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# STUMBLING INTO WISDOM IN RHETORIC, WRITING, AND LITERACY RESEARCH

## *An Introduction*

Maureen Daly Goggin and Peter N. Goggin

*ἐὰν μὴ ἔλπηται ἀνέλπιστον, οὐκ ἐξευρήσει.<sup>1</sup>*

—Heraclitus

*Dans les champs de l'observation le hasard ne favorise que  
les esprits préparés.<sup>2</sup>*

—Louis Pasteur

When students read published scholarship and research, the path toward discovery seems clean and direct. The dead-ends, the backtracking, the starting overs, the stumbles have all been cleared away, and it seems as though by some kind of magic the scholars were able to start at point A and arrive safely and neatly at point B. Of course, those of us who do scholarship know the path is never clear and never straight. Research and writing is messy. It is fraught with moments of anxiety and feelings of being lost. David Gold captures this feeling well when he says of researching, “I felt clueless, a feeling I have since come to learn is at the heart of the scholarly process. In academia, one is in a perpetual liminal space. As soon as you answer a research question, you ask another, your growing body of expertise simply marking the expanding edge of your ignorance” (18).

The liminal space of research stymies some students, making them want to quit the process. Yet as Heraclitus notes, “He [*sic*] who does not expect will not find out the unexpected, for it is trackless and unexplored” (Fragment 18, 106). In other words, scholars through practice, through living on the edge of ignorance, expect to find the unexpected. They learn, that is, to stay open to possibilities while they wait actively doing what it is they can do. Louis Pasteur points the way. On December 7, 1854, at a lecture at the University of Lille, Pasteur stated that “in the

fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind.” Active waiting offers the opportunity for preparing the mind. *Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research* takes up two terms from Pasteur: “chance” as serendipity, wonder, amazement and “prepared mind” as the different kinds of work scholars, particularly those in rhetoric, writing, and literacy, need to have done to recognize a serendipitous discovery or a missed opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

Economist Albert O. Hirschman writes about “stumbling” into truths: “Language itself conspires toward this sort of asymmetry: we fall into error, but do not usually speak of falling into truth” (13). He argues: “We are . . . correspondingly unwilling to concede—in fact we find it intolerable to imagine—that our more lofty achievements, such as economic, social or political progress [we might add scholarly research], could have come about by stumbling rather than through careful planning, rational behavior, and the successful response to a clearly perceived challenge” (13). In research, this “falling into truth” as he calls it is far more common than many scholars admit. Hirschman terms serendipity “the Hiding Hand.” He argues that researchers

take on and plunge into new tasks because of erroneously presumed *absence* of a challenge—because the task looks easier and more manageable that [*sic*] it will turn out to be. As a result, the Hiding Hand can help accelerate the rate at which men [*sic*] engage successfully in problem-solving; they take up problems *they think* they can solve, find them more difficult than expected, but then, being stuck with them attack willy-nilly the unsuspecting difficulties—and sometimes even succeed. People who have stumbled through the experience just described will of course tend to retell it as though they had known the difficulties all along and have bravely gone to meet them—*fare bella figura* is a strong human propensity. (13, original emphasis)

Those who do admit the stumbling usually refer to it as serendipity. For instance, in describing her research project on Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter (1860–1949), Gesa Kirsch notes that it “helps to have serendipity on one’s side, but that, of course, is not something one can arrange purposefully, although I am convinced one can be open to the possibility” (20).

Serendipity may be understood as an unexpected rupture, an opportunity, fortunate circumstances, and discoveries. Many of the life-saving and convenience items we use today—nylon, Velcro, Teflon, microwave oven, penicillin, X-rays, Viagra, sugar substitutes, safety glass, various plastics, and other technological advancements—were the results of such happenstance mistakes and unplanned-for discoveries (Gaughan; Hannan; Meyers; Rosen; Roberts). Thus, scientists value and write often about serendipity. As Till Düppe writes, “The rhetoric of chance is

part of the self-image of scientists” (9). Medical researcher and Nobel Prize awardee Pek Van Anandel dubbed serendipity “the art of making an unsought finding” (631). In *The Serendipity Machine*, David Green explores post-internet computers as serendipity machines. William Michener and colleagues recommend biological field stations as important sites of serendipity. More recently, in discussing the benefits of trans-disciplinary research, Frédéric Darbellay, Zoe Moody, Ayuko Sedooka, and Gabriela Steffen argue that “serendipity is . . . capable of playing a central role in interdisciplinarity, boosting the exchange of ideas and speeding up their circulation among researchers committed to exploiting the heuristic dimension of the unexpected” (1). So commonplace are the happy accidents that scientist Vincent J. Schaefer’s autobiography has at its center his fortuitous adventures in science, many of which were chance findings.

Social scientists also call attention to happenstance and fortune. In fact, the first volume of *Serendipities: Journal for Sociology and History of Social Sciences*, a publication focusing on chance discoveries, appeared in 2016. Isabelle Rivoal and Noel B. Salazar make the point that “in anthropology, serendipity, together with reflexivity and openness, is widely accepted as a key characteristic (and strength) of the ethnographic method” (178). Indeed, in the 1940s, Robert Merton was the first to call attention to the “serendipity component” in qualitative research, one that “involves the unanticipated, anomalous, and strategic datum which exerts pressure upon the investigator for a new direction of inquiry which extends theory” (506). He later authored a book with Elinor G. Barber on the origins and history of serendipity titled *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*, a monograph Pek Van Anandel assessed as “the best study on serendipity I ever read” (633). Keith Townsend and John Burgess anthologize researchers’ stories of qualitative studies in a variety of social science fields. Haim Hazan and Esther Hertzog write about serendipity in anthropological research, describing such work as “a lifelong nomadic journey of discovery in which the world yields an infinite number of unexplored issues and innumerable ways of studying them” (2). James E. McClellan III encourages historians to more fully understand and report serendipities. Emma Wild-Wood also urges historians to conduct field research from a vantage point that opens paths for serendipity, what she terms “se débrouiller,” a Congolese term that means “to manage (on your own), sort things out (by yourself), cope, get by” (367). In many ways, the term itself could stand in for precisely the ways research feels as one is doing it. Serendipity, Wild-Wood suggests, comes out of moments of roadblocks, situations from which scholars have to disentangle themselves, particularly in fieldwork.

Rivoal and Salazar rightfully note that serendipity in research is more than just a happy find or accident; serendipity “requires sufficient background knowledge, an inquisitive mind, creative thinking and good time” (178). Paul André and colleagues concur; they propose that “the term serendipity itself may be ironic . . . more often than not a confluence of specific events, knowledge and attitude is needed to draw insight from chance encounters; in other words, no discovery is truly *by accident* . . . The circumstances may be termed luck, but as Gladwell states, they are generally the particular advantage of experts” (original emphasis). Given the need for both happenstance and sagacity, Craig Calhoun, in his recent book review of Merton and Barber’s *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*, calls serendipity “accidental wisdom.”

*Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research* offers vignettes of scholars who have had moments of “accidental wisdom” in their research and writing processes. Thus young scholars need to come to understand that happenstance is not merely chance or accidental *phronesis*. It takes a lot of hard work to avoid or at least recognize what Van Andel termed “negative serendipity,” missed opportunities. Inquisitive open minds, wisdom, knowing how to know, and dedicated hours can, however, yield wondrous surprises. The stories in this volume substantiate precisely these qualities that mark good scholarship.

What exactly is it that serendipity needs? Serendipity demands not only a prepared mind but an open mind (*sine anticipatio mentis*). Learning how to do scholarship with an open mind, however, is typically not taught directly. Young scholars thus are often flummoxed by the stubborn steep path toward nuggets of discovery and by the serendipity encountered along the difficult way. Of course, one cannot purposefully rely on serendipity, as Kirsch notes. Rather, what one can rely on is an open mind, one that is ready for the messiness and one that learns to stay comfortable within the mire of unknowing as well as a process of preparing that mind.

Students thus need to be taught the hows and whys of doing *thorough* research—of where and how to start with the understanding that there will be dead-ends, roadblocks, U-turns along the way. They need to learn how to review the scholarly literature so they understand that scholars participate in an ongoing “unending conversation,” to use Kenneth Burke’s metaphor. Students also need to learn and understand grounded, sound, and tested research strategies to gather data, to ponder them, to rearrange and rethink them, to generate more questions about their project, and so on. One of the goals of this collection is to help students understand the reasons for staying open and “suspending belief” during a scholarly project, as Alton Becker has argued.

While researchers in the sciences and social sciences have written a fair amount about serendipity as a normal praxis in research, no scholar in rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies has devoted a book to the topic. This proposed collection thus breaks new ground. We imagine *Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research* as a powerful companion to the robust collection *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, edited by Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan, as well as that by Alexis E. Ramsey and colleagues, *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*. While the latter two present tantalizing scenarios of how various researchers came to define a research project, *Serendipity* will present scenarios of serendipitous moments that can occur anytime during a scholarly project. This collection also makes a good companion to other kinds of research methods texts.

The twenty scholars who penned these pages share with students the deep reality of doing research, a reality that doesn't have a prescriptive map (these don't work) or a how-to manual (these aren't often helpful either). They show what it takes to doggedly pursue a line of inquiry with an open mind that is prepared for the difficult terrain that is research in rhetoric, writing, and literacy.

#### A WORD ON THE ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.

—Toni Morrison

Storytelling through narrative structures is how humans relate to each other, pass along wisdom and experience, and give meaning to our lives. All too often it seems, though, that academic scholarly writing attempts to remove the fallible human element from the narrative to support the ideal of objectivity. But the concept of serendipity inherently challenges notions of objectivity, impartiality, and pure data in research. The very unpredictability and uncertainty of happenstance and “accidental” sagacity requires that we tell of such moments and occurrences as reflective stories of discovery. For academics, when or if we tell each other and our students these stories, more often they are relegated to social settings and non-scholarly publications, not to the privileged spaces of our classrooms and professional journals. *Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research* offers a corrective to this tendency and restores the human element of storytelling about adventures in the making, unmaking, and dissemination of knowledge. In the Call for this collection, we invited proposals for essays from scholars and researchers that narrated

a serendipitous transformative occasion they experienced during a research project. The result is a collection of essays that are rigorously scholarly in terms of their theoretical and methodological approaches to serendipity in research, but, in addition and perhaps even more important, they are the stories each scholar tells of his or her own experiences with exploration, discovery, and happenstance that have influenced their professional and personal lives as researchers.

*Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research* is organized into five sections that represent the range of experiences with serendipity into which the authors of this collection have delved. The twenty chapters in these five sections offer insights into research conducted in multiple theoretical frames and methodologies that have benefited from serendipitous moments, including, but not limited to, archival oral histories, ethnographies, case studies, feminist practices, fieldwork, theoretical work, qualitative and quantitative research, and rhetorical and discourse analysis. These sections are, of course, not exclusive; nor do they represent the entirety of possible approaches to, and perspectives on, serendipity in research; but taken together they offer scholars of rhetoric, writing, and literacy multiple analyses and usable knowledge on the significance of serendipity in research. We have organized this rich group of stories on these significant moments of happenstance and sagacity into narrative realms through which the authors tell their stories. The first two, *Intersections of Personal and Political* and *Intersections of Personal and Professional*, underscore that research always takes place somewhere and sometime and that these contexts—in conjunction with our personal lives, local and global events, relationships, funding, authority, institution, and a host of often unforeseeable connections between place and human connections, values, and emotions—can have profound impacts on the multiple twists and turns that impact research, and vice versa.

*Intersections of Personal and Political* is perhaps the most deeply introspective and empowering of the five sections, as the authors explore their experiences with serendipity in their research that mark significant shifts in perspectives and identities as individuals and scholars. In the first chapter, Shirley E. Faulkner-Springfield's "'Oh, My God! He Was a Slave!' Secrets of a Virginia Courthouse Archive," the author recalls the almost overpowering emotional and embodied trauma of her unexpected discovery of a long-"lost" ancestor while conducting historical and archival research and her resulting reimaging and retelling of the rhetorics of American culture and narratives of slavery and of herself as a scholar of this area of inquiry. In "Where You See Ruins, I See

Rhetoric: Composing a Methodology for ‘Making Sense’ of Disaster,” Doreen Piano explores how cataclysmic change opens up new possibilities for research projects and tools that may otherwise be hidden. She focuses specifically on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath to pursue several questions: What tools do we have from our past or other aspects of our lives that we may be overlooking in our research? How can these tools help us re-conceive our research agenda, our methods, and the kinds of data we draw from? What is the significance of building one’s own data collection of images from which to draw rather than seeking out more official kinds of archives? In chapter 3, “Death, Dying, and Serendipity in the Scholarly Imagination,” Gale Coskan-Johnson narrates the serendipitous coalescence of events, both global and personal, associated with death and dying centered around 9/11 and President Barack Obama’s subsequent announcement of the killing of Osama Bin Laden. In her chapter she explores the transformative links among the personal, the political, and the scholarly.

In the next group, Intersections of Personal and Professional, the authors recount their serendipitous experiences in academic disciplinary and institutional contexts. In “Fortuitous Happenstance: Serendipity in Archival Research,” Lynée Lewis Gaillet details the challenges of archiving the sheer volumes of records, materials, and resources and, further, knowing how and where to access the archives that do exist. She narrates her own experiences of fortuitous discoveries of archival data, often through the help of others, and the importance for scholars to recognize and take advantage of serendipitous opportunities in archival research. In chapter 5, “Pre-Sentence: Researching, Reporting, and Writing,” Caren Wakerman Converse relates how a chance call to a former colleague in her previous career as a probation office sparked a new direction and perspective in her research as a rhetorician on pre-sentence investigation reports in the criminal justice system. For Liz Rohan in the next chapter, “Echoes in the Archives,” high hotel prices and a long commute led her to a collection of Settlement House archives at Northwestern University. Like Converse, she highlights the importance of the “happenstance” of inquiry processes in professional contexts that can lead to unexpected caches of archived texts. In chapter 7, the final essay in this section, Kim Donehower explores what she describes as “the role of memory in serendipitous moments of analytical epiphany” in “Serendipity and Memory: The Value of Participant Observation.” In her examination of connections between methodology and memory, she details her personal and professional deliberations and negotiations between her field’s traditions and values and both contradictory and complementary values of another

field's methodologies. Drawing from two site cases, Donehower argues for qualitative research practices that prioritize vivid memory of field data as a necessity for the "prepared mind."

Stumbling into the Unknown takes us in into the realm of exploration. In the stories and analyses in this section, the authors focus on the journeys—in some cases, literally—they have taken in their scholarly pursuits and how "the prepared mind" resulted in serendipitous discoveries, impacting not only the journeys themselves but their research trajectories in rhetoric, writing, and literacy scholarship. In the first chapter of this section, Maureen Daly Goggin's "The Serendipity of (Mis)Timing in Research," the author recounts the significance of archival research in preparing her mind to capitalize on a sequence of serendipitous moments during her field research in churchyards, post offices, pubs, and museums in the English countryside. In chapter 9, "Setting Out for Serendip: Of Research Quests and Chance Discoveries," Ryan Skinnell relates his doctoral dissertation quest and subsequent purposeful travels for archival data to Michele Tramezzino's 1557 fairy tale/allegory, "The Three Princes of Serendip." Next, in "The Art of the 'Accident': Serendipity in Field Research," Peter N. Goggin argues the need for professional education in purposeful methods of discovery and describes his own accumulation of serendipitous events in field research with his work in island studies. Wrapping up this section in chapter 11, "Reading between the Power Lines: How 'Nikola Tesla Corner' Enhanced the Wireless Signals in a Rhetorical Analysis of Electricity and Landscape," Daniel Wuebben draws on a serendipitous moment of discovery in his quest for a street sign and offers a meta-critical narrative and rhetorical analysis about shifting between places of text and context.

The five authors in the fourth group of this collection, Methodology and Serendipity, delve into the roles of scholarly organizational principles and approaches to research in rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies that draw from expectations of serendipity. They offer us their accounts and cases built on methodological preparation in anticipation of such instances and provide usable models for future studies and discovery. For Lori Ostergaard, preparing for archival research and serendipitous opportunity is the key to discovery. Ostergaard illustrates her archival discoveries in chapter 12, "Prepare to Be Surprised: How Flexible, Methodical, and Organized Research Methods Lead to Serendipity in the Archives." Next, Patty Wilde, in "Playing the Name Game: Exploring Name Variations in Archival Research," relates her experiences while investigating "rhetorical strategies utilized by women composing sensational memoirs" during the American Civil War. In her

chapter, Wilde describes how her methods of preparing for searching name variations in records detailing exploits of Confederate spy Loreta Janeta Velazquez led to serendipitous discoveries. In “Serendipity and Methodological Willingness in Team Science,” Ellen Barton recounts her experiences as the designated linguist on a National Institutes of Health (NIH)–funded transdisciplinary health research team and how those experiences led her to a mixed-methods approach to research. In “The Sunshine of Serendipity: Illuminating Scholarship of Genre (a New Canon) and Generosity (Yes You Can),” Lynne Z. Bloom details how she serendipitously discovered a robust literary canon of essays. This then led her to unexpectedly create a 325-volume archive of canonical textbooks. Her research project combined canon theory and quantitative research, leading to qualitative discoveries in literary analysis, pedagogy, and ethics. She then turns to how serendipity plays out in pedagogy. In “Serendology, Methodipity: Research, Invention, and the Choric Rhetorician,” Jennifer Clary-Lemon draws on concepts of *chōra* as a methodology to examine the interconnectedness of serendipity across a variety of dynamic rhetorical activities. She argues that *chōra* is not something preconceived but something always ongoing, always generated, always a beginning in the making of scholarly life.

The final section in this collection, *Trusting the Process*, offers narratives on serendipity that underscore Rohan and Kirsch’s contention of research as a *lived* process. Thus, serendipity in research is inevitable and rewarding for rhetoric, writing, and literacy scholars who are prepared and willing to step out of the comfort zone of the known and not only to recognize and capitalize on unexpected moments of discovery and opportunity in their research but to generate the situations and conditions for those moments to happen. In chapter 17, Bill Endres tackles the uncomfortable reality that sometimes the catalyst for serendipity can be a calamity or trauma. In “The Ethics of Serendipity: Rare Events and a Need to Act,” Endres comes to terms with the death of a colleague whose demise provides the author with access to grant funding for a project in digitizing the early medieval St. Chad Gospels in Lichfield, England—a project he was well prepared for and able to step into under the circumstances. Next, in “Creating Kismet: What Artists Can Teach Scholars about Serendipity,” Brad Gyori details how formal strategies of montage, collage, and collaboration in media production are employed to intentionally cultivate the conditions for serendipity and discusses how these techniques and strategies can be appropriated for similar purposes for rhetorical and critical analysis. Judy Holiday’s approach to cultivating the conditions

for serendipity in her research involves reading widely and broadly and indiscriminately all texts that come to her. Combined with talking in person widely with others and with attunement to serendipity always in mind, her approach opens any manner of potential opportunities for happenstance in her work, and she expounds on this strategy in her chapter, “Coordinating Chaos and Befriending a Fuzzy Focus: Reflections of a Serendipitist.” In the final chapter in this collection, “The Strange Practices of Serendipitous Failure: Considering *Metanoia* as an Alternative to *Kairos*,” Zachary Beare asks us to consider the alternative to serendipity as fortuitous alignment—everything falling into place—and imagine moments instead when serendipity involves everything going wrong. In his chapter he explores how *metanoia* (missed opportunity) as opposed to *kairos* (opportunity) should also be theorized for its serendipitous possibilities.

In her afterword to this collection, Gesa Kirsch addresses the need for humanist scholar researchers to consider the ethical dilemmas of the discoveries we make that are dependent on the past, present, and future lives and circumstances of the individuals, societies, and cultures we study and remarks on “the current age of discontent” on university campuses and across the country as a whole. As this collection was going to press, the 2016 presidential election that revealed deep ideological, cultural, and economic divisions in the United States had just concluded and the country was facing new leadership and an uncertain future. The Brexit referendum in Great Britain has threatened to destabilize the European Union (EU), and researchers and universities in the United Kingdom are facing a potential threat of massive cuts in funding depending on how the post-Brexit government will align with future EU ideals. The waves of populism and nationalism that have swept across the United States and Europe appear to have emboldened volatile discourses of intolerance and hatred and sponsored fear for many of the most vulnerable members of society. How this will play out in terms of serendipity and future developments and discovery in our research and that of our students and colleagues is uncertain, but we also recognize that resistance in multiple forms is an appropriate response to intolerance, and we hope that this collection will inspire those who read it to continue the good work. In short, we hope this collection will encourage, inspire, and prepare the minds of current and future scholars for exploration and discovery, like Princes of Serendip, as they set forth on their own adventures in these especially challenging times.

## Notes

**Authors' Note:** We appreciate the support of Michael Spooner, editor at the University Press of Colorado. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers who offered productive criticism that improved an earlier version of this collection. We also thank Cheryl Carnahan for her keen eye in editing the manuscript. Of course, any errors remain our own.

1. "He [*sic*] who does not expect will not find out the unexpected, for it is trackless and unexplored."
2. "In the fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind."
3. Also see Mark de Rond, and Iain Morely's edited collection, *Serendipity: Fortune and the Prepared Mind*.

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