

## The Process Approach to Writing Instruction: An Examination of Issues<sup>1</sup>

- A process approach to writing instruction is intended to create a humanistic, nonevaluative classroom atmosphere in which students learn discovery-oriented composing strategies. Numerous assumptions are embedded in this perspective—for example, that expert writers compose in similar ways and that novice writers can become better writers by behaving like experts. These and other assumptions need to be questioned and explored within a broader social context than that provided us by cognitive process research. These social issues include purposes for writing, the role of evaluation in school writing, and the communicative nature of the writing act. A process approach can thus be viewed as a set of instructional techniques appropriate for some purposes and some writing tasks, rather than as a theoretically based research program.

As the 1980s draw to a close, scholars and educators are questioning the theoretical and pedagogical import of the cognitively oriented *process approach* to writing instruction. This period of questioning has come about in great part because writing researchers are recognizing that they have tended to neglect the social contexts in which all writing takes place (Bizzell, 1982; Cooper, 1986; Horowitz, 1986a; Perelman, 1986).

Yet writing is fundamentally a cognitive process—it cannot help being so—regardless of how it is influenced by social context. Moreover, there is much to praise about the insights we have gained into the writing process since the late 1970s. These insights most certainly have improved writing instruction in a number of important ways. Nevertheless, the original line of research, although it represented a welcome shift from the traditional exclusive focus on product, seems to have come to a conceptual dead end. It is no longer clear where this overriding concern for writers' cognitive processes will lead us. Thus, in research, scholars are increasingly convinced that attention to product and to social context is essential if we wish to understand writers' cognitive processes. In pedagogy, likewise, educators are going to realize that the term *the process approach* has become a buzzword that obscures the details of the incredibly complex cognitive and social phenomenon of writing.

My purpose in this paper is to look at what the process approach label has come to mean to us and at the assumptions that often lie behind the label. Such an exploration may help us understand what is missing from or oversimplified in process-oriented solutions to instructional questions. It may also help us contextualize process-oriented instructional activities within a broader social context. I first review briefly some of the characteristics of writing from a process perspective and some of the instructional techniques that have followed from this view of writing. Then I consider several assumptions about writing and writing instruction that underlie this view. I conclude by suggesting several ways in which our understanding of writing and writing instruction can be expanded.

### The Process Perspective on Writing and Writing Instruction

From research conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s, we have come to perceive writing from a process perspective. (See Humes [1983] and Applebee [1986] for a review and commentary on this work, and Zamel [1987] for a discussion of recent pedagogical research.) In this view, writing is held to be a complex cognitive process in which those writers who are skilled create and then work within a certain problem space in a certain task environment (Flower & Hayes, 1981). They make meaning—i.e., they transform intentionally, rather than tell about, their knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1986). The lists below display some of the language that has been used to describe the writing of experts from the process perspective. Writing:

IS	DOES
discovery	creates meaning
thinking	clarifies meaning
problem solving	generates language, ideas
a tool for learning	weaves thinking, writing, and revising
goal-directed	requires orchestration of complex activities
hierarchical, embedded	requires subsuming surface concerns for larger issues of meaning
complex	
cognitive	
strategic	
purposive	
writer-centered/controlled	
knowledge-transforming	

### IS NOT

linear, sequential  
formulaic  
a one-shot activity  
grammar  
product-oriented  
knowledge-telling

These descriptors, which were generated from a relatively small group of first and second language studies of writers, are usually taken to represent the writing processes of experts across the board. Educators are understandably anxious to translate the findings of such studies into instructional practices. In the second language field, for example, researchers typically conduct a small study in their university ESL programs, match their findings with those in published research, then offer pedagogical suggestions that teachers can easily adapt in their own classrooms (Raimes, 1985; Spack, 1984; Zamel, 1982, 1983). From this work and comparable work in first language research, we can examine instructional issues in at least four areas: (1) classroom atmosphere, (2) the generation of ideas and planning of text, (3) the creation of text, and (4) the evaluation of or response to text. What might instruction be like in the ideal process classroom from these four perspectives?

1. The classroom atmosphere in the ideal process-oriented writing class is humanistic and nonthreatening. Students feel relaxed and work together in a workshop or small group structure. They control their activities to a far greater extent than do students in traditional classrooms. The teacher in this class functions as a collaborator, and even as a writer and learner of writing (Hairston, 1982; Spack, 1984). This helps contribute to the workshop and collaborative atmosphere.

2. Numerous instructional techniques in the process-oriented class aim at assisting students in generating ideas and planning what they will write and how they will write about it. In this class, topics are chosen by students rather than imposed by teachers. Techniques for invention thus become focal. Such invention strategies include free writing, brainstorming, keeping journals, engaging in some real world experience, and considering an issue from multiple perspectives. Exercises such as these, which may be highly structured or relatively unstructured, not only help students generate initial ideas, they also help them find their way into their ideas—help them plan. These activities are typical of the many that teachers have devised and adapted in their own classrooms.

3. In the ideal process classroom, students create text under somewhat different conditions than they do in the traditional classroom. They write for real readers (e.g., for teacher-as-collaborator or peers); they are encouraged to write for a purpose; they focus on content and ideas rather than on surface features; they have at their disposal various writing strategies, all of which are considered viable options.

These students, moreover, have many opportunities to write as well as sufficient time for writing.

4. Finally, in the process classroom, evaluation of and response to students' texts occur not at the end point of the writing activity, but throughout the process of writing. Moreover, the teacher is not the sole evaluator and responder. Students read and respond to the work of their peers and are helped to become critical responders to their own work. Teacher and student meet in conferences, where the teacher-as-collaborator responds to ideas and content, not to surface errors. In these conferences, the teacher guides the student in constructing meaning and in creating, organizing, and transforming knowledge. Editing is postponed, multiple drafts are encouraged, and the final draft, polished or not, becomes simply the inevitable result of the process rather than its focus.

In general, then, the activities in the process classroom provide teachers with many options that can be conducted in a variety of ways. They may be loosely or highly structured, conducted individually, in pairs or small groups, or as a whole class. In the process class, activities are supposed to meet flexibly the variable needs and writing styles of individual student writers. They are dynamic, humanistic, and intuitively compelling. But they are also undergirded by assumptions that we tend to take for granted, or take as proven by research.

#### Assumptions Reflected in This View of Writing and Writing Instruction

A number of assumptions underlie process-oriented instructional activities. They become salient at times in the language we use to talk about writing, while at other times they remain hidden beneath the surface, emerging perhaps in our instructional practices.

Assumption 1: Writing process and written product are dichotomous elements rather than interdependent facets of a larger whole. Whether or not authors and conference presenters intend to represent writing this way, they do so when they choose phrases such as "process *instead of product*" or "process *rather than product*" (e.g., Liebman-Klein, 1986). In fact, when we write anything, we go through some sort of cognitive process; similarly, anything we write (even the roughest of drafts) constitutes a product of some sort. Moreover, access to writers' processes has been achieved via the product of the think-aloud protocol (Connor, 1987).

Assumption 2: Findings from research on the writing process can be translated directly into instructional materials and practices. This assumption is hardly justified, given the limited scope of most research, the major questions that have been raised about methodologies (e.g., about the different self-report techniques that are popular in this research), and the tentativeness and variability of the findings. It is probably more realistic to say that research can inform instruction by enhancing our awareness of why we make certain instructional choices

and by bringing certain issues to light that we might not otherwise consider.

Assumption 3: Writing is a process of making and discovering meaning. Such an assumption implies that (1) discovery and knowledge-making will somehow emerge magically from the writing act itself and (2) all writing acts somehow involve discovery.

Regarding the first implication, Spack (1984) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (1985) remind us that discovery does not happen automatically at all. On the contrary, it requires a great deal of hard work and "intentional learning" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1986).

Regarding the second implication, proponents of a process-oriented view of writing rarely specify what kinds of writing they are talking about. Unless we alter our definition of writing to include only the discovery-type, we are faced with a dilemma, since no doubt all of us can find examples in our own experience of writing that we would hardly label this way. When I write about a topic that I know inside and out, I am not discovering meaning. I discovered it already, perhaps as a result of numerous nonwriting experiences. Likewise when I write a resume, a letter to my mother, or a narrative progress report (as opposed to a thinking paper) to my advisor I am not necessarily discovering meaning. And when I follow the step-by-step prescriptions of a tightly controlled writing assignment, I may not be discovering meaning. In fact, the writing that students of all ages do in schools is evaluated primarily on what students know and can display, not on how they came to learn it. Even at the doctoral level, students who employ the kind of open and free-wheeling writing inspired by a process approach can encounter serious conflict in the face of the more formulaic writing required of them in their program (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988). In short, much of the writing that many of us regularly undertake may not involve discovery.

Assumption 4: A relatively uniform and consistent constellation of processes characterizes the writing of skilled writers. This assumption stems from the characterizations of skilled writers as not fully knowing what they want to say before they say it, discovering what they want to say through the act of writing (see above), and solving their writing problems in similar expert ways. But Reid's (1984) "radical outliner" is no less a writer than her "radical brainstormer" for focusing the discovery process in part outside the act of writing—for knowing much of what she will say before she begins drafting.

Reid exemplifies two very different individual styles of writing process in two equally expert writers. But in addition to the influence of individual styles on the writing process, isn't it also the case that the extent to which writers actively employ any of the behaviors that have been labeled *skilled* will depend on the writers' knowledge, tasks, and purposes? As writers' knowledge, tasks, and purposes change, so will their strategies for writing (Langer, 1984).

Assumption 5: Unskilled writers can become skilled if they learn to behave like skilled writers. Evidence from research does not yet support

this assumption. In fact, if we can infer from the second language acquisition studies of interlanguage, it may be that unskilled writers have their own interlanguage of written discourse that develops not by imitation of the processes of skilled writers, but by gradual development on its own terms (Kutz, 1986).

Moreover, it is unclear what is meant by the phrase "to behave more like skilled writers." Do we mean that unskilled writers should do what skilled writers do—emulate their activities? If so, process exercises in the classroom can become as rote and prescriptive as those we are reacting against. Or do we mean that unskilled writers need to learn to think as skilled writers think? It is widely believed that skilled writers can represent problems to themselves and can disembed thought, as represented by language, from its immediate context and reflect on it in a way that unskilled writers cannot. But we are dealing with invisible phenomena here, and it is not yet clear we know how to teach students to do these things.

Moreover, the language that we use to talk about these issues labels the people as skilled and unskilled. In other words, we assume that people write consistently in skilled and unskilled ways and can therefore be justly labeled as certain kinds of writers. But it seems more likely that all of us are skilled at some kinds of writing and unskilled at others. Further, we may write more skillfully on one day than on another, due to countless internal and external factors. Indeed, for these reasons it has been suggested that at least two writing samples are required to get a reliable holistic rating of someone's writing ability (Odell, 1981). In short, perhaps we should say that writers are or are not skilled at doing a certain kind of writing, or that they demonstrate skill on Task A but not on Task B. The behaviors, not the people, are labeled.

Assumption 6: Students who care about and are interested in what and how they write will produce better writing than those who are not or than those who are primarily instrumentally motivated, e.g., by the need to pass a test, produce a paper, and get a grade. To date there is little evidence to support this assumption; in fact, counter evidence exists. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1985), for instance, found that when students focused attention on their writing processes by thinking about alternatives to and implications of their writing choices, they produced more discursive, scattered, and rambling compositions than students who developed a single idea. Likewise, in her process-oriented class, Raimes (1985) did not find that her students' writing improved significantly, only that they seemed more involved in and committed to the writing task than students in nonprocess classes. Of course, we would not wish to forego interest and commitment, but their relation to writing quality is as yet unclear.

These assumptions, and no doubt more, seem to underlie the process approach to writing instruction. Without rejecting them outright, which I believe would be unnecessary and unwise, we can examine them, question them, and explore them further. By recognizing and

articulating our assumptions, we can make better and more informed instructional decisions. We can also see more clearly where the gaps are in our thinking.

### Broadening Our Understanding

The stereotypical process orientation to writing instruction and research has neglected at least four important areas: purposes for writing, the role of evaluation, social factors, and "theory." In concluding this paper, I consider each one briefly.

1. We need a fuller understanding of students' purposes for writing and of teachers' purposes for having them write. This applies equally to the writing that students do in composition classes and in content classes. Second language learners in the ESL writing class, for instance, may write for the purposes of language acquisition and development, for personal (intellectual or creative) development, for vocational preparation, for general and discipline-specific academic preparation, or for a combination of these purposes. The point is that as the goals of writing instruction vary, so will the writing tasks, activities, emphases and approaches.

By way of example, and to point out the complexities involved, let me discuss briefly only the group whose purpose is academic preparation, from the teacher's perspective. Many teachers see their purpose as helping students in the latter group prepare to do college level work. Part of this preparation involves helping students become familiar with the discourse conventions of the academic community (Bartolomae, 1985; Berkenkotter et al., 1988; Bizzell, 1982; Herrington, 1985; McCarthy, 1987; North, 1986; Swales & Horowitz, 1988) and helping students interpret writing assignments adequately so that they can meet the expectations of teachers and programs (Horowitz, 1986b; Perelman, 1986).

Some of these writing assignments, as Horowitz (1986b) found in a survey of university faculty syllabi, impose a great many external constraints on students' writing in terms of time, content, and form. Students may have little control over the writing task and no time for multiple drafts. Teachers who are preparing such a group of students, in addition to relying on standard process techniques, may also wish to give students formulae for certain kinds of very structured writing as well as practice in interpreting instructions for various kinds of writing assignments.

2. We need to recognize the deeply embedded role of evaluation of finished products and of grades in general at all levels of our school system, even if we are pressing hard to change the system. The pervasive focus on evaluation in our schools undermines many valuable educational goals, but this is a reality of schools as they are presently structured. Teachers, therefore, need to juggle their own experiments with alternative modes of evaluation with these larger institutional realities. Not to consider such institutional constraints in the writing class is to somehow miss one of the reasons we teach writing in schools:

to help students survive the system. Thus, while Liebman-Klein (1986) claims that professors at her university now employ process-oriented techniques (brainstorming, journal writing, revising) in their content classes, she fails to mention either purposes for writing or the inevitable role of evaluation of final products in determining grades.

As Applebee (1984) discovered, the process-oriented goals of even the best teachers who consciously employ a process approach in their content classes in secondary schools are undermined by the real goal—the need for teachers ultimately to evaluate the final product. The students in the Applebee project knew this. Though they dutifully engaged in the process activities, when it came to completing the final product, they were practically and instrumentally driven. They knew that there were right answers, or better answers, and those answers were in their textbooks, not in their journal notes.

3. We need a fuller understanding of the social nature of most writing, and of the connections between the social and the cognitive aspects of composing. Some scholars feel that “cognitive developmental work has been overly concerned with describing mental changes which are assumed to occur within the individual independent of contextual influences” (Rogoff, 1984, p.1). In a general sense, this group believes that a writer’s competence involves more than knowledge of strategies; it involves also how writers connect themselves to their discourse communities:

The various roles people take on in writing . . . arise out of . . . social structure: through interacting with others, in writing and speaking, they learn the functions and textual forms of impersonal reporting, effective instruction, irony, storytelling. In the same way they learn the attitudes toward these roles and toward purposes and ideas held by the various groups they interact with, and they come to understand how these interactions are themselves partly structured by institutional procedures and arrangements. (Cooper, 1986, p. 373)

At a more specific level, an act of writing can be construed as social in that it is one type of communicative event—a cooperative speech act—between writer and reader (Cooper, 1982; Grice, 1975; Mallet, 1985). Thus, when writers (such as students in school) communicate something, and readers (such as teachers) interpret what they write, their mutual understanding depends on shared knowledge of both the context in which the writing is taking place and the linguistic and genre-specific discourse conventions appropriate to that context. Mutual understanding of social context and discourse conventions is a prerequisite for successful writing in school.

All of this is not to deny the fact that writing is a complex cognitive activity, many aspects of which are internal to the writer. It is, rather, to recognize the cognitive consequences of the social factors involved

in writing and to place an individual’s cognitive activity within the broader social context, from which it cannot escape. There can be no decontextualized writing event.

4. We need to recognize that the process approach is not a theory. It has never been defined or developed as a theoretically based research program that helps us understand the act of composing. Moreover, an approach or paradigm that claims to embrace everything (as Hamp-Lyons [1986] would have the “true” process approach do) in fact embraces nothing. A theory, approach, or paradigm is so called because it frames a phenomenon and, within certain boundaries, explains and predicts. By suggesting what is, a theory clearly suggests what is not (hence the capability of theories to generate testable hypotheses). As others have noted, the process approach is a “perspective” (Hamp-Lyons, 1986), an “attitude more than a method” (Zamel, 1986), and a “collection of techniques” (Horowitz, 1986a). Because it is not a theoretically based, clearly defined paradigm, the process view of writing has not been able to generate further research.

However, it has generated what it seems well suited to generate—some useful instructional techniques that accord well with a humanistic and flexible view of teaching and learning—techniques that can appropriately be applied to some writing tasks for some purposes. Our task, then, is not to reject a process approach to writing instruction as a soon-to-be-outmoded fad, but to identify what it can do for which kinds of students doing which kinds of tasks for which kinds of purposes. Within a broadened, socially contextualized view of the writing act, the process approach to writing instruction should find a secure and comfortable home. ■

<sup>1</sup>A version of this paper was presented at the 1987 CATESOL State Conference in Pasadena.

*Christine Pearson Casanave is a PhD candidate and teaching fellow at Stanford University. She has authored numerous articles and textbooks on ESL reading and is a frequent conference presenter. Her current research examines how writing is used as a tool for socializing doctoral students into their academic and disciplinary community.*

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