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BEYOND THEORY: HELPING STUDENTS PROVE THEIR OWN WRITING PROCESSES

Richard H. Dillman

The abundance of research on the composing process has heavily influenced the teaching of freshman and advanced composition. The research of Janet Emig, Linda Flower, and John Hayes, along with the work of Donald Murray, has offered writing instructors material for lectures on composing, provided useful terms for discussing writing with students, and given us a new awareness of both the complexities of composing and the diversity of composing styles exhibited by our students. A new tolerance for varied methods of invention and pre-writing beyond the outline has developed in the last fifteen years, while the topic of revision has received new and powerful emphasis as Linda Flower's distinction between "writer-based prose" and "reader-based prose" has opened numerous pedagogical possibilities for writing teachers (110-118, 121, 144-166). Besides helping writing teachers become better evaluators and diagnosticians of student writing, this new awareness has also influenced course design and the sequencing of writing assignments in several ways.

It is time, however, to move beyond this composing theory that influences our teaching and turn our attention to helping our students probe more deeply into their own composing processes and those of

their peers. I propose that we composition instructors help our students develop abilities to act as "composing process" researchers who probe their own writing strategies and processes in ways that will heighten their awareness of composing. By doing this we can help them eventually become, by varying degrees, their own teachers and editors. We can integrate the study of student composing into our writing courses without seriously detracting from such things as critical interpretation of literature, the analysis of essays, or the study of techniques for writing the research paper that we may see as the primary focus of our courses. We can make the study of our students' composing behaviors and patterns part of the content of composition courses through specially designed writing and discussion activities that will heighten student awareness of the complexity and variety of possible composing strategies. We can also hope to modify student writing methods. In this essay, I will identify and explain several activities that will help accomplish these goals without necessarily detracting from other course material. These activities can be adapted in whole or in part as they fit the format and goals of specific courses.

For instance, after the first paper of the course has been completed, ask students to describe and explain their writing processes for that paper. This can be done at home or in class for thirty minutes, as a non-graded piece of writer-based prose or as part of an academic journal. When students are finished, the instructor can lead a discussion of these writings with the class. Students can speak or read from their writing. Class discussion can take the form of responses to such questions as these: What stages did you follow in writing the paper? Which strategies were effective or ineffective for you? It is also valuable

for the instructor to perform the same exercise and share his or her composing habits with the students.

This writing activity, which I use in most of my writing classes, elicits a lively discussion of student writing methods and helps students begin to develop an awareness of composing processes in personal terms. The discussion demonstrates that there is no single best way to compose within the class, that most students compose in varied ways, that composing is often quirky and highly idiosyncratic, and that few students even roughly follow the older paradigm found in grammar and rhetoric handbooks published before 1980 or so of choosing a topic, composing a carefully planned outline, and rigorously following it as they prepare the paper. When I use this activity in my classes, usually a few students reveal that they compose formal outlines while some say they begin by writing a draft or making rough lists or "brainstorming." The discussion begins to teach them about composing strategies that they had never imagined while it also increases their knowledge of possible composing options.

If the instructor prefers, these writings on student composing strategies can be the basis for small group discussions. In groups of three or four, the student protocols can be discussed and explored. Students may be asked to appoint a recorder who will register the main points of each group discussion and later report these findings to the whole class when it is reconvened. Either way—whole class discussion or small groups followed by whole class discussion—the results will be similar. Throughout the term, instructors can lead brief discussions of student writing strategies used for each assigned paper. Different types

of papers will require different writing methods from many students, and acknowledgement of these changes and variations will appear in the discussion.

Some instructors may wish to have students keep a composing journal in which they describe what happened each time they performed required or unrequired writing. Thus, students would keep an ongoing performance record in their notebooks, that is, a kind of learning log. They would continue to confront the act of composing, with this activity leading to productive discussions of composing that promote self-awareness of themselves as working writers and give students material for a final writing activity about changes in their own writing processes that occur by the end of the term.

Students may also be asked to interview each other about their composing processes either in class or in small groups as they discuss their ongoing drafts. They can also be asked to interview a small number of students from outside the class about their writing processes and then compose the results into a report. These students will thus become involved in designing questions for these interviews that would resemble the following:

1. What stages do you pass through when writing papers?
2. What writing strategies work best for you?
3. Which strategies or writing behaviors are least productive for you?
4. Which strategies would you like to drop?

5. How does your composing behavior vary from one assignment to another? Do you change for different types of writing?
6. What external factors influence your composing strategies? (Deadlines, surroundings, noise level, distractions, etc.)
7. What idiosyncratic or individual composing strategies do you use? These should be things that you think are individual to your personality and to your personal approach to writing.
8. What times of day are most effective for you as a writer?
9. Do you use any special tools for writing? If so, what are they? These might be special pens, types of paper, word processors, electronic typewriters, etc.
10. Do you prefer any particular surroundings for writing? If so, what surroundings work best for you? (Rooms, library, etc.)
11. What aspects of the specific class or course you're writing this paper for affected your composing of the assignment?

Other questions might help students probe their own composing methods by themselves or in class discussion.

A variation on this strategy of having students interview other students is to assign them to groups of three at the start of the term and have them follow each other's writing processes throughout the term or for a shorter period of time. The group would then complete their activities by presenting a report of their findings; thus a class of 25 might have about six such reports.

At the end of the term, the instructor can follow these discussions with a required paper, formal or informal, that asks students to describe the ways that their writing strategies have changed throughout the term. This will force students to carefully examine their experiences with composing from the viewpoint of observing change and

variation. They may spot growth or stasis (somewhat unlikely) and examine genuine breakthroughs in which they may have adopted a new composing strategy. The instructor can then follow this paper with a discussion that serves to synthesize the students' explorations of their own composing processes. Sometimes I use our final exam period for the above writing activity after 90% of the graded assignments for the course have been submitted; for an hour and fifteen minutes students write on the topic, "How my composing strategies have changed over the term," which I follow with a forty-five minute discussion of their findings.

After some of these activities have been used and others, like the long term studies of composing, are in progress, the instructor can gradually introduce important concepts from contemporary research on composing. I recommend Mike Rose's ideas on the causes of writer's block, particularly his emphasis on rigid rules and lack of composing options held by high blockers (4, 49), and Donald Murray's lists of composing techniques and recommended strategies for avoiding writer's block in the most recent edition of his *A Writer Teaches Writing* (44-50). Murray presents a useful list of writing strategies gleaned, it seems, from years of talking to writers and conducting writing workshops.

I also recommend introducing students to the thoughts of professional writers on their own composing behaviors and on their perceptions of themselves as writers. As they read or hear composing demystified by writers like Joan Didion, Ernest Hemingway, Henry David Thoreau, or John Kenneth Galbraith discussing their false starts or idiosyncratic composing habits, students will discover that their own contradictory and difficult efforts at writing place them in excellent

company. This activity, moreover, should not intimidate weaker students since they are not being asked to imitate the finished works of professionals but to hear their voices as struggling writers confronting many of the same composing problems and dilemmas that student writers experience. (An annotated list of useful sources for this purpose, accompanied in some cases by the titles of anthologies in which they may be found, is appended to this article.)

From the aforementioned activities, students will become, to a greater or lesser extent, researchers into the complexities of composing. These activities will heighten their awareness of the complexities of writing and increase their knowledge of the range of composing methods that writers may use. Moreover, they can develop the ability to ask intelligent questions about writing of both themselves and others. After leaving our writing classes, they will hopefully retain this sensibility and be able to analyze their own composing methods when necessary. They may be able to identify other options for themselves when those they are using do not work. Students who cannot generate viable outlines for essays will be able to try writing a draft to discover their thoughts; others may try free-writing, while some may simply achieve a sense of comfort in knowing that composing is often full of false starts and dead ends and that writing is often a messy process for even the most accomplished writers. What is more, they should come to appreciate the myriad composing styles among writers while also understanding that writing methods often change from one paper to the next or from one form of writing to another. They will surely come to understand that professional writers do not all use the same writing strategies and that some also experience considerable anxiety when writing. They may also

realize that composing is influenced by such things as emotional state, prior treatment by earlier writing teachers, and various myths about writing. The most important benefit from these activities will be an increased awareness of composing that can lead students to mentally audit their own writing methods.

In the influential book, *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, Mike Rose identifies some of the characteristics of what he calls "high blockers," those who experience a high degree of writer's block. Among these characteristics are a tendency to hold rigid ideas about how writing should proceed, the tendency to edit prematurely (too early in the writing process), the knowledge of too few planning and writing strategies, and a sense that writing is governed by conflicting rules (70-99). Students who spend time discussing the range of composing options and who are introduced to a variety of writing strategies will expand their composing options; they will confront writing experiences that contradict the rigid rules that they might hold about writing. Thus, the strategies that I have recommended for teaching students about the complexity of the writing process will help diminish the tendencies that Rose has identified. Finally, such activities may help students to identify ineffective composing techniques and aspects of their writing processes that block their fluency. Instead of seeing themselves as students performing assigned writing tasks, they may begin to think of themselves as writers.

Appendix: Professional Writers on Writing

The essays by Eldridge Cleaver, Joan Didion, John Kenneth Galbraith, Henry Miller, and Bertrand Russell can all be found in *Themes and Variations, A College Reader*. Eds. W. Ross Winterowd and Charlotte Preston. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985.

Cleaver, Eldridge. "On Becoming." An account of how Eldridge Cleaver used writing to sort out his own problems and priorities.

Didion, Joan. "On Keeping a Notebook." A discussion of Didion's use of a journal as part of her writing process.

Didion, Joan. "Why I Write." A discussion of how Didion uses writing to discover what she thinks about her subjects.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. "Writing, Typing, and Economics." A discussion of John Kenneth Galbraith's own writing methods with some attention to writing in the social sciences.

Ernest Hemingway on Writing. Ed. Larry Phillips. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984. A collection of Ernest Hemingway's comments on writing that includes commentary on his own writing methods.

Howarth, William. "Introduction." *The John McPhee Reader*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1976. William Howarth describes and explains John McPhee's writing methods.

Miller, Henry. "Reflections on Writing." Henry Miller's thoughts on writing as a perilous journey of discovery in which a writer's ideas may be contradicted and repudiated.

Russell, Bertrand. "How I Write." A direct account of Russell's writing techniques.

Thoreau's Comments on the Art of Writing. Ed. Richard Dillman. Lanham, Maryland: The University Press of America, 1987. A collection of Thoreau's comments on writing non-fiction prose that was compiled from his journals, his correspondence, and his published writings. This collection contains substantial material on Thoreau's writing methods.

White, E.B. "The Essayist." *The Essays of E.B. White*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977. A discussion of the role and writing approaches of the essayist, with E.B. White treated as representative of all essayists.

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