

NOTES TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF WRITING AS PROCESS AND PRODUCT

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Introduction: The Product and Process Paradigms

In this essay I will present some pedagogical notes for composition teachers based on my own experience and eclectic study. I define my own teaching style as that of a teacher in transition from teaching writing as product to teaching writing as process. As scholar-teachers have been redefining the theoretical model for teaching composition, I have been transforming my teaching style and practices as I come to understand the new model and ways of enacting it. But I began teaching composition much as it was taught to me by English literature teachers trained in formalist criticism; we taught composition as textual analysis plus grammar. James Thurber describes his teacher's practices this way:

Miss Groby taught me English composition. . . . It wasn't what prose said that interested Miss Groby; it was the way prose said it. The shape of a sentence crucified on a blackboard (parsed, she called it) brought a light to her eye. She hunted for Topic Sentences the way little girls hunt for white violets in springtime.¹

Today's teachers of writing as literary product may not parse sentences, but some of their practices originated in the same era. Richard Young lists the product-paradigm teacher's concerns:

the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing

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process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into [modes, such as] description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis); the preoccupation with the informal essay and the research paper; and as a corollary, the tendency to assume that "creative processes" are not susceptible to conscious control by formal procedures.²

Many of the items in Young's list still sound good to us teachers-in-transition; we still have faith in some product-paradigm methods, such as teaching modes of discourse, for example. However, the profession's recent pendulum-swing to pure process-paradigm methods would disabuse us of retaining any product-paradigm practices. New breeds of composition teachers, who are likely to have formal training in classical rhetoric and perhaps cognitive theory, are shaping the new paradigm, writing as a composing process; they see writing as a process whereby one discovers and creates ideas, drafts several formulations of those ideas, and finally — through re-seeing those ideas as they take form in the written word — develops a version which seems best at the time to fit the writer's purpose and audience.

Let me sketch two hypothetical situations to show the different teaching styles of product- and process-oriented teachers. The product-paradigm teacher assigns a student a topic and sends him off to await the Muse's inspiration for writing. The student often feels like Gene Fowler, who said, "Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead."³ Once the student *has* written an essay, the teacher reads the text, makes a thorough analysis of its merits and demerits, and sends the student off again to correct the product's deficiencies. Perhaps the teacher admonishes the student to re-read Bruce Catton's or E. B. White's essay in the course reader and to follow it as a model. As a result, critics charge that product-oriented teachers ignore the composing process and compare student essays unfairly with those of professional writers.

The process-paradigm teacher assigns a topic and asks the student to follow certain thinking procedures for generating potential writing ideas; then she discusses with the student ways of drafting sentences and paragraphs from such ideas. After the student has sketched a preliminary version of the essay, the teacher or another student reads the draft and comments on it. These comments are not those of

the literary critic; at this point in the process, the reader merely wants to respond to the shape of the writer's ideas, recommending new perspectives from which to view the ideas or ways to seek further development of them. The process teacher then asks the student to follow certain revision and editing strategies to produce — eventually — a finished product. The student may wonder how many “re-writes” suffice. Finally, the teacher grades a final product, demonstrating concern for form and correctness; however, the focus of her instruction is on helping the student to compose a product, not on evaluating the composed product. As a result, critics contend that process-oriented teachers give too little attention to the final product, failing to weigh heavily in grading matters form and correctness.

But, one of the earliest exponents of the process method, Donald Murray, defends it as the better way to help students to learn how to write. Murray says

The process of making meaning with written language can not be understood by looking backward from a finished page. Process can not be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage. It is possible, however, for us to follow the [writing] process forward from blank pages to final draft and learn something of what happens. We can study writing as it evolves . . . through the hands of . . . our writing students.⁴

Many of us, not yet so experienced in process analysis, wonder how one performs such a trick. How does one demystify the writing process, enable students to examine their meaning-making decisions, and provide them with exercises for practicing various stages in the process? And must we discard all of the old practices which are so familiar to us and which we believe may be effective?

To answer those questions for myself, I surveyed current works by pioneers of the new theoretical model and experimented in class with their ideas alongside my old practices. I also began writing essays as my students did and analyzed my composing process as the students analyzed theirs.

Let me share with you my notes on teaching writing as process and product. In these notes I survey some of the new practices, give examples, and comment on them. I also discuss retaining some product-paradigm practices and choosing some new practices which, I think, represent a convergence of the two paradigms.

JOURNALS, NOTEBOOKS AND FREEWRITING

There's certainly nothing new about a writer keeping a journal. However, many of our students have never kept one and so need advice on how to use a journal effectively as a place to jot down thoughts which are aborning. In *The Writing Room*,⁵ Harvey Wiener presents helpful ideas for using journals as a source of ideas for class discussion and writing. Also, Elaine Maimon offers several useful suggestions for journal writing in any course: 1) jot down questions that come to you in lectures or in your reading; 2) copy important or difficult passages from material you read; 3) summarize a night's reading; 4) record your responses to your reading, lectures, and class discussions.⁶

In *The Making of Meaning*,⁷ Ann Berthoff suggests what she calls a dialectical notebook. Berthoff asks students to use opposing pages to develop a dialectic or a dialogue. In pages on the right students keep notes, make lists, jot down fragmented but evolving thoughts; later on, after a period of incubation, the students read their notes and, on the facing page, the left side, they comment on, question, restate, or examine the original notes.

The obvious purpose of these exercises in journal and notebook writing is to show students that writing is a way of thinking critically, of teaching themselves something about a topic, something they would not have discovered had they not been encouraged to evaluate and expand their innermost notions. Peter Elbow, whose ideas for freewriting have given new direction and impetus to using journals and notebooks in the classroom, tells writers that freewriting is "a *transaction* with words, whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, perceive, and make available to yourself something better."⁸

Berthoff says, "The reasons freewriting, listing, and other modes of pre-writing [including the journal] can lead to something else is that the seeming random words, the images and phrases and fragments are stand-ins for fuller statements, for relationships, for assertions and questions."⁹ Truly, students need support in developing the simple habit of writing daily in a journal and getting the most out of their freewriting. To be sure, I find that those who already routinely write in these ways generally write better than their classmates. Because of this finding, I encourage all my students to develop journal-writing and freewriting as routines of each and every day.

DISCOVERING AND CREATING IDEAS

When she gave us a writing assignment, my freshman English teacher instructed us to write a thesis statement and make a formal outline, using Roman numerals, letters of the alphabet, and Arabic numerals to indicate major headings and subheadings. She used to say, "Build the logic and organization into your outline and in your papers stick to the outline." One of the early signs of the breakdown of this product-paradigm methodology was the emphasis on the invention stage of composing through pre-writing exercises. At first these amounted to nothing more structured than brainstorming. But the important point was that some writers and writing teachers began contending that one doesn't really know what he or she wants to say about a topic until after having written something about it. Thus, formal outlines were looked at suspiciously, often discarded, pre-writing exercises replacing them. Construction of a thesis statement was often deferred until after the pre-writing stage, as this phase of the writing process came to be called.

Although it became a popular term, pre-writing is inaccurate, for one certainly, as I have described, writes during this period. More precise, the activity a student does during this period has been called invention. Teachers design a number of thinking procedures or strategies for developing writing ideas. Some of these procedures follow intuitive methods; others follow analytical methods. The intuitive methods include brainstorming, personifying, and creating metaphors. The analytical methods include thinking strategies which have been dubbed heuristics, from the Greek word which means "to discover." The more popular heuristics are cubing, the pentad, and particle-wave-field. Let me briefly discuss these analytical procedures since they are new to some of us.

Cubing, the simplest of the three procedures, aids student writers in examining a topic from six perspectives, each of the six having a cue word: describe, compare, associate, analyze, apply, and argue.¹⁰ The pentad, a set of five questions about human action and motive, was developed by Kenneth Burke out of his study of classical rhetoric and drama. According to Burke, "any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where was it done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)."¹¹ Of course, it should be obvious that this

method is appropriate for writing topics which involve human action. Abstract topics must be modified — that is, set in a concrete situation — to be examined according to this model. The Particle-Wave-Field heuristic, developed by Richard Young, enables the writer to shift perspective on a topic by viewing it, first, as a static entity, second, as a dynamic object or event, and finally, as an abstract interacting with or compared to other such systems.¹²

These thinking strategies can be effective in helping students to think systematically about a topic and to arrange their ideas according to a pre-judged pattern of organization. Our students need help in both of these writer's tasks. Furthermore, they enjoy working with these strategies because of the challenge of problem-solving, game-playing, and in general matching pattern to idea.

Let me make two final remarks on methods for inventing ideas for writing. First, encourage your students to practice both the intuitive and analytical methods in order to exercise all of their creative thinking faculties. Secondly, after they have learned to use them all, permit the students to select their favorite method, because one person's heuristic may well be another's writer's block.¹³

DRAFTING AND REVISING

A draft is a preliminary sketch, a tentative drawing up of a writer's ideas. Students must make writing decisions, based on their notes and previous writing; they must put words and phrases into complete sentences and paragraphs, for instance. In so doing they make meaning out of a chaos of ideas. Generally, they are relieved at having put something together, at having created some original ideas. In fact, many are exhilarated at their accomplishment at having put a text together. Teachers should let them bask in their pride, for a moment. Then they should warn students about the dangers such feelings pose for all writers, especially for beginning writers: the dangers of believing the job is finished because the draft appears to be an essay. Now that the ideas are in complete sentences, they sound authoritative; they take on a life of their own, a life in which the student has invested precious time, emotion, and intellect.

At this critical stage in the writing process the students need to learn that this is the middle, not the end, of the writing (and learning) process. If taught that revising means,

literally, re-viewing or re-seeing the topic, students can let their own writing teach them more than they ever believed they could learn about the topic, about the audience, and about their purpose in writing. The difficulty for most student writers lies in their inadequate conception of the revising process.

Through comparing her students' revision strategies with those of experienced writers, Nancy Sommers concluded:

It is a sense of writing as discovery — a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new — that the students failed to have. . . . Good writing disturbs; it creates dissonance. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery, utilizing in their writing, as the experienced writers do, the very difference between writing and speech — the possibility of revision.¹⁴

The trick here is to lure students away from the false security of the seeming order and brilliance of their first thoughts. Inviting them to throw themselves back into the chaos of further meaning-making is no simple task. Berthoff says, "Now, chaos is scary: the meanings that can emerge from it, which can be discerned taking shape within it, can be discovered only if students who are learning to write can learn to tolerate ambiguity."¹⁵

Any experienced writer knows that revising is hard work, physically and mentally exhausting. It is an especially vexatious task for beginning writers. Some students find it difficult to focus sustained attention on the same topic through several drafts. Others tire of searching for new insights; thus, their final versions are merely neater copies of their original drafts.

In order to get students to take drafting and revising seriously and to rewrite effectively, I teach revision strategies in class, using the students' drafts as the teaching material. For this purpose I have developed Writer and Reader Comment Sheets.¹⁶

I also share with the class George Plimpton's comment, "Writing is never finished; it is merely abandoned at some point."¹⁷ I urge my students not to abandon their fledgling work before it can stand on steady legs in front of an audience.

DEVELOPING AUDIENCE AWARENESS

To sense more fully the writer's problem with his so-called audience let us envision a class of students asked to write on the subject to which schoolteachers, jaded by summer, return compulsively every

autumn: "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." The teacher makes the easy assumption, inviting and plausible but false, that the chief problem of a boy and a girl in writing is finding a subject actually part of his or her real life. In-close subject matter is supposed to solve the problem of invention. Of course it does not. The problem is not simply what to say but also whom to say it to. Say? The student is not talking. He is writing. No one is listening. There is no feedback. Where does he find his "audience"? He has to make his readers up, fictionalize them.¹⁸

Thus, Walter J. Ong described the composition student's dilemma of audience analysis. Since, as Ong says, the writer's audience is always a fiction, I encourage students to make up an audience for each assignment, writing a brief analysis of the audience's characteristics, interests, needs, and so on. In *Writing With Power* Peter Elbow presents four chapters on audience, which I believe may be of interest to you, especially his discussion of teachers, "one of the trickiest audiences of all."¹⁹

SENTENCE-COMBINING AND OTHER IMITATION EXERCISES

If you ever studied or taught writing by prose models, you may know that Henry David Thoreau is often cited as a master craftsman of the sentence as well as of the cabin at Walden Pond. About sentence craft Thoreau wrote, "A perfectly healthy sentence, it is true, is extremely rare." That describes the state of syntax in many student papers. Thoreau also said, "Give me a sentence which no intelligence can understand."²⁰ That seems to be a maxim some students attempt to follow.

Sentence-combining exercises can help students write sentences which any intelligence can understand. Sentence-combining exercises consist of expanding and embedding elements, generally, nominals and modifiers, from a series of simple sentences into a single, complex sentence. Andrea Lunsford tells students, "Learning to expand and combine sentences allows you to bring ideas together in new ways, and emphases. As your stock of sentence patterns, of syntactic options grows, your writing will become more mature, more varied and interesting."²¹

I have found sentence-combining exercises effective in helping students develop syntactic maturity; I even suspect, as others do, that it stimulates cognitive growth as well. By this, I mean that rearranging the relation of sentence parts stimulates thinking about the relation of ideas in the sentence. In a study on coherence, cohesion, and writing

quality, Stephen P. Witte and Lester Faigley state, "Open sentence-combining exercises, for example, offer as much practice in forming cohesive ties as they do in manipulating syntactic structure."²² Students work eagerly through sentence-combining exercises because they present interesting problem-solving games. The latest sentence-combining texts contain sophisticated and interesting exercises; also, issues of professional journals have been carrying articles on the most current studies on sentence-combining.²³

I want to mention briefly two semantic exercises, interpretive paraphrase and persona paraphrase, both from Ann Berthoff.²⁴ Interpretive paraphrase is Berthoff's term for rewriting a sentence to change slightly its meaning. This is an effective revision device. A teacher may ask a student to revise a faulty, or cumbersome, sentence and then ask how the revision changes the sentence's meaning. Berthoff requires her students to write at least two different revisions of the same sentence and then to judge in context which version better fits. While Berthoff calls this merely interpretive paraphrase, some syntactic change may also occur in revising.

In persona paraphrasing, a student rewrites a prose passage, making semantic changes, while maintaining the syntactic structure of the original. Like sentence combining, paraphrasing exercises appeal to students because of the game-playing and mental gymnastics they invite.

Sentence-combining and paraphrasing exercises have been developed by process-oriented teachers. However, I believe they aim at about the same goal as sentence-parsing and textual analysis did. The grammatical terms have changed or have been discarded, and the emphasis has shifted from analysis of a static form to creating a dynamic form by manipulating words or sentence parts for rhetorical effect. Nevertheless, I see these exercises as evolving from the product-paradigm practices. Furthermore, I retain another product-paradigm practice: analysis of the finished essay. Distributing three or four student papers to the class, I assign a group of four or five students to assess each paper. After each group presents its assessment to the class, I supplement it with my evaluative comments. I find this exercise provides not only the whole class with useful practice in close reading but also the writers with sound reader response.

CONCLUSION

If you are like me, a composition teacher in transition from teaching writing as product to teaching writing as process, I suggest that you practice composing and experiment with new methods to teach the writing process as well as retain product-oriented practices which you find still effective.

I believe the most effective way to help students learn to write well is to work with them during the composing process, and to assist them in evaluating and reshaping the written product. Thus far my experience and study have shown me that the most effective writing instruction comes from an integration of practices from both theoretical paradigms. In addition to the notes to this article, you may find the following selective checklist of works helpful as a guide to your study.

NOTES

¹*My World and Welcome To It* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942), p. 126.

²"Paradigms and Problems," in *Research on Composing*, ed. Charles Cooper (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1974), p. 31.

³James Charlton, ed., *The Writer's Quotation Book* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 27.

⁴"Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning," in *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1980), p. 3.

⁵(New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 260-264. This book is a valuable resource for the composition teacher.

⁶*Writing in the Arts and Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1981), pp. 20-21.

⁷(Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981).

⁸*Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 49.

⁹*The Making of Meaning*, p. 38.

¹⁰See Elizabeth and Gregory Cowan, *Writing* (Somerset, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 1980).

¹¹*A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1969), p. x.

¹²*Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), p. 127. In *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* Elaine Maimon describes and applies several heuristic strategies to academic topics.

¹³Anyone interested in studying invention should begin with "A Critical Survey of Resources for Teaching Rhetorical Invention," a Review-Essay by David V. Harrington, Philip M. Keith, Charles W. Kneupper, Janice A. Tripp, and William F. Woods in *College English*, 40 (February, 1979), 641-661.

¹⁴"Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writer," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December, 1890), 387.

¹⁵*The Making of Meaning*, p. 70.

¹⁶I have adapted this method from Elaine Maimon's revision practice which she outlines in the instructor's manual for *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*. Ken Bruffee, who introduced the idea of collaborative learning to most of us, also has a finely-developed system of peer-tutoring. See Bruffee, Kenneth A. "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring." *Liberal Education*, 64 (December, 1978), 447-468.

¹⁷In an address at the Conference of Indiana Teachers of Writing, Indianapolis, October 2, 1981.

¹⁸"The Writer's Audience Is Always A Fiction," *PMLA*, 90 (January, 1975), 11.

¹⁹(New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 216. Also, Walker Gibson presents some useful exercises for developing audience awareness in *Persona: A Style Study for Readers & Writers* (New York: Random House, 1969).

²⁰*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), pp. 82, 122.

²¹Janice Lauer, et. al., *Four Worlds of Writing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 367.

²²"Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality," *College Communication and Composition*, 32 (May, 1981), 201. See also, Lester Faigley, "Names in Search of a Concept: Maturity, Fluency, Complexity, and Growth in Written Syntax," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (October, 1981), 291-300.

²³If, for example, you are interested in a study of the relation of sentence-combining to reading improvement, see Marilyn Sternglass, "Sentence-Combining and the Reading of Sentences," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (October, 1980), 235-238. One new text which you may find especially helpful is William Strong's *Sentence Combining and Paragraph Building* (New York: Random House, 1981).

²⁴See *The Making of Meaning*, p. 72. There are also several interesting exercises in semantics and syntax in Robert Scholes and Nancy R. Comley, *The Practice of Writing* (New York: St. Martin's press, 1981), pp. 281-331.

A SELECTIVE CHECKLIST OF WORKS ON COMPOSITION THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

- Christensen, Francis. *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: Six Essays for Teachers*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Coles, William E., Jr. *The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978.
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- D'Angelo, Frank J. *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Winthrop Press, 1975.
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- Flower, Linda S. *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*. Chicago: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981.

- Gebhardt, Richard C., ed. *Composition and Its Teaching: Articles from College Composition and Communication*. Findley, Ohio: OCTELA, 1979.
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- Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968.
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- Tate, Gary, ed. *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays*. Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.
- Tate, Gary, and Edward P. J. Corbett, eds. *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1981.
- Winterrowd, Ross W. *Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1975.