. Inductive inference is a quasi-logical form of argument that is based on reasoning by probability (see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca). Using such a mode of inference allows one to make educated guesses or predictions about the probable. The use of inductive inferencing occurs at the level of the individual scholar who aims to build theory through making claims about evidence from a particular study or a group of studies; for example, see Hillocks' meta-analysis. And as mentioned earlier, the individual scholar's inferencing is influenced by the community's concerns about what questions are interesting to ask and what observations are interesting to make. For example, in the 1970s and early 1980s, most of the community of scholars working on problems of reading and writing focused their attention on "process," and thus, few researchers felt it important to analyze the quality of students' written products. More recently, however, researchers such as Applebee have voiced the concern that we need more work which makes explicit connections between process to product. In conducting empirical studies, then, we typically draw on the accumulated public evidence on an issue thus far (if there is any) and then design a study that can extend our knowledge.

The method of inductive inference is used cumulatively. Like work in any area in English, empirical work extends, refines, organizes, or challenges previously held assumptions about reading and writing. For example, one way to summarize knowledge across studies is to build "models" of the process under study. Models of the composing process such as those of Bereiter and Scardamalia or of Hayes and Flower are provisional. They are intended to be elaborated or changed as evidence accumulates, and are *not* as North claims "axiomatic, deductive structures" (238). As Hayes and Flower say, their model "whether it is right or wrong, can serve as 'a target to shoot at' and hence guide further research on writing" (29). When sufficient evidence is found that can lead researchers to a relatively more certain guess about what individuals do when they compose, the authors (or others) will modify the theoretical framework to account for new public evidence.

In the context of cog out a study, both inductive and deductive inferencing are sometimes used alternately, although most empirical work in rhetoric so far has been inductive. Ethnographic research is a good example of work that frequently proceeds by generating tentative statements of relationships followed by refining and creating alternative hypotheses while working in the field. Goetz and LeCompte discuss induction and deduction as types of assumptive modes in conducting research:

Purely deductive research begins with a theoretical system, develops operational definitions of the propositions and concepts of a theory, and matches them empirically to some body of data (Popper). In a sense, deductive researchers hope to find data to match a theory; inductive researchers hope to find a theory that explains their data. Purely inductive research begins with collection of data-empirical observations or measurements of some kind-and builds theoretical categories and propositions from relationships discovered among the data (Becker, Kaplan). That is, inductive research starts with examination of a phenomena develops a theory to explain what was studied. (4)

Invention in Empirical Theory Building

Theory building in empirical scholarship is a creative act in which there are many inventional points of departure. Problems are never "out there" in some acontextual space waiting

to be solved. The process of “problem formulation and problem finding” (see Young, Becker, and Pike) is simultaneously an individual and a social construction. On the one hand, invention can be a deliberate activity focused on addressing a gap in one's knowledge; on the other, original inquiry can be initiated through unconscious and even accidental experiences. Although any description of “moves in theory building” will necessarily fail to capture the excitement, spontaneity, and richness of invention within empirical scholarship, it is possible to characterize several of the more familiar starting points that often lead to building theory. Some of these include:

- Making speculations based on existing theory (from English studies or from another area, for example, anthropology) often leads to collecting data which in turn leads to confirmation or disconfirmation of the theory.
- Reading another's work critically and asking “Do I believe that?” or “What are the alternative explanations for this idea?” typically leads to proposals for alternative theories and data collection designed to discriminate among the theories. Thus, theories are often modified or reversed as a response to previous work.
- Experiencing a surprising observation may generate a set of questions that lead to data collection which can provide an opportunity to build theory to explain the observation. Observations can be verbal or nonverbal in nature, for example, linguistic, semiotic, physical, perceptual, graphic, or affective.
- Noticing an incongruity in the way an interpretive community conceptualizes a theory often provides the impetus for a reexamination of the assumptions which inform the theoretical framework and its attendant practice, which in turn can lead to theory building.
- wanting to know more about a phenomenon may lead to exploratory data collection, which often suggests hypothesis formation and posing alternative explanatory theories.
- Theorizing by analogy or metaphor. For example, one may speculate that “planning in writing is like sketching in graphic design,” or that “social psychologists have looked at interpersonal relationships in ways that can enrich approaches to the study of collaborative learning.”
- Considering aesthetic issues of an existing theory can lead to theory building. For example, a complex theory may be replaced by a simpler theory because the simpler theory is more elegant. Similarly, if two theories are related, they may be reconceptualized showing how they are related, for example reading and writing processes.

These patterns describe only a few of the moves which can be seen in the work of empirical scholars who work individually or who collaborate with a research team. This sketch is, of course, necessarily incomplete and falsely tidy. In addition, not all of these moves are particular to inquiry in the human sciences which is empirical.

Pluralism in Empirical Scholarship

Empirical scholars in rhetoric and composition accumulate evidence for their speculations through a wide variety of perspectives. They view all empirical perspectives as potentially useful

and mutually supportive “windows,” seeking to employ both quantitative and qualitative evidence. (For a good discussion of the artificial dichotomy behind the quantitative-qualitative debate, see Reichardt and Cook). Some of the perspectives taken by empirical scholars in rhetoric and composition are historical, social, linguistic, semiotic, socio-cognitive, and cognitive. Most empirical scholars are eclectic and are willing to shift perspectives and methods employed to explore those perspectives (for example, exploration, process-tracing, naturalistic observation, linguistic analysis, ethnographic, quasi-experimental and experimental studies), depending on the question they are asking. But the willingness to shift perspectives does not mean that all ways of knowing are equal in all contexts. The appropriateness of a perspective is related to the question under study.

Indeed, in the best work in our field (and here, I do not mean most influential), the perspective taken is driven by the question one seeks to address. Perspectives and methods should neither drive nor have primacy over the questions we are asking. The best empirical scholars realize the inherent limitations of any particular way of coming to know and share assumptions about the relativistic and problematic nature of certainty and of knowing. So if you ask an empirical scholar, “What are the best perspectives and methods in your area?” he or she is likely to answer “All of them. . . While there are no bad perspectives or methods, they can look bad when people use them shoddily, unthoughtfully, or inappropriately.” The important question is “How well does the perspective and methods) allow the scholar to address a question(s) in the most sensitive manner?”

Even so, debates on perspectives still divide our field. Looking at the discipline's journals reveals an ongoing debate over whether literate activities are motivated by cognitive, social, or cultural forces. We must believe that each of these perspectives (as well as others) can help us better understand the nature of literate activities. Although these perspectives do assert opposing views about the nature of literate behaviors, our differences need not prompt us to wage epideictic warfare against one another. These differences are too important for that. Moreover, investigating the points of intersection among the theories that underly such perspectives can provide powerful starting points for reconceptualizing future theory and practice:

Cognitive approaches in our field, for example, have their roots in an empirical tradition of scholarship which is rich with theory. Some of the more familiar theories within the cognitive tradition include theories of reading, memory, language processing, language acquisition, human development, perception, and creativity. Cognitive approaches in writing focus on identifying and describing the thinking processes of individuals and on the way in which those processes are organized. The cognitive approach to writing is enriched by the underlying assumption that the mind which writes is the same mind which reads, converses with friends, absorbs cultural traditions, learns to play music, and so on. Thus, what is discovered about the mind in each of these contexts can to some important extent be shared by the people who study writing.

The social approach examines the role of context, history, ideology, or culture on writing. Some of the theories which influence the social tradition include theories of the sociology of knowledge, sociolinguistics, anthropology, social cognition, constructivism, interpersonal communication, cultural criticism, and semiotics. Work by scholars concerned with the social construction of language furthers our understanding of issues such as collaboration among students and their teachers, the role of literacy in society, writing in nonacademic contexts, the contextual nature of disciplinary knowledge, intertextuality, invention in writing, the cultural artifacts of schooling, and the process of entering new discourse communities.

Although the cognitive approach concentrates on the individual and the social on the collective, the difference is partly an old one of figures and grounds—of what people choose to focus on. Of course, we do take sides and our disagreements are not superficial, but we must exercise caution against building unnecessarily narrow theories. Just as some cognitive rhetorical theorists err in not questioning their assumptions about the individual's conscious and rational control over actions, some rhetorical scholars who study the social context err in not questioning their assumptions about environmental, social, or cultural determinism. Either oversight can weaken the credibility of claims. It seems clear that cognition is mediated by context and that culture is a potent force in all literate acts. Taken together, these views can coexist to provide a more complete view of literate practices than either alone. They force us to ask the hard questions, “how much?” and “to what extent does either contribute to literate practices across rhetorical situations?”

It is important to point out that most scholars who employ cognitive or social approaches in rhetoric and composition do not see themselves as strict cognitivists or as strict social-constructionists, but rather, see themselves as cognitive or social (and in some cases socio-cognitive) rhetoricians. The difference here is that along with the theories that come from a cognitive or social tradition, these scholars draw implicitly on their heritage of classical and contemporary rhetorical theories, both to guide their questions and to help them understand what they observe. As Connors has stated so eloquently, rhetorical theory “is our memory” (1). Rhetorical theories enlarge cognitive and social approaches because, they situate our inquiry in a historical and ideological context. And as Lauer and Asher suggest; rhetorical inquiry “provides hypotheses for experimental research. In return, empirical research refines rhetorical theory, helps verify or repudiate it, and identifies important variables that contribute to new theory formation”

Rhetoricians have always been concerned with how writers create texts for particular audiences within unique rhetorical situations. But with the wedding of cognitive, social, and rhetorical theory, we find a proliferation of studies of writer-reader relationships, collaborative learning, and a host of other areas built on the assumption of the audience as co-creator of meaning. (For a recent review of work in audience, see Schriver, “Teaching Writers to Anticipate the Reader's Needs.”) We find few empirical studies in writing that explore the processes of individuals who write without an audience, i.e., people who write for themselves. As work in the area progresses, socio-cognitive rhetoric is telling us more about the process of how individuals read, write, and learn within social and cultural contexts.

If we can agree that such theory building needs to be encouraged, then we must turn our focus from arguing against perspectives and methods to arguing against sloppy or poor execution in employing a perspective or method. Unfortunately, there is a worrisome trend in our field of asserting that some perspectives and methods are better than others (see Irmischer). This sort of talk implies that a single approach is best for all questions in our field. Not only is this wrong-headed, but it shifts our attention away from evaluating the quality of scholarship within the context of what it is trying to do, i.e., the goals it establishes for the inquiry. Critics should evaluate whether the person has thought carefully enough about the question and if the choice of perspective or methods is appropriate for the question. Thus, critics should not dismiss, for example, the work of a person taking a cognitive perspective and using quasi-experimental methods because that person is not taking a social perspective and using ethnographic methods, but rather they should critique that person on the basis of how well he or she understands a cognitive perspective and how he or she uses quasi-experimental methods. While this point is obvious, even a brief look at our discipline's journals indicates that it needs to be underscored.

Because any one window can provide only a partial view on what we want to know, an empirical inquiry in rhetoric and composition must be pluralistic. To obtain more certain understanding of an issue, people drawing on empirical perspectives typically seek converging ways of knowing for support of their claims. And, in fact, when they do not explicitly admit the limitations of their method(s) of knowing, are rightly criticized. Take for example, Roger Cherry's insightful review of North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*. Cherry points out that although North "claims to have an 'inside view' of each of the methodological communities he treats, North gains access to these communities (for all we can tell) exclusively through their published reports" (20). Cherry asks:

Can a single type of information be considered adequate to provide an insider's view of a particular community? As I understand it, ethnographic research attempts to gather data through multiple sources. By immersing themselves in the communities they wish to investigate, ethnographers are able to draw upon a wide range of sources for their insights into the nature of the community under investigation . . . North claims that his own methodology is similar to Diesing's "essentially anthropological" approach (by which I assume North means to suggest that he has employed ethnographic methods for his own study?) True, North argues that "the claim to this anthropological perspective must be regarded as partly metaphorical" (North 4) The problem, however, is that North never explains what it means to take a "partly .. metaphorical approach," and he never considers what the implications might be of limiting himself to the written records of the communities he seeks to describe . . . It seems to me that by limiting himself to a single type of data, i.e., his own reading of selected texts with no concern for how the community members themselves might interpret, use, or judge these texts-North has severely restricted his claim to an "inside view" of the communities he examines. Even more important, his lack of reflection on this issue, and on the question of what precisely a "partly metaphorical" approach might entail, does not indicate the kind of methodological self-awareness North claims for himself and calls for in other composition specialists . . . It could be argued that North has engaged in a kind of pseudo-ethnography, that he has not studied "communities" in any meaningful anthropological sense of the term. Instead, North has constructed various "communities" by carving up the territory of composition studies in a certain way, and he has co-opted the language of ethnographic inquiry as a way of describing these communities. The problem is that, by doing so, North implicitly invokes the authority of a methodology that he doesn't in fact employ . . . It is essential to keep in mind in a way that North does not that the "methodological communities" he describes don't exist outside the pages of *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*. (20-22)

Good empirical scholars are well aware of these issues and try to be extremely self-conscious about the theoretical assumptions and moves they make. But like scholars in other areas in English (and in other domains) empirical scholars sometimes take their assumptions for granted. As Richard Young points out, "during stable periods, theoretical assumptions tend to function as presuppositions rather than as subjects for investigation. When one believes, one does not question his or her beliefs, he uses them" (32). It seems reasonable to assert that empirical scholarship is currently in an unstable period.ⁱⁱ We need to articulate and be more reflexive about the rhetoric of our inquiry.

The many voices who contribute to empirical scholarship in our field need to be heard on the issue of what we are doing and why we are doing it. Our work makes progress in increments that sometimes make an individual's efforts seem small and lacking scope. Some have attacked empirical work as invested in "confirming the obvious" (Irmscher), as concerned with solving easy problems and ignoring hard ones, as embracing a "reductionist perspective" (Berlin). But if one

looks at the empirical scholarship in our field over the last twenty years or so, it becomes apparent that our work is becoming much more self-conscious both about what we know and about what we do not. The criteria empirical researchers have for public evidence make us less likely to make dazzling but unsupported claims. These aspects of empirical work have prompted some critics to dismiss and trivialize empirical efforts as not telling a good story. But empirical scholars and researchers have a very good story to tell.

Along with those people who are already active participants in constructing knowledge in English, there is another community of scholars who need to understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. I am thinking of graduate students in English who are currently forming an impression of empirical work. As North rightly put it, they need to be able to articulate the theoretical similarities and differences between Hayes and Flower's and Peter Elbow's approach to rhetoric and composition. I hope we will be able to provide some answers about who we are, how we got this way, and where we are going in the not so distant future.

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ⁱ I want to thank John R. Hayes, Richard E. Young, Linda Flower, David Kaufer, Richard Enos, and Victoria Stein for their generous and valuable advice on this essay. I also want to thank Charles Bazerman for asking me to write it in the first place.

ⁱⁱ I am currently in the middle of a large scale in-depth interview study, “Diving into the Wreck!: Interviews on the Role of Theory in Rhetoric, Composition, and Literature.” In this study, I am talking with professors of English across the United States and Canada who are working in these three area's (or some mix) about their perceptions of how theory informs their teaching, publications, research, or scholarship. I am concerned with how people in English perceive their own theories as well as theories of people in other areas. My goal is to gather perceptions about the role of theory from the “talk” of a variety of people in English--from adjunct professors in the trenches without tenure to “the most quoted heavy hitters” in powerful positions within particular interpretive communities. Perhaps such knowledge will be useful in encouraging productive dialogue on theory among the factions within our field.