Getting to "How Do You Know?" Rather Than "So What?" From "What's New?"

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A few years ago, Carolyn Rude (2009) mapped out the field of technical communication by formulating an overarching research question and four subtopics. Rude's central question is ''How do texts (print, digital, multimedia; visual, verbal) and related communication practices mediate knowledge, values, and action in a variety of social and professional contexts?'' (p. 181)

The subtopics are disciplinary history and identity; pedagogy; practice (designing, developing, and managing information using varying technologies); and social change. The areas are illustrated with references to book-length studies. Rude defines the field in generous terms while demarcating some important boundaries that distinguish it from other fields.

Yet, regardless of whether she intended it this way, Rude's conception of research comes across as rather linear, moving top down from questions. Questions point to gaps in disciplinary knowledge that ''necessitate'' the research and index its significance; questions also ''dictate'' the appropriate research method (p. 175). Well, yes, in theory. I agree that certain kinds of questions are ideally addressed with particular methods (Charney, 2002). In real life, though, the method or the site or some special interest often comes first. You realize you have access to a work place or an archive of records. Someone in your family has a medical problem. You enroll in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). Your advisors in grad school were skilled at one particular method or had ideological commitments for (or against) some methods. Productive research careers can grow out of an assortment of starting points.

A good example of someone whose career was driven by a question is Summer Smith Taylor. Her quest to improve the feedback that students receive on their writing led her to employ a wide array of methods, including text analysis (Smith, 1997), experimentation (Smith, 2003b; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Patton, 2006), think-aloud process-tracing (Smith, 2003a), case studies (Taylor, 2006), and discourse-based interviews (Taylor, 2011).[1] Taylor got on the trail in graduate school not only by teaching technical writing but also by securing a new opportunity to work with faculty in engineering. She ended up reassuring technical writing instructors of the value of their comments as well as illuminating several factors that increase or reduce the usefulness of comments for students.

A good example of a researcher who has been dedicated to a particular method is Clay Spinuzzi, who has used variants of activity theory to investigate workplace communication in an array of settings, including a transportation agency (Spinuzzi, 2003), a university computer research and teaching lab (Spinuzzi, 2007), a telecommunications company (Spinuzzi, 2008), a high-tech company that optimizes search engine results (Spinuzzi, 2010), and a business that

provides office space away from the office (Spinuzzi, 2012). Each site presented different issues, such as complying with web accessibility requirements, using industrial-strength applications that are not tailored to any specific use, and tracking the source of a failure of customer service. Spinuzzi not only gives vivid tracings of communication practices but has also come to critique the method itself (2011).

The danger of starting somewhere other than a good question is ending up with a study that is of no interest to anyone but the researcher. Having reviewed a couple of hundred manuscripts over the years for a variety of journals in rhetoric, composition studies, and technical communication, I can say that framing is essential for passing the ''So what?'' question and moving on to consider the method, the ''How do you know?'' question. It's often possible to work backwards to relate a study to concerns in the field—but not always.

The most common problems with framing do not stem from ignorance of Swales' (1990) Create a Research Space model for journal article introductions—rather, the model is too often treated as a mere matter of form and jiggered to point to a gap in the literature that is not worth filling. As Kaufer and Geisler (1989) explain, novelty is not a property of an idea or a topic; it is a relation between an idea and a community. A novel contribution does more than add facts and descriptions; it tests or adapts common knowledge in creative ways. A frame that amounts to ''Let's see if it is happening over here, too'' may not be new enough, but ''Here's something no one's been looking at'' may be too new. Accordingly, savvy researchers seek out conflicts to address: disagreements among scholars, contradictory results, neglected comparisons. In technical communication, the most promising sites for research may be areas of known conflict, failure, or dysfunction.

The best strategy for research, then, is to keep on the lookout for conflict throughout the process, regardless of whether the starting point is a question or a site or a data set. The studies in this special issue all offer good ideas for starting points that I next supplement by referencing additional studies that take more advantage of conflict.

In this issue, Read and Swarts use the establishment of a computer research laboratory at a research university to illustrate the differing perspectives offered by two variants of social theory: Actor Network Theory (ANT) and network analysis. As the authors note, these methods serve to provide ''a fuller contextualized understanding of the object in question'' (p. 18) rather than to diagnose a problem or point to ways that communication can be improved. In contrast, earlier research in technical communication took off from failures and dysfunctions, such as the loss of the shuttle *Challenger*, explored to such great effect by Winsor (1988, 1990) and others.

Also in this issue, Walton, Zraly, and Mugengana offer insights into the on-the-spot decision-making that pervades ethnographic research, especially in sites where cultural differences and participant vulnerabilities abound. For a vivid display of problem solving in a situation with severe constraints on data collection, see Teston (2012); and for some valuable lessons to be learned from dysfunction, see Burnett (1996).

Last, Graham, Kim, DeVasto, and Keith make good use of the big FDA Drug Advisory-Committee's data set, relating committee decisions to the types of evidence presented and the attendance of speakers with conflicts of interest. Their initial choice to work with the full-scale data set rather than pinpointing specific controversial decisions was probably something of a gamble. For an example of a big data set with more built-in conflict, see Walsh (2009, 2013), who analyzed comments from public citizens (mainly ranchers) and EPA administrators on a project to readmit Mexican wolves to Arizona and New Mexico.

NOTE

1. Summer Smith Taylor's research career was too brief, cut short by her death from illness at age 39 in 2011.

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