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Dashu Culic Nisula

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EXPLORING BRIDGES WHICH LINK THEORY AND PRACTICE IN COMPOSITION

Dashu Culic Nisula

Theories, be they political or literary, are most appealing when we hear them at political rallies or at various conferences. Yet, as soon as we return to our homes or our classrooms, the well formulated theories are often forgotten or appear inapplicable in real situations. Sharing the frustration of composition instructors who, like myself, sometimes feel that theory and practice do not go hand in hand, I wholeheartedly support the proposal made by Don K. Pierstorff (1984) that we ought to have conferences on how theorists can help English composition teachers. For these reasons, I decided to explore bridges that can be made between theory and practice in composition classes.

One frequently quoted term in composition theory today is the "shifting paradigm." Thomas Kuhn (1963) used this term in his **Structure of Scientific Revolution** to explain a process by which major changes occur in scientific fields. According to Kuhn, this process is a gradual one which occurs when an old model no longer solves problems at hand. Maxine Hairston (1982) borrowed the notion of a "shifting paradigm" from Kuhn and has applied it to describe what is presently taking place in composition theory. In her article, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," Hairston argues that the teaching of writing is currently at the point of a "paradigm shift": composition theory is moving from an inadequate model of inquiry to a new one. However, some educators concerned with composition studies have questioned whether a theoretical model implied by the term "shifting paradigm" even exists for this discipline; yet others have challenged the very use of scientific terminology to explain recent changes in composition studies (Connors 1983).

A problem with using scientific terminology in a humanistic field of inquiry, such as composition, is that it implies that repeatable and controlled examination using a scientific model can be performed again and again. We know, however, that because of so many variables, repeatable and controlled situations revealing the working of a particular model are difficult to demonstrate in the teaching of writing. Nevertheless, we can use scientific terminology to describe the focus of our study in composition theory, or the kind of methodologies we employ, which, eventually, we will be able to repeat under controlled situations.

But even if we accept the use of scientific terminology in the field of composition studies, Hairston's use of the term "shifting paradigm" seems inadequate. A "shift in focus" (a kind of Copernican revolution) would be more appropriate, since a paradigm shift implies forgetting the old model altogether (Progress in scientific research is guided by the law of refutation, i.e. rejection of previous errors and false theories). A Copernican revolution, however, implies the same order of things among which only the point of view has changed. What is happening in composition studies to a degree is merely a change in focus to more workable methods of teaching (Progress in humanities is guided by the law of transformation of the familiar, which is to say, seeing the old in new ways). Part of the new in composition theory is, in fact, a refocusing on the ancient rhetoric of Aristotle--a transformation of the classical model.

Other disciplines do exist in which it is not possible to demonstrate the working of a particular model under repeatable conditions. Psychoanalysis is a good example. Parallels can be drawn

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between psychoanalysis and composition studies: first, neither field of study possesses a clearly outlined model of inquiry, under repeatable and controlled situations; second, in each the expert gropes on insecure ground, hoping to hit the right approach for each individual patient or student; and third, there are too many variables in these fields to determine what, if any, success has been made in helping a patient or a student. However, even in these two similar disciplines there are a number of knowns, steps that can be taken which have proven to work well. Teachers of composition, then, like psychiatrists, aid in breaking old habits and teaching new ones.

Further, methods of pedagogy in composition as well as approaches in psychoanalysis continue to evolve as we learn more about the way in which human beings operate. We can, therefore, look forward to a time when we can speak about a general composition theory to encompass all the various approaches to the teaching of writing currently in use. We can look forward to a functioning interrelationship among linguistics, composition, communications, and the language arts. For now, however, we must depend upon modifying old methods and making them workable in effecting good writing for students of different learning styles. Hence, knowing the history of rhetoric as well as recent research in composition theory is a must for all teachers of composition.

Over the past three years, I have tried to learn about what has been going on in composition theory by attending meetings and seminars, and engaging in reading. However, all of this has not been as valuable as when I have tried to implement contemporary theory in my classrooms. I have come to realize that, just as the reader in literary theory is the one who unlocks and begins to unweave the text, so, in composition theory, it is the audience who becomes the focus of everything that goes into a text. Therefore, the questions that should be entertained by the writer from the beginning and throughout the act of composing are for which audience is a piece being written and for what purpose.

Besides bringing to the classroom what we know about the relationship

between writer, audience and purpose, we can focus on what we know about the function of the human mind. For example, we know that man makes sense out of the chaotic world in which he lives. Ann E. Berthoff (1981) in **The Making of Meaning** points out that we know the world by looking, perceiving, identifying and grouping based on similarity and dissimilarity. In our composition classes, therefore, we may have students create their own chaos by making lists of related and unrelated items or ideas, or we can bring to class such materials, and then ask the student to select and group similar ideas and objects in order to create an order and a meaningful piece of writing. Exercises along these lines are offered by Berthoff in her textbook for teachers. In addition, we can create such exercises using various data, then ask students to look, select and group these to come up with a text.

We also know that analysis and synthesis are more sophisticated operations of the human mind than identification and classification. To bring these skilled operations into the classroom for practice, we can ask students to analyze a particular piece of writing and report on it in written and oral format. Especially useful in a composition class is to have students produce a synthesis of two articles thematically related. First introduce the notion of synthesis in scientific terms by referring to the process of combining chemical elements, such as sodium and chloride, in a laboratory setting. The compound produced--NaCl--has characteristics of the original elements in it, but the seams or the connective points where the two elements merge are not obvious. Then ask the students to create a synthesis of two articles, for example Goldberg's **In Harness: The Mail Condition** and Perelman's **The Machismo Mystique**.

Still another way of incorporating theoretical information in a classroom is to actually work with students on what Kinneavy and Britton have reported on writing skills. James Kinneavy (1980) in **Theory of Discourse** points out that writers move along the horizontal axis of expressive-objective writing, by which he means from personal to a more public kind

of writing. James Britton (1975) in **Development of Writing Abilities** points out that a writer passes through a hierarchy of the modes of writing. The expressive mode, consisting of the building blocks of writing, is the stage that is mastered first. Once mastered, the writer moves on to other more complicated modes of writing: transactional and poetic. Because expressive writing is easier for students to master, it is a mode students often regress to, especially when they are unmotivated, confronted with difficult contexts or are insecure about the topic, not knowing what they want to say. (It is interesting to note that a similar situation occurs in a psychoanalytic situation in which a patient regresses to earlier modes of behavior when confronted with sensitive issues.)

In contrast to inexperienced writers who prefer the expressive mode, students in advanced composition classes often lock themselves in at the other extreme of objective writing, so that their discourse, as pointed out by Hairston (1984) in "Working With Advanced Writers," is at times too impersonal. I feel that motivating such students to personalize their prose is much easier than pushing students from an expressive mode to the higher levels of discourse. There is no doubt, however, that as students mature they eventually move from the expressive to the objective mode of writing, with the instructor facilitating this process.

Working with students precisely to help them up the hierarchy of writing modes, I found several things that work. For instance, I will ask students to summarize an article, an essay or a paragraph. I realize these are old tricks in the composition trade, but they work. Often students must first be told what a summary is. Basically, I tell them, it is a reduced piece of original writing which contains no personal opinions or evaluations. I then ask them to summarize without making references to the article, the title, or the author,

since immature writers use expressions as "I think," "I feel," or "the author says" or "feels," etc. as a crutch. These expressions veil the crux of the point, much as in a psychoanalytic situation the patient employs various defenses in order not to reveal or not to deal with sensitive material. But the importance of this exercise is to help students become conscious of what they are reading and doing as writers.

The above exercise can further be reduced if we ask students to express a summary in one or two sentences. Though this may appear to be a simplistic exercise, the task is quite demanding for freshman composition writers and only after repeated tries do some students get it right.

Reversing this exercise, I bring to class a line or two, or a drawing with a short legend, and ask students to respond to the item in a full length essay, again without making any references to the legend, the drawing, the artist, etc. Here some students find it difficult to avoid beginning their papers with "I see" or "The artist is trying to say." The same exercise, by the way, may be given to advanced composition students, who come up with various responses, some quite sophisticated and original.

These exercises by no means exhaust the possibilities by which theory may be applied in a classroom. And though these methods are not new, they have proven to work well in bringing about a specific result: moving the students from the expressive mode to more sophisticated types of writing.

Reciprocity between theory and practice is indispensable for composition teachers, and for theorists as well. For composition teachers to be effective, they must be abreast of what is going on in the field at the theoretical level. Theoreticians must remain conversant with the activities of the classroom; they must know how their theories apply in the classroom from firsthand experience.

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- Dasha Culic Nisula teaches English at Saginaw Valley State College, University Center, Michigan.**