



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AND THEORY: WRITING AS PROCESS AND PRODUCT

Since the New England Association of Teachers of English convention in 1972, when Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Donald M. Murray presented his landmark essay, “Teach Writing as a Process Not a Product” (Murray 3), the product-versus-process debate has taken the forefront in the world of composition pedagogical theory. Murray’s advocacy of process, and the support it has garnered since, came in response to what Mike Rose in “The Language of Exclusion” notes as the focus of “[t]he twentieth-century writing curriculum...on the particulars of usage, grammar, and mechanics” (550)—as opposed to the cognitive process of writing that not merely puts what one wishes to say into words, but actually discovers and creates knowledge through the writing process. And though the community of composition teachers at large has come to at least a general agreement on the fact that process matters—if not necessarily on how much it matters, how it works, nor on how it should be incorporated into the curriculum—we still too often pay lip service to process while placing the greatest emphasis on product. However, I believe we should not teach composition as merely a product nor merely a process. Instead, we should teach composition as a recursive cognitive process that leads to a polished product acceptable within a given discourse community, be that community academic or otherwise.

Most composition teachers are already familiar with the work of Flower and Hayes, and, whether or not we agree with every point in their “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” we may safely assume they have dispelled the myth of the linear writing process by proving “writers are constantly planning (pre-writing) and revising (re-writing) as they compose (write), not in clean-cut stages” (255). But how do we apply this recursive process theory in concrete classroom instruction? Every major scholar in the field over the past 30 years has addressed this very question, and the immense body of knowledge that has been generated in that time may be summed up in a single answer: students learn to write by writing.

When first making his case for an increased awareness of the importance of process, Murray made a strong statement that most likely rankled the sensibilities of many in the field of composition pedagogy, and may

still continue to do so. But, Murray’s point was and still is relevant to how students learn to write: “When [the teacher is] talking [the student] isn’t writing. And you don’t learn a process by talking about it, but by doing it” (Murray 5). This sentiment has been echoed by the likes of Andrea A. Lunsford, “students learn by doing and *then* by extrapolating principles from their activities ... [c]lass time should be spent writing, reading what has been written aloud to the group/audience, and talking about that writing” (Lunsford 282); Patrick Hartwell, “any form of active involvement with language would be preferable to instruction in rules or definitions” (Hartwell 226); and Peter Elbow, “[p]eople don’t improve their writing much unless they do a great deal of it—much more than [teachers] can ever read and respond to” (Elbow 39); among others.

It is our responsibility, then, as composition teachers to structure our classroom activities in such a manner that students spend the majority of their time actively engaged in the writing process—whether writing, reading, or talking about what they have written. And rather than hearing us drone on about process, it is more beneficial to have students keep a process journal in which they make observations of their own individual writing processes immediately after each activity. Aside from further practice organizing thoughts into writing, the process journal allows students to reflect in a meaningful way on their writing and be more cognizant of their processes.

However, as David Bartholomae points out in “Inventing the University,” “[i]f writing is a process, it is also a product; and it is the product, and not the plan for writing, that locates a writer on the page, that locates him in a text and a style and the codes or conventions that make both of them readable” (531). So we must not misunderstand a focus on process as the neglect of product, because inevitably process results in product; and when written for the halls of higher education, regardless of discipline, that product must conform to the accepted standards of an academic discourse community. These accepted standards include the grammar, punctuation, and spelling of Standard Written English—as opposed to dialect—and the usage rules of academic discourse conventions. Again, another question arises: when and how do we incorporate the teaching of these conventions into the classroom?

First, let me state explicitly that academic conventions should not be allowed to hinder the writing process in its early stages in any way. In fact, in many cases, composition teachers must actively work to prevent students’ fears of academic conventions from

hindering students' writing processes. This is another point repeatedly addressed by composition scholars. Sondra Perl, in "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers," points to this fear of convention as a major hindrance for basic writers: "[Students'] lack of proficiency may be attributable to the way in which premature and rigid attempts to correct and edit their work truncate the flow of composing without substantially improving the form of what they have written" (31). In other words, the very conventions to which the discourse community demands students adhere in their academic writing impede the generation and exploration of ideas that the same discourse community expects of student writers. In an effort to prevent this type of impediment, our critical feedback must evolve over the course of the students' writing processes, beginning with a focus on ideas and thoughts and moving to form and finally mechanics closer to the final draft.

If the previous exploration guided by Perl's insight identifies when in the writing process to begin focusing on convention—grammar, punctuation, spelling, usage, etc.—the question of *how* still remains. Many university professors at all levels find themselves wondering what students were learning in elementary, middle, junior high, and high school English classes. In "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," Patrick Hartwell argues that "regardless of instruction, one masters those codes [of composition] from the top down, from pragmatic questions of voice, tone, audience, register, and rhetorical strategy, not from the bottom up, from grammar to usage to fixed forms of organization" (224), and that "one learns to control the language of print by manipulating language in meaningful contexts, not by learning about language in isolation, as by the study of formal grammar" (225).

The implications here are, as we saw with process, that students learn to write by writing. By constantly writing and exploring the writing process within themselves as individuals and among themselves as knowledgeable peers, they will seek out and discover the conventions by which they may make their writing acceptable within an academic discourse community. And we may attach more than one meaning to Hartwell's phrase "not by learning about language in isolation," because, as Kenneth A. Bruffee states in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" when discussing academic studies concerning collaborative learning, "[s]tudents' work tended to improve when they got help from their peers; peers offering help, furthermore, learned from the students they helped and from the activity of helping itself" (398), which seems to be a clear indicator that peer collaboration in the classroom is just as important if not more so than a teacher's red marks on a student's paper.

If we are to teach composition, then, as a recursive cognitive process that leads to a polished product acceptable within a given discourse community, with the focus of the teacher's critical feedback moving through ideas, content, form, and surface mechanics as a student's process moves toward final draft, we are still left with the question of the teacher's actual role in the teaching of process and product. Peter Elbow

acknowledges that "[g]ood teaching calls on two conflicting abilities or stances: positively affirming and critically judging" (Elbow 55). And when weighing these conflicting stances, the teacher's role becomes that of a guide—pushing students to explore the furthest limits of their creative and critical thinking abilities, and then reigning students back in so that they might focus their ideas in academic writing. Because as Murray pointed out to the New England Association of Teachers of English convention back in 1972, "[w]e are coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of environments in which our students can experience the writing process for themselves" (Murray 5).

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