

STUDENTS AS THEORISTS: DEVELOPING PERSONAL THEORIES OF COMPOSING

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In *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, Noam Chomsky reflects on the matter of theory-building when he observes, "At every stage of inquiry we try to construct theories that enable us to gain insight into the nature of the world, focusing our attention on those phenomena of the world that provide enlightening evidence for these theoretical endeavors" (8). The students who enter our classrooms each day are also inquirers seeking evidence for theories. They propose theories about their abilities or personalities to provoke peers into response, they compare advice from adults against their own lived experience, they revise generalizations when values clash, and so on. Though our students work constantly to form and re-form the ideas they live by, they rarely consider the formal school curriculum as providing them the opportunity to theorize. Instead, they regard what they have to learn as already worked out, prepackaged, there for taking-or-leaving. Even something as potentially creative as writing is often seen as a body of knowledge and skills passed down from teacher to student. For them, the composition curriculum, like most subjects, is viewed more as a building for lease than as an open lot to be built upon.

Unfortunately, such a view tends to be reinforced most strongly among lower-achieving students in curricula that are highly structured. Basic writers are given more rules and guidelines than their peers in advanced or college-preparatory classes, often on the assumption that the less they have to figure out for themselves, the faster they will catch up to where they should be. Working against this assumption, however, is the intimate connection that binds education and experience, or what philosopher John Dewey called the "organic connection." For Dewey, both the individual and the larger society are best served when an authoritarian, imposed curriculum is absent, leaving learners' social interaction to become the "normal source of order" (63) through participation in common activities (54-55).

This paper explores one teacher-researcher's attempt to involve students in theory-building research of their own composing processes. To achieve this goal, I found it necessary to challenge traditional role-expectations for student and teacher by minimizing the traditional hierarchy and freeing students to develop their own sources of order and authority through the kinds of social interaction that are characteristic of scholars in a university community.

During the summer of 1988, 15 students between their junior and senior year from a dozen rural high schools in western Pennsylvania spent four weeks on the campus of Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) in Indiana, Pennsylvania. They were selected as part of a one-time, state-funded Rural Scholars Project. The students were identified by their high schools as having the ability but not necessarily the motivation, desire, confidence, or financial means to pursue a university education.

The broad aim of the project was to increase involvement of rural youth in higher education, youth who have traditionally remained on the farm or gone directly to work in now-faltering rural economies. To achieve this aim in the context of a composition course, I attempted to create opportunities for students to become involved in the kinds of academic activities that make universities exciting places for social and intellectual growth—talking with colleagues, creating new knowledge, publishing, and so on—and to do so in ways that enabled them to pursue theories of their own composing processes. When the high schoolers came to IUP, they lived together in a dormitory with two undergraduate

tutors and two undergraduate residence counselors. They enrolled in two courses taught specially for them, a theme-oriented twentieth-century history course and freshman composition. A history professor taught the history course, and I the composition course.

In many ways, the students were typical of those for whom structured curricula are often intended: ambivalent about academics generally, and about college even moreso, they arrived expecting to see if "it was for them" and if they could "cut it." As their instructor, I at first felt obligated to meet their expectations for a regimen of specific and demanding writing assignments. Upon further reflection, however, I contemplated why they were so ambivalent in the first place, and whether their success or failure in a typical freshman writing course was a worthwhile way to help them resolve this ambivalence. Their uncertainties involved more than academic ability, for they were also ideologically constrained by rural culture.

I wish to share some of the ideological implications that finally carried me toward implementing a highly unstructured course for these students, and into a teacher-researcher project of my own. The plan was not the first of its kind. Shirley Brice Heath in *Ways with Words* and Nan Elsasser and Patricia Irvine (1985, 1988) have undertaken far-reaching studies involving learner research. My study, more limited than theirs, and focused on interpersonal collaborations in a composition course.

As a writing teacher, I can conceive of the composition course as initiation into an academic discourse community where students are instructed to use the language habits of school—or *else*. An unfortunate by-product of such an approach is the risk that students soon begin to see this discourse community as a kind of well-established, tall, and forbidding building. They are shown an edifice, not a piece of land to be developed, and are expected to take up residence in this edifice promptly—despite the fact that what they really must do to succeed, as David Bartholomae writes, is to "invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language" (135).

The students in this project were able and intelligent, but their backgrounds were removed from academic traditions. As Henry Giroux describes in *Theory and Resistance in Education*, they were more like those who experience "the pain of humiliation and

powerlessness because their own lived experiences and sedimented histories are at odds with the dominant school culture" (68). Their parents worked in the home and on farms, as salespeople, bookkeepers, and woodworkers. These students grew up with the work ethic and had learned to respect their teachers, but like Heath's Roadville families in *Ways with Words*, they tended to feel the tasks school sets up for them are unrelated to the jobs they want or feel suited for. They pondered their futures a great deal, and thought more about the immediate financial burden of higher education than about its long-term payoff. They typically spoke of college as "probably a good idea, *but* . . ."

In coming to campus for four weeks of the summer, what they needed was not yet another traditional initiation into academe. They were already deciding that high school was enough of that. What they needed was the freedom to construct and participate in an inquiry of their own making, and to do so not from a position of powerlessness, but from one of authority and responsibility—the very foundation they were accustomed to locating externally, in the school and larger society, rather than in themselves. Like the learner ethnographers in *Ways with Words* (Heath) or in Howard Tinberg's recent "Ethnography in the Writing Classroom," they deserved to have a share in something the university holds most dear and guards most jealously—original research.

And so I was led to a teacher research plan that plunged all of us into research. The course became an opportunity for students to work as theorists investigating their own composing processes and to learn what college is like by doing what quintessential academics do—work on research projects, hold deep discussions with peers, tinker with computers, and of course, publish. The course became an opportunity for me too—a teaching job that was also a research event.

As the students began investigating their composing processes, considerable risk was involved: How much responsibility for their own learning and writing would the students take on if I regularly placed myself in the background? As part of this low-profile teaching, I gave myself the task of researching their learning to write, and told them my research question. I asked them to join me and become researchers of their composing processes by gathering data, reflecting on it, and writing about it. I invited the class to write a book using the computers in our Writing Center and to publish their research in it. Finally, I asked them to be

responsible about it all because I hoped to learn at least as much from them as they learned from me. All this was risky because these were high schoolers, not graduate students. And if they didn't do well with the plan, we would all have little to show for the effort: they would have missed not only the insights that accrue from constructing composing theories but also the writing skill development they came to acquire, and I would have not only my own flopped research project to contend with but also their failure to learn what I had not taught.

The course plan we negotiated is outlined below. The class met five days per week for two hours per day; since the students lived together in a dormitory with tutors and residence counselors hired exclusively for the project, they also spent evenings working together in study and research. The first week was spent discussing assumptions about learning, writing, and intellectual life. Students began work on an essay to characterize an interesting campus setting, and also began interviewing each other about their writing. In the second week, students used analogies and metaphors as instruments for examining their values and behaviors for composing. Also, in the first of three planned lectures, a geographer spoke to the class in her lab about the nature and function of theory in geography. Within the next several days, an archaeologist and a psychologist also spoke to the class about theories in their disciplines. These talks presented opportunities for the class to see theory-building as the continual revision of generalizations based on observation and insight. We used the three talks afterward to reflect on our own research, and the class met in small groups with graduate students in IUP's Rhetoric and Linguistics Program to discuss their composing processes. In the third week, students mostly structured their own time according to specific needs and other individualized writing projects. Plans were also solidified for the book which the class collaborated on. The last week of class was devoted to a workshop for completing projects and the book.

OUTLINE OF COURSE

Week 1

- M —How do people write? Why do people write? How do people learn to write? Are you people? (from Hartwell and Bentley's *Open to Language*)
—What's a university? What's research, and why do it?

What's a theory? (Discuss the relationship between facts, inferences, and theories.)

- T Observe and record observations on an interesting campus location.
- W Library: tour and browse for research topics.
- Th Observe your campus location again. Visit the Writing Center for word processing.
- F More Writing Center. Interview each other on composing processes.

Week 2

- M "For me, writing is like [analogy]"; Interview each other—How accurate is analogy?
- T Investigate each other's drafts of Observation paper. Guest lecture by geographer on theory in geography.
- W More library: TOMUS computerized card catalog. More investigation of composing processes in the Baker paper (based on Russell Baker's *Growing Up*.)
- Th Guest Lecture by archaeologist on theory in archaeology. Begin drafting composing-theory papers.
- F Discuss composing process with grad students and colleagues (classmates).

Week 3

- M Guest lecture by psychologist on theory in psychology. Complete Observation paper, or Library research paper, or Baker paper; exchange with colleagues for feedback and revision.
- T Meet in library: Work on any unfinished project.
- W Theorizing revisited: Guest lectures, our investigations, instructor's research project.
- Th Writing Center; Teach grad students how you write.
- F Finalize plans for *Scratchbook* (class book project).

Week 4: Workshop in Writing Center—Scratchbook.

What did we learn? Answers are to be found at many levels. One of the riskiest aspects of this teacher-researcher project involved responsibility: How much responsibility for their own learning and writing will students assume if I regularly place myself in the background? It is easy to imagine non-academic students requiring much direction, especially in conducting research on their

own writing. In challenging this expectation, I learned instead that the responsibility students assume is proportional to their understanding of and involvement with the broader agenda of university activity. As outsiders to academic traditions, they needed even more freedom than regular students in order to feel a sense of their own authority over it, to "invent the university," as Bartholomae says, in authentic ways.

As one might expect, the students were not so inclined at the outset. For example, during the first week and a half, Terri, the composition tutor, was besieged with questions about how and when we wanted them to write—amount of writing, questions to ask in interviews, deadlines, etc. Terri and I brought the issue before the whole class and explained that this was a research/learning class; we couldn't answer their questions because we didn't have the answers. They, not we, had the expertise on their own composing processes. And their expertise was invaluable, we argued, because their learning was the subject of all our research. At the same time, of course, we discussed what we felt we already knew about the composing process, but we offered our ideas as open questions: "We *think* writers do such-and-such. Do you do this? Please investigate, and share your findings with us." In her final Composing Theory paper, one student reflects on both the initial dilemma and her resolution:

This [composition class] is a lot different than in high school because here we can try new things, experiment with new processes and play around until we finally find what style we prefer. But like everything else, this style has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is you have the freedom of doing things the way you want them without worrying if the teacher will like it. You can be honest about how you feel on a subject and get into a paper to better understand it. The disadvantage is in some ways you have too much flexibility. Some people need a certain amount of pressure to function and meet a deadline. Personally I prefer the method taught to us [in this class]. I feel as if I have more pressure knowing that Dr. Rafoth is counting on me to handle my assignments on my own. (Sandy)

What did the students learn about theory-making? I had hoped the students would learn that the excitement and richness of intellectual inquiry is to be found in the knowledge one discovers

for one's self. If sheer number of pages is any indication, the students were at least enthusiastic about their work: they wrote approximately 1119 pages, or an average of 74 pages each—four pages per day—over the four-week period. I wanted them to gain a sense of what college is like by theorizing about their own writing—collecting data, looking for patterns, generalizing, and so on. From the final papers published in their book, it seems clear they became better acquainted with such important intellectual habits as reflecting, forming tentative theories, and pursuing ideas “until it hurt.” For example, in an interview, Donna pointed out to Michelle that (Michelle) seemed to use a lot of emotion in her writing. Michelle then realized this may explain why she had chosen to describe a building, rather than people, in an observation paper. In the final draft of her Composing Theory paper, Michelle wrote:

I found that I use a lot more detail in my writing than I realized. For example, “The walls are made of glass panes that are light smoke colored and divided by three-dimensional black metal bars.” I go deep into my emotions when I write, and I hope people realize that these are my feelings and not just a bunch of words on a sheet of paper. I find it easier to write about buildings rather than try to explain what someone is feeling. I think that I can put my emotions into the buildings more easily because I know that they do not have emotions, and they do not know how I feel. You can be watching someone for a long time and think you know what he/she is feeling and you really do not. I can look at a building and see that it is only reflecting what I am feeling—not any feelings of its own. (Michelle)

In another instance, Donna discusses in a general way the data she gathered and its significance. She describes procedures that led her to meaningful data. In her final, published paper, she writes:

To learn about my composing process, I had to do a lot of investigation. I did this in several ways. The first way I explored my writing was by writing itself. I wrote my observation paper and had to read over the rough drafts. By reading my rough drafts, I could examine my writing closely. I found out where I made changes and why I made the changes I

did. Another way I learned about my composing process was when I was interviewed by other people in the class. Those people, my friends, brought insight into my papers that I had missed. They noticed things that I had not because I began skimming over my writing; therefore, I carelessly ignored many deep thoughts I had placed in my papers.

Our class also visited different professors in various departments. We listened to each of them lecture on the theory of their respective field of occupation or interest. Seeing how other theories came about aided us in building our own theories. Being able to ask questions was also a big help because we could learn more than just the basic ideas of the theories we discussed. (Donna)

In the course of interviewing each other about their composing processes, students also led themselves to pursue ideas and develop them with uncommon vigor. In the following passages, we see how one student, using feedback from a peer research partner, progressed from a rather simplistic view of her own composing process to an elaborated, complex understanding.

In response to the question, "What Do You Do When You Write?" Marie began and developed her first three drafts around a simple chronology:

"I start with . . . Then I . . . Finally I . . ."

Most of Marie's observations were about choosing words, working in facts, thinking of a title, etc. The major change she made between drafts consisted of inverting the opening and closing.

Marie then turned to analogy: "For Me, Writing Is Like . . ." For this, she wrote a two-page extended analogy:

For me writing is like putting the pieces of a puzzle together. I think that I feel this way because when I'm putting a puzzle together I look for exactly the right piece that fits in place. When I write I do the same thing I try and find a word that fits in right where it is needed. [. . .] The difference between writing and the puzzle is that the picture you make can change in writing. The picture is how you see it not how someone else has decided what it should look like. The puzzles picture never changes. [. . .]

Marie then asked Darrin, her interview partner, for his written response. Darrin wrote,

“At first I thought Marie’s analogy would be boring for I thought at least 1/2 of the class would choose [it]. I was later proven wrong. but from her insights I have gained a great deal of knowledge about her as well as myself. I differ with Marie on how to deal with rage. [. . .] She also believes in bluntly exposing her inner most thoughts and feelings to fight for her beliefs. This can also be dangerous because if the wrong people get a hold of your paper and you may be ridiculed or even worse, if it was written during a period of blind rage it may be held against you socially or in extreme cases politically.”

By her fourth draft, Marie had now tripled the length of her paper, introducing many higher-order concerns. She built upon the analogy to achieve a well-developed paragraph, as this excerpt indicates:

“I think of writing as if I was putting the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together. I start with the border (the title), then organize the different color pieces together (the small paragraphs), and finally try and figure out how all of this goes together to form the “big picture.” I use connector pieces. . . . [. . .]

Then in drafts 5, 6, 7, and 8, Marie refined higher order concerns begun in Draft 4 and discussed her research explicitly. At this point Marie achieves an integration between what she knows and how she came to know it:

The way I found out how I write is by discussing my reasons for writing with Darrin, whom I normally don’t agree with. . . . In the interview, I found myself being asked questions I really had to think about. For example, “Would you compromise your writing if you felt that someone would laugh at something personal you had written?” I had to think about it because I am not someone who likes to be criticized about the things I feel, but I can accept that others feel differently than myself.

When I am writing I don’t find myself throwing out an idea because someone may not take it the way that it is meant. Rather I will try and express my point so that the

reader can understand why it is that I feel that way. I think that it doesn't matter if they don't agree with every thing that I have to say, because my reason for writing is not to please everyone but rather to express my ideas."

One of the remarkable things about this student's research and final paper, I believe, is that it articulates a rather complex theory of audience, one in which the writer is clearly aware of readers' needs but at the same time insists that expressing her ideas cannot be sacrificed to pleasing everyone. Though Marie does not have the theoretical vocabulary to speak of Ede and Lunsford's concept of "audience addressed / audience invoked," one cannot help but feel that she has worked out a similar concept on her own.

In conclusion, pointing to any single method or tactic that makes self-directed learning possible is impossible, but remembering that students find as much reward in functioning from positions of authority as we do is important. Perhaps they do not need to accommodate to the academic discourse community we unfold for them as much as they need to build a community of their own by peeking at our blueprints. As Garth Boomer puts it in Goswami & Stillman's *Reclaiming the Classroom*,

Whenever people decide to learn, they undertake research. If teachers wish deliberately to learn about their teaching, they must research. If children wish to learn about electricity, they must research. Learning is defined as understanding in such a way that one can say it in one's own words and be understood, or do it and be effective. (8)

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