

Theorizing with Undergraduate Researchers

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If this section of *Composition Studies* and increasing interest in the field are any indication, composition studies—the field of writing studies—is in a good place. Our field creates space for undergraduate research at its major conferences, events such as the Naylor Workshop for Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies bring together students and faculty from across the country, and writing centers have long been a natural venue for fostering undergraduate research. In our work, we are also seeing more attention to the ways in which undergraduate research can be more accessible, particularly as the demographics of higher education change. Undergraduate research is possible for underrepresented and adult students to conduct and for contingent faculty members to mentor. With creative, thoughtful administrative support, it is possible to create cultures of undergraduate research, to involve graduate students as mentors, and to value this work in the tenure and promotion process. Where we are is good, and we have reasons to be hopeful for the future—reasons to hope that undergraduate research in writing studies can be an intellectually and personally meaningful part of college for more and more students.

As we move forward, we call the field to take seriously student voices in the project of theorizing undergraduate research. One obstacle to this call is our strong attachment to student writers and student writing. Student writing functions as a key object of inquiry in the field, and it often serves as evidence of *our* pedagogical agency and *our* theories of writing. Although she endorses the idea that published, peer-reviewed undergraduate research is scholarship, Amy Robillard confesses what many feel: her initial “professional impulse on citing the work of Bastian and Harkness [undergraduate researchers] is to analyze their work as student writing, to draw on it as support for a pedagogical argument” (256). Viewing the products of undergraduate research as scholarly contributions to the field requires a shift in both category and perspective. Undergraduate research cannot be categorized as *student writing* and thus evidence of our pedagogical agency. It must instead be categorized as scholarship and thus evidence of student intellectual agency.

Publishing undergraduate research is critical, but undergraduate student voices must be present in scholarship *about* undergraduate research. Undergraduate researchers should participate in discussions about mentoring practices and accessibility, and frankly, they should be given the opportunity to respond to our representations of them (undergraduate researchers) and their work (undergraduate research). In the call for proposals for our special issue

of *Pedagogy* (2021) on undergraduate research in English studies, we asked students and faculty to write together about their research experiences. And in doing so, we believed we had good aims. We wanted students and faculty to tell their stories together in part because undergraduate research is mentored, collaborative research. And for entirely practical purposes, we wanted a faculty member involved in what will be a two-year long publication process. When we received these stories about undergraduate research, we learned a great deal: we learned how the whiteness of the field influences research experiences, how socioeconomic status influences the choices students make about publishing their work, and how faculty and students work in and around institutional realities. Yet in our desire to incorporate student voices, we also fell into a familiar trap and allowed students voices to exist only alongside faculty voices—to narrate the undergraduate research experience but not to critique or theorize it. We wonder what we would have learned by asking students to respond to scholarship about them and about the future of undergraduate research.

Where we are is good, but where we are neglects the student perspective and constrains student agency. To expand our myopic perspective, we suggest looking outside of our discipline, especially to colleagues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. For example, the Students as Partners (SaP) approach defines the student–faculty partnership as “a reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 6–7). The SaP principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility can help us build frameworks for bringing student voices fully and consequentially into scholarship on undergraduate research. Where we are is good. Listening to stories of the work is good. But ensuring that undergraduates talk back is our next imperative.

Works Cited

- Cook-Sather, Alison, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten. *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. Jossey-Bass, 2014.
- Robillard, Amy E. “Young Scholars’ Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Citation Practices.” *College English*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2006, pp. 253–70.