GOING BACK AND PAYING ATTENTION: SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF THE WRITING PROCESS

ROBERT TREMMEL

It is popular right now to think that the teaching of writing in the United States has turned a corner of some sort, that the momentum built up by new rhetorical theories, composition research, the successes of the writing center movement and the National Writing Project, and a stronger overall professional awareness on the part of those who teach writing have made a perceptible difference at last and that some sort of long awaited new era and new paradigm for writing instruction are at hand. Often this kind of thinking and the optimism it engenders are based primarily on one thing: faith in something called The Writing Process.

For years now, The Writing Process has been the hottest commodity in the profession. Textbooks are full of information about it; education students know all about it; teachers in graduate schools and grade schools have known about it all along and say things like "I used to teach 'X' but now I feel free to teach The Writing Process" or even "Process Writing." Thinking about the Writing Process used to be a source of encouragement for me, too. I figured that research in this area and the fact that so many teachers and curriculum directors seemed genuinely interested in what it is human beings do when they compose written language could only lead to positive results.

Lately I'm not so sure.

Lately, thinking about The Writing Process makes me feel a bit uneasy. There are three sources for this uneasiness. The first and main one is that I realized some time ago that I have no idea what The Writing Process is, that, indeed, I probably never knew. Certainly the last twenty five years of research have yielded a rich variety of views of writing processes (compare and contrast, for example, Rohmann, 1965; Emig, 1971; Elbow, 1971; Britton, 1975; Perl, 1980; Sommers, 1990; Murray, 1985; Flower, 1986) but nothing at all to suggest *A* Writing Process. The second is that there have been many voices over the last few years that we have not listened to closely enough which have been warning against placing an undue amount of confidence on the results of writing process research and, more importantly, on the ability of institutions to put those results directly into practice (see, for example, Applebee, 1981; Faigley, 1986; Freedman, 1987). Even though I want to believe that the teaching of writing is better than it used to be, there is no evidence to suggest that it is uniformly and nationally improved. The third source of my uneasiness is that in some respects the way people are talking about The Writing Process right now reminds me of the way many were talking about expressive writing in the late sixties and early seventies. The fact that too many finally did not know what they were talking about helped lead to the back-to-the-basics frame of mind that still, after all these years, hinders the teaching of writing in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

In this paper, I look closely at the current problem with the writing process and then suggest alternative ways of understanding and discussing process with our students and colleagues. Stated simply, the problem with the writing process is too much eagerness in the profession to discover some teachable formula easily packaged by disseminators of composition theory and methodology to be appealing to teachers as well as administrators, program and curriculum directors, textbook selection committees, and others in charge of structuring teaching practices for sometimes large and professionally diverse faculties. All too often the formula looks like this composite which anyone could easily put together, as I have, from a survey of texts, conference presentations, and inservice programs:

THE WRITING PROCESS

PRE-WRITING

(Also known as INVENTION, GETTING STARTED, DECIDING TO EXPLORE AN EXPERIENCE, UNEARTHING FACTS AND IDEAS, THESIS SHAPING, PLANNING, GATHERING IDEAS, STATING PURPOSE, RESEARCHING, ORGANIZING. . . . Represented by BRAINSTORMING, FREE WRITING, JOURNAL KEEPING, CLUSTERING, CLASSICAL TOPICS, OUTLINING, DIRECTED QUESTIONS, THESIS BUILDING, EXPRESSIVE WRITING, AUDIENCE ANALYSIS, FOCUSED WRITING, DISCOVERY DRAFTING.)

WRITING

(Also known as DRAFTING, REWRITING, PUTTING IT ON PAPER.)

REWRITING

(Also known as REVISING, EDITING, PROOFREADING, GETTING IT RIGHT.)

From almost any point of view, but certainly from the point of view of the last twenty-five years of composition research, such an understanding of process is astonishing. This "pre-writing, writing, revising, editing litany," as Robert Boynton calls it, "which is the current theme song of textbook publishers, and too many curriculum directors who should know better" (210), is based on the framework proposed by Rohman in 1965. While it certainly has some applications, it has been extensively qualified by subsequent researchers. Even more astonishing, though, than the currency of this stage model, is a point of view common in the profession but never defended in print that holds there is little wrong here at all. "After all," I hear many say, "the textbook authors and in-service presenters—for the most part—qualify their presentation of the stages by saying the process does not always fall into this neat pattern." "After all," they say further, "many teachers right now, in transition from traditional methods of instruction, need this kind of crutch temporarily." "The stages," they say, "merely represent a stage we are passing through as a profession right now." "And finally," they say, "even though this view of the writing process lacks conceptual integrity, and even though it does not enact the findings of current research, it does foster better teaching practices and better writing practices."

While I try to understand and respect the intentions behind such arguments, I am not comforted by them. First, such a view of process is essentially a fiction. It does represent, I am sure, many writers' processes on many occasions, but it is clearly not a model that represents a single, widely applicable vision of the writer's work. If it does, why have the last ten years of research seen so many repeated calls to broaden our view of processes beyond the limits of stages? Why are we embarrassed by the stages? That is, why are the stages so often introduced and then qualified? Why introduce them in the first place? Is it reasonable to believe that whole classrooms of students will benefit from patterned, stage oriented assignments that, say, require specific prewriting exercises? Of what use is such a single model to students writing lab reports, business letters, or poems in which formal or rhetorical constraints require processes beyond or removed from those usually elaborated in the various manifestations of The Process? These questions and many other questions that have been asked repeatedly and should be asked some more all lead inescapably to the same answer, namely, that while this vision of process surely is not a wrong one, it is just as surely an incomplete one and one not sufficient to form the basis for a text or a course or a term of writing instruction. Yet, for some reason, we cling to it and all too often base our teaching on it.

Second, such an approach over-simplifies and misrepresents process. It narrows our students' senses of composing and limits their options. As we know, it does not have to be this way. Take, for example, two texts issued by the same publisher. The first, even while following the general outline described above, is among those "process" texts that are not rigidly organized on the basis of stages or steps. On the contrary, in the preface for students, the authors steer clear of reference to The Process altogether, instead encouraging students to come to terms with their own processes—wise advice indeed given the variety in writing process research:

> A GUIDE encourages you to develop an individual writing process and learn how to respond to the demands of various writing situations. It allows you to experience the recursive, 'back-and-forth' nature of the writing process so that you can understand why good papers are not produced in a one-

shot burst of energy at 7 A.M., but in a process of rethinking and rewriting a topic through several stages and drafts (xiii).

By contrast, the other, a text for basic writers, takes a much different approach, first promising students that at the end of chapter three they "should never have to worry about having something to say when asked to write an essay" (1) and then giving them, in chapter four, "a six step method to guide them through the prewriting, writing, and revising processes" (xv). This method, the authors are eager to point out, works just as well for personal writing as it does for "more objective writing" (1), which is represented in this text by summaries, research, and argument. Here are the six steps to this apparently universally effective formula:

Step 1: Gather ideas and information
Step 2: Analyze the ideas and information
Step 3: State your purpose
Step 4: Make your plan
Step 5: Write
Step 6: Evaluate, revise, and edit (60)

While I do not want to belabor the obvious, I do want to make two points here. The first is that the theoretical basis for this formula is very confusing. Like the above composite, it is a hybrid, combining a mutation of Rohman's 1965 model with various elements of current-traditional pedagogy. The sequence through steps 4, 5, and 6 certainly ignores, at any rate, the research on revision that has occurred this decade. The second point is that there is nothing about this formula or the commentary that accompanies it to suggest that it can live up to the two claims made for it, namely that it will "guarantee" a topic for writing each time and that it will enable writers to produce writing in a range of discourse categories. The fact that such claims are made reveals the motivation behind all such process schemes: to provide a foolproof formula that will yield acceptable written products without forcing anyone to deal with the messy, unpredictable aspects of process. So, in one sense anyway, such "process" approaches end up reverting back to the "product centered" approaches they intend to replace.

Of course, basic writers are not the only victims of such formulism. At a recent district-wide in-service on writing in a Kansas

school district, teachers were asked "What is writing?" The answer was that writing is made up of seven sequentially exercised skills:

1. Getting Ideas
2. Planning
3. Researching
4. Organizing
5. Drafting
6. Editing
7. Publishing

As with the preceding example, the problems here are more than obvious, and the unworkability of this formula clear. Not all writing requires research and not all research usefully takes place after the getting of ideas and planning. Indeed, planning and organizing do not necessarily take place apart from each other or apart from any of these other skills/stages. And what of revising? One need not look far to find problems in a multitude of examples like these last two.

The third reason such an approach to process bothers me is that it diminishes the efforts of everyone struggling to bring about substantive changes in the teaching of writing. How, after all, are such views of the writing process incorporated into a course, curriculum, or text? In too many cases, process, which we recognize to be the fundamental basis of the writer's whole practice, encompassing all acts of composing, is relegated to a lesson, or a unit, or a chapter where it takes its place alongside other concerns such as paragraphing or dangling modifiers, rather than informing the student's whole effort at composing. Kathleen Welch has characterized this phenomenon when it occurs in textbooks as converting the writing process to nothing more than an additional mode of discourse.

Even though Welch sees this "conversion of process into a mode [as] not merely depressing . . . [but] also hopeful because it represents a response to theory" (272), I am not similarly encouraged. Such an interpretation of theory and research represents in the worst way what Janet Emig has called a "flight from complexity," a reaction by too many teachers, textbook writers, program directors, and language arts supervisors who after looking long and hard at the complexities of the craft of writing and the apparently confusing results of research, have decided against all logic to pretend that a simple linear formula, interpreted in the

form of teachable skills, exists that can be packaged as content and transmitted to students.

It is tempting to place all of the blame for this problem on textbook writers and publishers who, as Ross Winterowd has pointed out recently, are caught in a complex web of professional and commercial interests. It is at the textbook industry, at any rate, that Boynton aims his proposals for solving a wide range of current problems, including the problem of The Writing Process. However inadequate the textbook industry might be, though, the problems they are having and the problems we are having with them suggest that we have come—and perhaps not just recently—to a point where we are willing to accept superficiality and half-measures in the teaching of writing as a price we have to pay to make any apparent progress at all in improving instruction. But turning to some highly refined, over-simplified view of process will not help people learn to write or teach writing. Sure, it will help them get through a formulized course just as students and teachers have always managed to get through composition courses based on other formulas and fictions such as grammar study or the five paragraph theme. But sooner or later everyone—our students, our colleagues, and ourselves—will wake up to the fact that this fiction of The Writing Process is just that, a fiction and nothing more. And then where will we be?

The teaching of writing, as we are coming to understand it, is still a new professional orientation and is decidedly still in a state of transition. Widespread, premature agreement by teachers and textbook writers on the nature of The Writing Process could stultify and perhaps block further classroom innovations and even research. "If we know what the Writing Process is," it will be easy to say, "all we have to do is teach it." It is a very short step from there to the formal, mechanical teaching that has characterized ineffective composition instruction for many years. We are, in fact, already (or still) on our way if we have textbooks telling students—as apparently we do—that the same six steps to The Writing Process will get them through any kind of writing situation.

Once The Writing Process is processed for consumers there is the inescapable tendency, unfortunately reinforced by the metaphor of a paradigm shift, to look upon it as just another educational innovation. "I used to teach the modes," I hear fellow teachers say, "but now I teach The Process." This is surely not what we want for our profession, our students, or our programs.

Writing processes are neither new nor old. Writers have mastered them for thousands of years. Like the capacity for other forms of human performance—speed, spirituality, sexuality, art, bicycle riding—performance in writing and in the teaching of writing is discovered by the practitioner in response to the exigencies of particular situations and contexts and in the company of good teachers who are also practitioners. These good teachers, for their part, know that instruction has its limits, that performance can be refined by instruction, but that basic practice cannot be formulated as a separate, non-contextual set of stages, techniques, or skills and given to another. Process, as "procedural rather than declarative knowledge," as Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee interpret it, cannot be added on or adopted as a mode of instruction: it cannot be taught in the didactic manner in which we often want to teach. It must instead be learned in the uncertain struggles of practice. To reduce beyond this fundamental point is to enter onto dangerous ground—is surely to fly from complexity.

But if we refuse to fly from complexity are we not stuck then with complexity in a world that resists complexity, that requires us to simplify, to define ourselves, establish objectives and be accountable? The source of the problem runs deep. There are, after all, many good reasons why one might want to fly from complexity, not the least of which is a basic need most human beings have to feel as if they are at least minimally in control of their lives. What, in other words, can we possibly tell our students and our colleagues about the writing process without oversimplifying and misrepresenting it?

One thing we can tell them is the truth. Instead of bending to the pressure to explain The Writing Process and to provide a formula for teaching, we can demonstrate—in a way appropriate for each audience—the history of writing process research and demonstrate the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical implications of the varying results of that research. The work of the researchers I mentioned earlier would be a good place to start, although it should not be the place to end: writers and writing teachers also need to examine their own processes and methods of working. What studying the history of the research in the context of studying the self finally comes down to is a move in a direction opposite from the one we have been headed in for the last few years. Instead of taking a further step forward into an apparently somewhat forget-

ful paradigm, it is a step backward into the richest and most recent traditions of paradigm making and unmaking.

This moving back might include several useful recovery steps. One person to turn back to for help in this kind of work is Donald Graves. Almost all teachers and writers respond positively to Graves' teaching and such approaches as conferencing, keeping a folder, publishing, etc. On page 270 of *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, very near the end, Graves comes to this conclusion which he states in boldfaced type: "WRITING IS A HIGHLY IDIOSYNCRATIC PROCESS THAT VARIES FROM DAY TO DAY." He goes on to say that "variance is the norm, not the exception." Even though I suppose it would be easy for Graves to propose a series of stages for the writing process based on his research, he does not elect to do so, choosing instead to dwell, as it were, quite calmly and powerfully in the center of complexity.

The kind of stance that Graves adopts is by no means limited to him and to those who work with very young writers. Maxine Hairston has proposed a view of writing and the teaching of writing based on her recognition of the fact that "it's been evident in the profession for some time that major researchers and teachers in the field cannot agree on what the writing process is or should be" (442). Hairston's common sense conclusion from this is that we cannot agree because no one single theory of process covers all the different rhetorical situations and occasions for writing that arise in the lives of even inexperienced writers. Her proposal is that we should construct "a larger view of the writing process" in order to accommodate the infinite varieties of task and audience that writers must deal with, and, I might add, the infinite varieties of writers we meet as our students. Thus, in Hairston's view, the student writing a note to clip to the teacher's door, the student writing a report on a clinical observation, the student writing a research paper on storks, and the student writing a reflective essay on an emotional and controversial topic like abortion need to understand writing process in a variety of ways and must learn to use different tools of the craft in order to get the job done—even if the student in each of these cases is the same student.

Even if it is true in some cases, like those involving inexperienced writers or large class groups, that instruction in the use of the tools of process must be more explicit than for more ex-

perienced writers, and that in some cases with any writer or group of writers it may be useful to resort to outlining certain specific increments in a process, it is possible to do so in a way that avoids the use of simplistic formulas. It must be already long ago enough for people to forget that Mina Shaughnessy showed how this might be accomplished for basic writers without reducing to some single, comprehensive, fictional view of process. The metaphor she used to describe this approach was "scaffolding" (262), support conceived, unlike that in many texts and classrooms, so that it was specific to the task at hand and so that it could be dismantled—at least in part—for later tasks. Thus, when Shaughnessy erected a scaffold for a particular analytical writing task (253-255), it looked completely different from the scaffold she erected for a particular comparative writing task (262), even though both scaffolds proposed certain steps for the student to follow. There was no confusion whatsoever on Shaughnessy's part between the approaches to process she proposed and any entity called The Writing Process.

More recently, Langer and Applebee have also elaborated this notion of scaffolding. Their conception of scaffolding, like Shaughnessy's, understands it as a task specific tool for the teaching of writing, intended to be set up when the need arises and taken down when the need is fulfilled. A free-standing, monolithic model for the writing process is the last thing they have in mind. They write:

> . . . the student learns to do new language tasks by being led through them in the context of a supportive dialogue. This ensures that skill in learning includes a sense of the appropriate contexts for use; new procedures and routines are embedded in the contexts they serve, rather than being presented as isolated components that may or may not be seen as relevant (143).

The basic concept behind Shaughnessy, Langer, and Applebee's views on scaffolding is an important one based on an idea much more useful in the teaching of writing than the idea of A Writing Process. That idea is L.S. Vygotsky's theory of the "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more

capable peers." (86) In the process of learning to do anything the zone of proximal development is that area just beyond what the learner is already able to do alone and just short of the limits of ability. This is common sense: instruction aimed anywhere else is of little use because it poses tasks which are either too simple or too difficult.

When we look at the teaching of writing from Vygotsky's point of view, since students' needs and abilities vary, whole class teaching methods and general theories of The Writing Process will be of little use. What will be of use, though, are approaches to teaching, like Graves', Hairston's, Langer and Applebee's, which are geared to and support the abilities and efforts of individual writers. One key factor in designing such approaches may center on the use of writing groups which can respond to a writer's needs in the process of composing. Instruction which centers on the use of writing groups, such as those described by Anne Ruggles Gere, is an example of an approach capable of responding to students as individuals working within the larger context of class, audience and social group. As Vygotsky himself said:

> We propose that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. [Once these processes] are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental [achievement] (90).

Thus, in the writing classroom, the zone of proximal development is not a sparsely populated territory inhabited by isolated struggling individuals, but, ideally at least, a convivial community inhabited collaboratively by writer, teacher, peers and other readers.

Ironically, one thing this scaffolding metaphor suggests is a deconstruction of the Theories of Process, which have been built up and generalized on the basis of results gathered from large quantities of data and multiple individual student cases—a deconstruction that might eventually lead back to the beginning, to the first complexities faced by individual research subjects as they worked to solve the problems of composition. Thus, in research like Linda Flower's, which specifically takes on Vygotsky's problem solving terminology, what is most important for teachers is not the admittedly interesting "cognitive process theory" of the

writing process, but the raw materials of the research, the spoken aloud protocols and original texts which reveal the work of individual writers and which can surely help all of us work more effectively with the day to day, moment to moment problems that arise in the practice of student writers.

As with the applications of deconstructive processes to literary texts, it may be necessary to sacrifice attractive, generalizable conclusions for more chaotic and conflicting sets of possibilities. However, we stand to gain a great deal in return, not the least of which is a sharpened awareness of how to pay closer attention to the practices of individual writers and the problem of teaching students how to respond to the complexities of particular rhetorical situations. I would like to suggest that this "close attention" or, as Richard Lloyd-Jones calls it, "careful looking" is a much more useful focus for both teaching and research than any theory or hope-for-salvation-through-paradigm-shift, and that in the long run it will be a much firmer foundation for the teaching of writing and the growth of writing teachers.

Robert Tremmel now teaches at Iowa State after many years at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. From 1986-89 he edited *Kansas English* and has published articles on language arts matters in a variety of journals, most recently *Freshman English News*.

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