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Marketplace & Classroom: The Writing Process of Professionals and Students

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Writing Processes

Among current paradigms of writing, the cognitive process model developed by Linda Flower and John Hayes and the developmental model proposed by Carl Bereiter are complementary to one another. Together they present a perceptive and persuasive theory of the development of writing ability and the dynamics of the composing act itself.

The cognitive process model redefines the stage model of the composing process—pre-writing, writing, rewriting—as three subprocesses—planning, translating, and reviewing—and adds a fourth subprocess, monitoring, as a means of deciding when to switch among the other three, which are constantly and randomly alternating rather than following one another in sequenced stages. More importantly, perhaps, Flower and Hayes add to the writing processes the elements of the writer's task environment (including both the initial rhetorical problem and the expanding text) and the writer's long-term memory. These three elements are described as constantly interacting, and the inclusion of task environment and long-term memory are significant additions (Flower, 1981).

Flower and Hayes assert that the writer's long term memory stores knowledge of the topic of the writing task, knowledge of the audience it is intended for, and knowledge of specific plans and strategies for specific writing tasks. The more such knowledge is stored and readily accessible in long term memory, the more the demands made on short term memory during the actual writing process can be lessened. Flower and Hayes suggest, and other researchers confirm, that the problems students have with writing can often be accounted for by their inability to juggle all the demands being made on them in short term memory concerning the assignment, topic, audience, or writing itself. This suggestion relates to Bereiter's model of development. Bereiter sees the development

of writing abilities as a movement through stages of automaticity, where the mastery of one level allows for the movement to another level by pairing a new skills system with skill systems already achieved. Thus, the learning writer begins on the level of associative writing, combining written language production with controlled association; from there he moves to performative writing with the addition of rules and style and mechanics, and then goes on to communicative writing with the addition of social cognition. He arrives at the next stage, unified writing, with the addition of his own emerging critical and esthetic judgement; it is a stage where, according to Bereiter,

the writer begins to develop a personal style and a personal viewpoint...(which) leads to a focus on the written product as a thing to be fashioned. Hence writing becomes a productive craft and not merely an instrumental skill (Bereiter, 1980, 87-88).

Epistemic writing, a combination of unified writing and reflective thinking, is "the culmination of writing development, in that writing comes to be no longer merely the product of thought but becomes an integral part of thought" (88).

The key to this development is the concept of automaticity. As Bereiter points out.

Automaticity does not imply mastery but only proficiency such that the behavior in question requires little or no conscious attention. Examples of automaticity without mastery are to be found in people with fluent but illegible handwriting or with confident but inaccurate spelling. The preferred or "natural" order of writing development would be a sequence of stages in which the attainment of automaticity at one stage maximally facilitates progress toward the next stage (89).

In terms of the cognitive process model, automaticity is achieved when skills are stored in long term memory, making it unnecessary for the writer to confront a lack of proficiency on several fronts at the same time.

Taken together, then, the Flower-Hayes cognitive process model and the Bereiter developmental model seem complementary, and, based on my research on the composing processes of professional expository writers, I have also found them to be reliable descriptions of writing and writing development and useful reference points for comparing and contrasting the processes and stages of development of professional and student writers.

Marketplace & Classroom

In the past three years, I have read the published work of a number of writers who regularly compose short expository articles on a deadline for a specific audience, interviewed those writers about specific pieces they had written, and examined, wherever possible, all the stages of composition of those articles. My subjects have included Tom Wicker, political columnist for **The New York Times**; Noel Perrin, essayist and book reviewer; Walter Kerr, drama critic for **The New York Times**; David Denby, film critic for **New York Magazine**; Neal Gabler, co-host for the PBS series **Sneak Previews** and also at that time film critic for **Monthly Detroit**; and Susan Nykamp, managing editor of **Photo Marketing**. Not only did their texts and interviews confirm the validity of both the Flower-Hayes and the Bereiter models, but they also provided implications for the classroom which I can best make clear by comparing the composing of both professional and student writers in light of these related models.

Consider the task environment of the professional in comparison with that of the student writer. The professional has a very specific sense of his audience. David Denby can say of **New York** readers that they are "probably an audience of people working in the professions or in business in New York who are college educated or bright and have cash to spend," and he avoids reviewing "schlock horror movies because I assume our readers aren't interested in them" (Interview, 1982). Susan Nykamp knows of her professional audience that "they don't want to have to sit down and figure something out—they want to read and get some information and say, 'Yes, this is going to help me.' " Consequently, she has to decide how narrow

her audience or sub-audience is: "Do I want to write it for finishers and dealers? Or do I want to write it for just photo dealers, the retailers themselves?" (Interview, 1982).

By contrast, as James Britton has made clear, the student writer may have a number of possible audiences—him- or herself, the teacher in a variety of roles, a wider, known audience, an unknown audience—but predominantly is asked to write to the teacher, usually in the role of examiner (65-66, 130-137). The student's relation to his audience is the opposite of the professional's—the professional writes to share particular ideas of his own with an audience drawn to the writing by interest in the subject; the student writes to provide means of measurement, evaluation, and assessment for a reader who either already knows more about the topic than the writer can tell him or cares less about what the student is saying than the way he says it.

Professional writers have a very particular sense of their writing task. They usually have written in the same genre frequently—a columnist is continually producing the same form of writing. They know the limits and the limitations of their form and the general area in which they are expected to write—their charge, as it were. Tom Wicker, for example, says, "My basic assignment is to write about national affairs. I probably wouldn't write about the Iranian-Iraqi war, unless it was causing some problem with our oil supplies" (Interview, 1982).

The writer also knows the expectations his readers might bring to their reading given the occasion for the piece and the place they find it. Walter Kerr says of his weekend columns, "On Sundays there's a choice and everyone knows you've got a choice, therefore what you say ought to be important to you" (Interview, 1982). Because Neal Gabler writes for a monthly, he assumes that his readers expect his article to be more general and more carefully considered than a daily newspaper or weekly magazine review (Interview, 1982). In addition, the professional also has an internal as well as an external understanding of the length of the piece expected of him and has routinely written to that length. In the course of writing 150 five-minute

radio commentaries, I very quickly fell into a rhythm of producing rough drafts of two and a half to three legal pad pages—almost exactly five minutes delivery time.

Student writers have a different sense of their writing task. They very likely have never written in the form requested of them, have no visual sense of what the typed paper should look like or how to achieve it on the typewriter, have little concept of form, format, or appropriate length, no sense of audience other than the teacher, and no realization that it might be written differently for a different audience.

Professionals have great confidence in their own professionalism; students have no confidence in either their own language or their persona. The professional has a sense of purpose related to the topic; the student has a sense of purpose related to the grade the writing might receive. The professional has a background in the subject, has immersed himself or herself in the context of the topic, and routinely draws upon accumulated information and personal insights and intuitions to write about it. The student has very little background on the subject, particularly with research papers, has almost no idea of how to get the background, and very likely will be sent on to his next assignment with the challenge to use a new format—move from a personal narrative to an argumentative paper—and to find a new topic—move from reminiscing about summer vacation to arguing the pros and cons of abortion, gun control, or nuclear disarmament.

Thus in regard to task environment the student is constantly being thrown off balance while the professional is constantly finding ways to store and recall information about topic, audience, and writing plans in long term memory. As Sharon Pianko writes,

If the writing is school-sponsored and must be written within limits set by the teacher, the composing process is inhibited. There is just so much energy a person is willing to give to please others and there is just so much energy that a person can expend at any one time for composing. Some persons

can only compose for a certain length of time, after which they must seek out diversions in order to replenish their creative and intellectual energies. A certain amount of time must elapse during which the writing is placed in the "distal," Polanyi's term to indicate that it is not being attended to. Later, the writer can return to the composition with new energy and perhaps new insights. (11).

The task environment that the teacher establishes can in fact interfere with the composing processes of students, if it doesn't allow flexibility for the student.

The idea-generating strategies of professional writers differ from those of students as well. Professional writers, because they are immersed in context, rely upon spontaneous generation of ideas through observed connections. As Tom Wicker has observed, writers need to be "assiduous string-savers" who collect and store information all the time, in hopes not only of better understanding the article they are presently writing, even if they don't use the information directly, but also of later on making connections with new information leading to a new article. He says,

If I picked up the paper this morning and read a particular story, it might well trigger something and I know I've got something in (my file) that pairs up with that, or contradicts it, and I could pull it (Interview, 1982).

Other writers make the same point. As Neal Gabler says, "I'm always looking for connections" and illustrates it by showing how the random response to two films did not generate an article until a viewing of a third set off connections which led to a long analysis (Interview, 1982). The professional writer always works in a specific context, though it may be very broad, and the ideas arise from a process of continual information-gathering and connecting. In other words the information and the assignment itself are intimately connected and the work goes smoothly because each piece in a sense leads to another.

The tackling of new subjects usually leads to some disorientation. Susan Nykamp, a good college writer with a degree in Journalism and English, nonetheless had difficulties manipulating sentences when she began her job with the Photo Marketing Association because she lacked any kind of background in photo retailing, the subject of her writing. She could only take the ideas assigned her and attempt to execute them as well as she could. As she says,

I was very limited because I could only take the information I'd gotten for that article as what I knew to be true. For example, I had to do an article on equipment breakdowns and I was telling people about all this equipment and I didn't even know what it was. (Interview, 1982).

Two years later she had developed an understanding of her field sufficient to rise to managing editor of **Photo Marketing**, the top writing position in the major periodical of her organization. Her success was due to immersion in context and experience in expression over a period of time.

The idea generating strategies of students are quite different. Usually the idea for the assignment comes from the instructor and each assignment is separate from the assignment before. Not only is the format different, as we noted under task environment, but the subject is different as well. Whatever material went into the writing of a personal narrative is of little value for the writing of a problem analysis or a process paper, research paper, classification paper. Students have little possibility of building on their knowledge, or making connections between old information and new information except in the broadest sense and through the use of elaborate heuristic structures. Such invention or prewriting techniques, if they are used at all, are entirely internalized by professionals.

An exception to this fragmentation would be a course in which writing is assigned regularly as part of an ongoing study of a single unified subject—English literature, geology of the Southwest, the New Testament. But even these writing assignments are more often tests of research or means of measurement, setting

students to work on new tasks rather than helping them develop their writing out of work already in progress. Intermittent, isolated assignments estrange students from the writing processes of professional writers by preventing them from taking advantage of the same idea-generating strategies. As Sharon Pianko observes,

If teachers are to affect a positive change in students' written products, they must change the focus from the evaluating and correcting of finished papers to helping students expand and elaborate the stages of their composing processes. Teachers must help students become more reflective writers (21).

When Donald Murrery, a Pulitzer Prize winning writer as well as a writing teacher and scholar, allowed a researcher to examine his own composing processes he professed to be surprised and said, by "the length of incubation time, I now realize that articles that I thought took a year in fact have taken three, four, or five years." As a consequence he changed his own classroom practices "by allowing [his] students much more planning time and introducing many more planning techniques" (171). With greater opportunity to plan and incubate, students can profit from assiduous string-saving in intensive short-term classes.

Much of the research I conducted on the composing processes of professional expository writers produced fairly predictable results. For example, what I've said about task environment and idea-generating strategies seems rather obvious on examination, but nonetheless helpful for understanding the context in which writing might be improved for students. In the area of revision the evidence of professional writers seems at first to be at odds with current teaching about the subprocess, even to suggest that it is less significant than we take it to be.

Revision for professional writers often takes the form of minor changes for the purposes of clarity and comprehension (proofreading, of course, is a separate matter); revision is seldom major on a completed draft. There are three

reasons for this. One is that a professional writer has sufficient confidence in the professional quality of his work that he can publish it without “perfecting” it and still feel as if he has done a professional job. Several of the writers I spoke to acknowledged that one or more of the pieces we discussed were not as well-organized or as clear as they would have preferred. In other words, a professional recognizes that not all his work is of primary quality though it may be of secondary value. Tom Wicker said that, in the days when he wrote three columns a week, only one third of them met his personal standards (Interview, 1982). Other writers generally agreed with that number.

A second reason is that work is done under the pressure of a deadline. As Nora Ephron once observed,

one of the most glorious things about being trained as a journalist is that you almost never get writer’s block, because...it’s not tolerated. You have writer’s block, you get fired. No one thinks it’s charming or artistic (10).

Like the student asked to come up with a good paper in forty or fifty minutes on an impromptu assignment or in a day or two on homework, the professional writer has to make allowances for the circumstances and ask something less of herself than she would if she were to be writing without a deadline on a project of her own selecting.

The third reason is that the professional writer works hard enough at the preparation of the article to avoid the problems of discovering on the first draft. Linda Flower has observed that much student writing can be classified as “writer-based prose,” writing in which the writer struggles with concepts in an attempt to explain them to himself; “reader-based prose,” on the other hand, is deliberately composed to be accessible to the general reader (1979). For some professional writers, discovery through writing in an early draft is a means of generating ideas, a more ambitious version of freewriting. Donald Murray has described this process as one going through several drafts and moving from writing which is chiefly exploration for

oneself to writing that is chiefly clarification for others (1980).

But most of the writers I interviewed, working on shorter articles than Murray describes, disavowed the possibility of discovery during the first draft. As Neal Gabler put it, “I would never discover while I write because to me that would be too frightening. It means I’ve missed something in the initial process” (Interview, 1982). Instead, professional writers work very hard on the lead, the sense of the idea and the beginning of a way to get at it. Most have journalistic backgrounds but by “lead” here they don’t mean the journalistic opener to grab the reader but the drafting opener which will generate the right kind of sequence and development. Most work from some vague outline or guidelines, and many will work doggedly on the lead until they find one that they can comfortably follow.

Classroom Application

This point brings us back to the earlier observation about long term memory. Professionals are epistemic writers. At this stage of their careers a good many skills have achieved automaticity and need little conscious attention. Students cannot approach revision in the same way until they have achieved similar levels of automaticity in their own areas of expertise.

This is not to say that we need to attend to revising in traditional ways. Students don’t make the distinction between editing, revising, and proofreading, and often teachers don’t either. We are well versed in the ways in which writing anxiety is created by premature attention to editing for correctness. After observing the composing processes of unskilled college writers, Sondra Perl noted that

1. Editing intrudes so often and to such a degree that it breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing. When this happens the students are forced to go back and recapture the strands of their thinking once the editing operation has been completed. Thus, editing occurs prematurely, before students have generated enough discourse to approximate the ideas

they have, and it often results in their losing track of their ideas.

2. Editing is primarily an exercise in error-hunting. The students are prematurely concerned with the look of their writing; thus, as soon as a few words are written on the paper detection and correction of errors replaces writing and revision (333).

Richard Beach confirms Perl's position when he notes that "students' conceptions of revision reflect teacher and textbook conceptions of revision as final polishing of wording and mechanics," and proposes that, "in order to help students learn to self-evaluate effectively, we need to provide alternative, helpful models of the revision process" (164).

Students in general need to see the possibilities of revision as a substantial change in the conceptualization of the paper first, in order to help them move from writer-based to reader-based prose, and then to think of revision in terms of the clear expression of the ideas represented in the paper. Attention to editing for errors and proofreading should be held off until the preparation of the final draft. Moreover, instruction in revision should be individualized as much as possible. As Perl points out, "teachers may first need to identify which characteristic components of each student's process facilitate writing and which inhibit it before further teaching takes place" (334).

The differences between the composing processes of professional writers and those of student writers seem, by this comparison, to be attributable to three factors. The first is immersion in context, which we have seen facilitates the generating of ideas, the revision of text, and the use of resources in long-term memory. The second is experience in expression, the continual and sequential development of writing abilities by replication of the writing task over a period of time. The third is development over time, the understanding that writing abilities require prolonged immersion in context and experience in expression in order to achieve stages of automaticity that integrate skills systems and transfer knowledge of topic, audience, and writing plans into long-term memory.

If these factors aid the composing process and the development of writing abilities, then our job as classroom teachers is to find ways to overcome the limitations of the task environment we impose upon our students, to replace piecemeal approaches to writing and isolated assignments with opportunities to become immersed in context, and to ask of them sufficient amounts of writing so that they gain experience in expression. Our goal is not to make our students professional writers but to use the evidence of the composing processes of professional writers to confirm and modify our theoretical paradigms of the composing act and writing development to ensure that, as teachers, our contribution to their writing development is as constructive as we can make it.

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