Teacher Negotiation and Embedded Process: A Study of High School Writing Assignments

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Recent scholarship in the fields of composition and English education promotes teaching writing in ways that allow students to construct their own texts for authentic purposes and audiences in order to see themselves as writers in and out of school. While it has been argued that students are currently engaged in very rich literacy experiences outside school, often their experiences in school are limited (Brannon; Daddone; Jocson; V. Kinloch; Pahl and Roswell; Yancey). Making the connection between in- and out-of-school literacies can be encouraged in part through allowing students choice, the space for experimentation, process-based pedagogies, and the creation of responsive classroom writing communities. By contrast, however, most test-writing calls for formulaic essays and focuses upon a clear, correct product. Recent scholarship has shown that standardized, high stakes testing narrows curriculum (Ramirez; Smith), negatively influences teacher and student attitudes toward writing instruction (Mabry) and decreases reflective, locally-informed and individualized instruction (Ketter and Pool). In fact, Sandra Murphy describes the influence of standardized testing on writing curriculum as dependent upon the type of test and shows how instruction narrows to mirror the test itself or even focus on skills only, moving toward exclusion of actual writing experiences within the instruction. When a student is asked to write on demand for a test, structure and correctness are often valued over invention, creativity, or understanding of process. Further,

experimentation is devalued, and classroom writing communities and localized instruction are deemed unnecessary.

Philip Jackson's *The Practice of Teaching* identifies differences between *mimetic* and *transformative* instructional methods. The mimetic tradition transmits facts and procedures from teacher to student in a manner similar to what Freire described as the *banking concept of education*. This mimetic teaching is "secondhand knowledge . . . 'presented' to a learner, rather than 'discovered' by him or her" (Jackson 117). Transformative teaching, on the other hand, creates a qualitative change in the learner; it is not merely "adding on" someone else's knowledge, but a deeper transformation of the learner. In a writing classroom, this transformative approach allows students to take control of authorship opportunities and embrace literacy events both in and out of school (Kirkland; Yancey).

Unfortunately, we are teaching in a time that values the mimetic. The high stakes testing and standards movements seem more in line with the idea that knowledge should be packaged and transmitted to students to then be assessed with tests. These standardized tests often measure writing abilities superficially, as though the skills and correctness shown within the product are all that is of value within a text. The conflict within many classrooms is how one can negotiate the need to prepare students for these standardized writing assessments when many teachers know and have been trained to teach writing through process theory. Many high school teachers feel tensions between helping their students pass state mandated and college entrance or equivalency exams, and inviting students to write for more authentic purposes and better comprehend and manage their own processes of writing. Lad Tobin describes the conflict of writing for school in this way: "It is not so much a matter of teaching students new rules or strategies but of helping them gain access to their 'real' or 'authentic' voice and perspective that traditional school has taught them to distrust and suppress" (5). The conflict between the mimetic and the transformative is most pressing when many teachers wonder if it is possible to teach writing for standardized

tests without forcing students to "distrust and suppress" their own voices and their own processes.

Building upon the process pedagogy that revolutionized writing instruction in the 1960's and 70's, current researchers are once again championing expressivism and student agency to not only transform students into writers, but to connect their writing to democratic citizenry. Janet Bean and Peter Elbow liken free writing to freedom of speech, explaining, "society—and individual writers—need an arena for uncensored expression, not only to discover the (contingent) truth but to serve the ultimate good" (12). The politicization of this one writing exercise calls into question whether when we suppress students' voices, we are teaching them that they also have no (trustable) voice within their democratic society.

Valerie F. Kinloch, likewise, in her study of urban middle school creative writers, identifies the political nature of writing as "literocracy." She describes literocracy as writing instruction which holds special civic possibilities for adolescents. When students are allowed freedom to find their own topics, genres, and voices, they are able to examine "hidden truths" about themselves and their places in the world. Kinloch describes literocracy as much more than a mimetic way of learning to write. It is both a creative and civic act created within "poetic and creative styles and a sense of urgency," and teaching writing is organized but not defined by the teacher through "democratized forms of classroom engagements" (98).

Because of the predominance of high stakes testing, what actually occurs in high school classrooms often tends to focus on the mimetic view of writing instruction—that of correctness in grammar and structure. This often encourages a more narrow representation of generic possibilities focused upon more essayistic assignments in analytical, informative and/or argumentative modes. Writing such as poetry, drama, and fiction, considered by some as "less academic," is often undervalued or eliminated. Though teachers may be trained in the more authentic pedagogy of encouraging student voice, choice and freedom of

expression, they instead feel forced to focus instruction on showing students how to correctly answer an essay test prompt. Working through a sustained and layered process of writing may give students more authentic literacy experiences and confident voices in our democracy but it will not necessarily test well (Daddone; Christenbury).

However, when students enter a college classroom, write in the workplace, or become fully participating citizens, there are more multifaceted issues to which they must attend in order to write successfully. As Irene Clark states, "correctness is nice, but it isn't enough." If we are merely instructing for test preparation, we will be instructing students to author correct and perhaps unremarkable texts. Our sights should be set on a higher mark.

In a research study conducted at George Washington University, freshmen were surveyed on their writing experiences in high school. Of the ten genres of writing surveyed, including personal narratives, reflective and creative writing, only three genres had been required at least monthly during their senior year in high school: literary analysis, analytical essays, and lab reports (Beil & Knight). These three types of writing assignments certainly reinforce a very narrow and simplistic field of academic discourse.

In a three-year study of high school, community college and university writing students, researchers found that writers improved the most when given a longer amount of time to work with and distance themselves from and think critically upon their texts (Simmons & McLaughlin). This length of time also allowed students to more carefully reflect upon the rhetorical situation, and it allowed them to receive feedback and make deep revisions adding complexity to the essay.

Finally, Applebee and Langer's recent study looked at writing in high schools between 1988 and 2004. They show the following changes: shorter assignments (1-2 pages) and a narrowing of curriculum to focus almost entirely upon academic essay writing. While creative writing such as fiction and poetry was present in

many classrooms, these assignments were far outnumbered by the academic essays students were required to write.

Despite the many discussions and studies helping to inform teachers in how to teach writing, there still remains a fairly narrow range of types of texts students are asked to create in school. There also are a limited number of studies which look at the assignments themselves as data to better understand the current language and discourses of schooling as well as the possibilities that exist.

In this study, the intention is to carefully analyze the discursive features of high school writing assignments written by highly trained teachers to discover patterns of communication from teachers to students. The identification of such patterns within these texts will certainly inform our understandings of schooling as a discursive act and the various genres students must negotiate and learn to produce in order to enter into the academic discourse community. Perhaps most importantly, these texts will provide information about the values and assumptions highly-trained teachers have about their students: their abilities and identities as writers, and how these fit into the particular discourses of writing assignments in school.

In a language arts classroom at any level, the primary document of assessment is the writing assignment. In his article "Assignments by Design," writing teacher Kip Strasma describes these assignments as "the anchors" of his teaching, as they express his pedagogical objectives and curricular philosophy (248). Writing assignments do more than just invite students to show their learning in a particular class. These documents also illustrate the values of an academic discourse community and invite students to participate in this community's context. Writing assignments portray a particular teacher's assumptions regarding what students already know about a topic. Assignments also illustrate assumptions about students' knowledge and experience in the act of writing itself. Finally, they portray teachers' values regarding skills and concepts they want their students to acquire. What

should students be able to do? How should they depict themselves on paper? What should their writerly personas be?

When a teacher writes an assignment for her students, in other words, she embeds the text with assumptions regarding who her students are (as writers, as people), and who they should grow to become (with her guidance and instruction). Therefore, by analyzing the actual writing assignments given to students in several high schools, I hope to portray patterns of language and attitude which will inform how these texts work to either invite students into or alienate students from the community of academic discourse. I will work with a data set of assignments from teachers with special training in the teaching of writing. Since the teachers included in this study have been participants in a National Writing Project summer institute, they have certain specialized understanding of writing pedagogy and theory; I will also attempt to identify common practices in writing assignments among this group. The three questions this study will consider are:

1. How do teachers negotiate the often contrasting curricular structures created by high-stakes standardized testing and current writing theory of constructivist instructional methodology?
2. Are expert writing teachers able to create writing assignments that allow space for student choice and ownership even while preparing students for standardized tests?
3. If so, how are these choices and freedoms expressed within the written assignment?

Data Collection

The primary source of data for this study was a collection of actual assignment sheets used by high school English teachers trained in the National Writing Project (NWP). I purposefully chose to include only teachers with extensive training and leadership. In selecting a data set of particularly trained teachers, I

wanted to determine how writing teachers may be able to negotiate competing pressures in curricular philosophies derived from high stakes testing.

I originally sent requests to twenty-six teachers whom I knew to be involved in a local site of the NWP. These teachers had participated in a NWP invitational summer institute, so they had similar backgrounds in training in the teaching of writing. The NWP summer institute includes over 120 hours of training in teacher leadership and teacher inquiry, as well as discussion of current composition pedagogy and theory. Teachers who participate in these institutes gain expertise in the field of writing instruction and come away with a new lens of inquiry with which to view their own classroom practice.[1] In their study of the organizational structure of the NWP, Leiberman and Wood described NWP teachers within Peter Elbow's construct of growth through contradictions, "Most NWP teachers, in fact, learn to 'embrace contraries' . . . or to create new syntheses out of apparent dualities" (27). My hope is that the teachers within this study will show this synthesis in their writing assignments. Further, these teachers' training in inquiry allows us to assume the choices made in their assignments are pedagogically deliberate.

A total of eleven teachers responded to my request, and they sent me a total of fifty-six assignments through e-mail. These assignments covered grades 9-12, and included Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes as well as more general high school English classes. Several teachers sent me one assignment each, but many sent multiple assignments. One teacher sent thirteen, but most sent between three to seven assignments. When I originally requested the assignments, I did not specify what sort of assignments I would like; I merely specified that I would like the actual assignment sheet they hand out to their students (not lesson plans, notes, etc.).

The selected teachers come from urban, suburban and rural schools because I am interested in looking at assignments that are used with diverse student populations in a variety of settings. Since these teachers have such extensive training in writing

instruction, they often teach the high-performing students at their schools. Over half of the teachers who submitted assignments teach Advanced Placement (AP) and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. These classes prepare students for very specialized academic writing often based upon the critical discussion of classic literature. Two of the teachers in the sample work in urban public or charter schools identified as "college prep." Based on the knowledge of these teachers' instructional contexts, it seemed likely that most assignments would be academic essays and, more likely than not, literary criticism.

There are several other similarities among the teachers in the sample: all have Masters degrees in either English or education, and the majority (nine of eleven) have given presentations or delivered workshops on the teaching of writing at regional or national conferences. The majority of these teachers have at least five years of teaching experience, which is important, since studies have identified one third of all beginning teachers leave the profession before their fourth year of teaching. Many of these teachers however have over ten years experience. The specificity in this sample allows me to make several general assumptions about these teachers' pedagogy.

First, NWP participants likely adhere to a constructivist model of writing instruction. In other words, they focus their instruction on the process of writing and not just the product; they focus on revision and inquiry rather than correctness and form. In their NWP experience, teachers are asked to write personal and professional texts themselves, and to examine their own processes as they write. These experiences of writing and reflecting upon process allow teachers to make connections between their writing and their classroom expectations.

Secondly, NWP participants likely engage their students in frequent writing assignments for varied purposes. During the institute, teachers are asked to write for a variety of purposes and in a variety of genres. Often the genre is left open for the participant to decide, with the understanding that genre is deeply connected to purpose, audience and message. Once again,

participants are asked to reflect upon these writing experiences and consider how these assignments and experiences can be adapted into their classroom practice.

Finally, NWP participants are likely to be well aware of the current research in writing instruction, and thus may more acutely feel the conflict between teaching what is pedagogically sound versus what is necessary to pass state-mandated tests and/or college entrance/equivalency exams. Throughout the institute, teachers are provided with current scholarship on the teaching of writing and are asked to create their own research projects. These inquiry projects are based upon their own classroom challenges and allow teachers to merge theory and practice by relating scholarship to their own classroom knowledge.

Because of these common NWP institute experiences, these teachers are knowledgeable about the current research on writing instruction; therefore, they are more likely to critically construct their pedagogies based upon both context and theory. Teachers at the high school level must prepare students to pass the state-mandated tests and college entrance exams, and at the same time, many are trying to prepare students for writing in college and/or their future professions. I assume teachers who are more familiar with current research will be able to negotiate these tensions in interesting and important ways, and perhaps portray their expertise in handling such conflicts through the assignments used in their classrooms.

Though I was very specific and mindful of the teachers I selected for my sample, I contrastingly provided few specific requirements for the requested assignments. I merely asked teachers to submit one or more writing assignments they have used in their classrooms. Because of this, teachers could choose to send a variety of different types of assignments: from poetry assignments and journal prompts to traditional research reports. I was interested to see what sorts of assignments teachers would choose to send. I believe it is human nature to share what one is most proud of, so an underlying assumption is that these teachers

would be submitting assignments they feel best represent their teaching.

Analysis

First, a content analysis was conducted to show the common elements of the sample assignments. Basic coding was done regarding length and genre of assignment. The preliminary categories for this analysis were selected based on the assumption that most high school writing assignments are essayistic, reflecting the predominant valuing of academic discourse and standardized testing. A secondary assumption was that a shorter, less descriptive assignment would provide more opportunity for student agency in responding to the assignment. The results of this preliminary coding proved most assignments were rather lengthy; most (thirty-seven of fifty-six) were over two pages in length. A second finding portrayed a fairly even distribution of essayistic and non-essayistic assignments within the sample (see figs. 1 and 2 below).
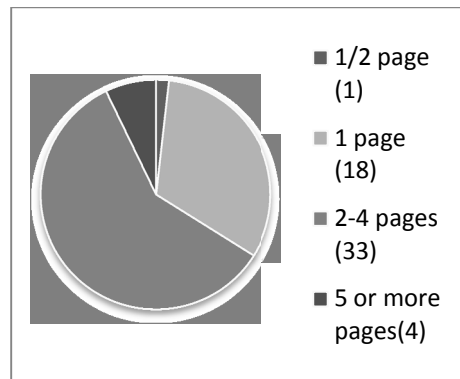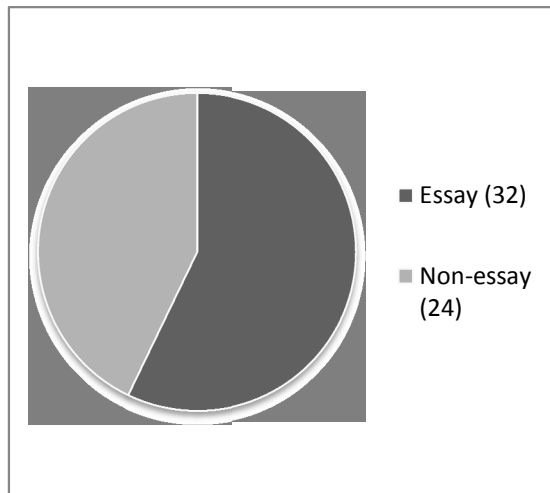

**Fig. 1. Assignment Length**

Fig. 2. Genre Variety

After finding many of these assignments were quite long (the longest was actually fifteen pages in length), further coding was done to account for this length and to portray exactly what was included in the assignments to necessitate multiple pages of text. The next session of coding focused on answering the question of length and student agency issues: amount of choice and type of choice. This second round of coding also counted the inclusion of process-based elements within the assignment. A discussion of each category's findings follows.

Student Choice in Assignments

Four categories were coded as possibilities for student choice within writing assignments: *topic, genre, structure and form,* and *attempted grade*. The most common opportunity for student choice in this sample of assignments came through the choice of writing topic (see fig. 3). In fact, forty-three of the fifty-six assignments allowed some opportunity for topic choice. This freedom ideally allows students to select a writing topic they find personally engaging and significant. Since students who feel invested in their writing often do better work and put forth a greater effort, this makes sense pedagogically. These teachers obviously believed

their students would be able to choose appropriate topics, and gave them the autonomy to do so.

Structure and Form was another area where teachers allowed students ample space for choice. This makes sense when viewing the data through the lens of process-writing theory. Often, proponents of writing as a process describe how ideas should help determine the form, and form or structure cannot be created without an understanding of ideas, focus, support, etc. (Atwell; Graves; Romano). So, though students may have less choice regarding the genre in which they are asked to write, they may have freedom in how they envision the structure of that genre. An essay, though it should follow particular generic essayistic qualities, need not be only a five-paragraph essay; a poem need not fit into a particular number of stanzas or portray a particular rhyme scheme as long as it fits into the genre of poem and the structure makes sense with the content.
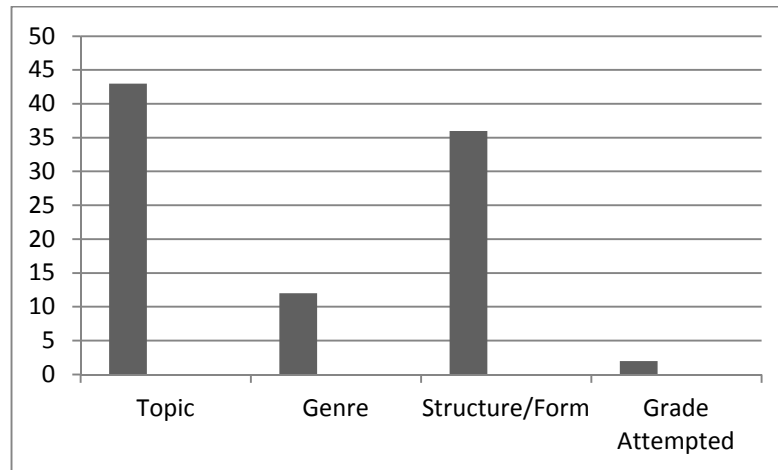
Fig. 3. Opportunities for Choice in Writing Assignments

While there was not as much choice in genre (only twelve, or one fifth of assignments allowed this choice), a number of assignments allowed for this option. It is noteworthy that teachers allowed students freedom to appropriate the structure and form

within certain genres even when they did not allow a choice in genre itself. The final category, while not numerically striking, was interesting philosophically. Two of the assignments in the sample allowed students to choose the grade they wished to earn for their writing. For example, for a literary criticism essay, a teacher allowed students to self-select the elements of the essay they would include, making it a more complex writing task when more items were selected. This sort of autonomy is unusual and interesting, and suggests an area for future studies of student choice in writing prompts.

Embedding Process–Writing Within Assignments

So many assignments in the sample were more than a page long because of the embedding of process-writing activities. This was done by including additional activity worksheets, checklists, questionnaires, graphic organizers, and the like, to portray the writing assignment as one that would take several steps to complete. The main categories of process-embedding came in the forms of pre-writing and revision activities.

Several assignments came with response sheets attached, suggesting the teacher viewed revision and/or editing as valuable work for a writer. These response sheets were labeled for peer, parent or self-evaluation. They had different sorts of questions and prompts, yet they all showed students from the beginning that the teacher expected more than one draft, that a piece of writing should be taken through a revision process, and that it is effective to have writing viewed and critiqued by another person before it is turned in to be graded.

Other assignments came with a set of open-ended questions and/or heuristic strategies to help students think through possible paper topics. These were sometimes graphic organizers, sometimes a list of questions with space for students to write their answers. These assignment sheets were creative and relaxed in that it was clear the student was expected to experiment and play with various ideas, memories and beliefs on paper. These activities, attached to the assignment sheet (and less often inserted

within the assignment text), showed students that identifying a strong topic was essential. In fact, this work was so essential, the teacher wrote up and distributed a specific activity to accompany the assignment.

Figure 4 portrays the way process writing was embedded in different assignments by genre. I have considered non-essayistic assignments as creative or imaginative genres consisting of poetry, fiction, drama and others that are non-academic, non-fiction prose. Essayistic assignments then were non-fiction prose assignments that were analytical, informative and/or argumentative in nature. In the essay assignments, twenty-five included process elements, and seven did not. In the non-essayistic genres, eleven included process, and thirteen did not. Embedded process was most common in essay assignments, and this may be due to the predominance of essays in standardized testing and therefore the valuing of essayistic texts in high school writing curriculum.
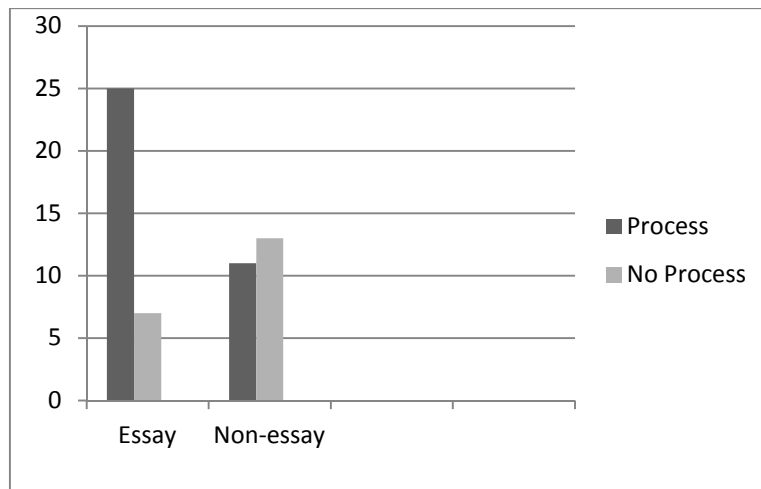

Fig. 4. Process Embedding across Genres

This teaching of process within an essay assignment likely portrays teachers' assumptions that students will need to assimilate such procedures into their writing practice in order to

succeed on tests and future college writing. It would also follow that while these teachers may have valued more expressive and creative (non-essayistic) forms, it is possible that they did not feel the need to embed process within these assignments as regularly since these texts may not be as valued in testing or college. Another possibility could be that these more expressivist assignments did not warrant specific process-based instruction and that these genres invited more freedom and experimentation.

Descriptive Analysis of Assignment Data

Because these assignments portray the values of the teachers and their theoretical stance on the teaching of writing, including what their students need to know and are capable of doing, I also would like to move beyond the content analysis and look closely at how these texts portray teachers' negotiations within the current culture of teaching and schooling. Following the earlier frame of the content analysis, I will now describe how these findings portray teachers' negotiation of process philosophy by attempting transformative teaching within a culture of standardized testing. These assignments show how classroom teachers frame student writers in their classrooms and define the purposes of writing in school.

The relative lengthiness of most sample assignments express the values this group of teachers hold regarding the primary work of writing and even the process an author moves through to create a finished text. With added length, teachers included many value-laden items beyond a basic writing prompt. A teacher who gives her student a four-page packet, instead of a one-page sheet, has included other process-related activities and self-assessment tools that will move her students to create a text in a specific way. The differences I have seen as most common in my sample show that many teachers value revision and/or prewriting as fundamental steps in a writer's process. These teachers assumed these steps needed to be taught and/or required; perhaps students wouldn't know how to do prewriting and/or revision. Or, if students did

know how to accomplish these tasks, they may see them as superfluous and not perform them unless required to do so.

One particular assignment within the data set asked students to write a literary criticism essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and can serve as a good example of this embedded valuing of process writing. This assignment, beyond the writing prompt, also included a prewriting worksheet that appears to accompany an in-class workshop. This teacher not only included a formal worksheet and graphic organizer in her assignment packet, she also gave valuable class time to this work, showing that she expects her students to come up with unique, creative ideas, and conceptualize their essays before they begin drafting. The fact that she used class time shows that it is important enough to do this work where she can oversee the process. It also may say that she does not trust her students will take this task seriously, or do it correctly without her guidance in class.

Two other sheets in her assignment packet are connected with revision. One guides a group discussion of rough drafts, and the other seems to be a self-evaluation. Both of these also accompany in-class activities and help students see the act of writing as a process over time. These two sheets encourage metacognition, self-critique, and social interaction through texts. This teacher wants students to consider their work from multiple points of view. Through these exercises, she allows students to create their own revision process by hearing what others have to say, reflecting upon their own work, and experiencing how others have approached the same assignment. Students are invited to take control over their own writing process with the teacher guiding them through, but not interacting with their draft until the process is nearly complete. Donald Graves said this about teachers' misunderstanding of student control over their own writing process:

Children want to write . . . The child's marks say, "I am." "No, you aren't," say most school approaches to the teaching of writing. . . . We underestimate the urge because

of a lack of understanding of the writing process and what children do in order to control it. Instead, we take the control away from children and place unnecessary roadblocks in the way of their intentions. (3)

In this assignment, it seems that the teacher steps out of the way as she guides students to develop their process. It does not appear that the teacher responds to any but the final draft of this paper, meaning that while the process of invention/prewriting, drafting and revision is delineated for the student, the student has complete control over the decisions he makes within this process.

The assignment prompt is very restricting in some respects: the final text must be a two-page compare/contrast essay about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and it must follow a certain process. However, other components of the assignment and its sequence give students a lot of independence and agency by allowing them choices, allowing autonomy in their revisions, and by teaching how to create an independent process of writing and revision beyond the responses of the teacher.

This teacher is representative of many in the study in that she desires her students to become independent writers. She allows them independence in certain areas where their choices can positively influence their writing (students can select their topic and attempted grade), and she guides them through a process that will help them become more independent and metacognitive about themselves as writers, portraying the sort of teaching Bean and Elbow, and Valerie F. Kinloch describe as democratic activism through student choice in writing. There is a distinct difference between a teacher interrupting and regulating the process versus guiding a student through it. At the same time, the assignment portrays a very narrow example of school writing. This certainly is reminiscent of Applebee and Langer's findings of the predominance of shorter, analytical essay writing. It is a short compare-contrast essay related to a novel the students have studied in class. Students are not required to use their own

experiences, but rather to base their thinking and ideas within another text.

Descriptions of Embedded Process

Most instances of embedded process were similar to the previously described assignment, in which there were extra sheets included in the assignment that moved students through prewriting in an experimental idea-gathering stage before drafting. These worksheets moved students through open ended, reflective questions and/or a graphic organizer that allowed students to uncover and clarify their thinking on a topic. Examples of questions or prompts for prewriting work portrayed the common concern for reflection and discovery. In an assignment asking students to write a satire, one teacher included a list of pre-writing questions that allowed students to connect what they had already learned to their essay planning:

TARGET(S): What are some individual targets which are components or causes of the problem? Below, list some of the problems that you plan to include.
AUDIENCE: Describe the specific audience for this work. What must the audience know or have been exposed to so that they are able to see both levels of the satire?
PERSONA: Describe completely the persona that you will create to narrate the story which is the context or basis of the satire. Make clear the tone you plan to use.

These prompts also encourage students to identify themselves as someone who both analyzes audience and controls the text through the ethos of a particular persona.

Differing from prewriting exercises, yet still portraying writing as a process, one research paper assignment asked students to stop and write a one-page reflection on their work half-way through their research and writing:

At a mid-point in our project, I will ask you to write an informal reflection. You should write about the research process so far. Have you changed directions at all while completing the research? Is there something that has been particularly challenging? Has anything surprised you? Create a timeline for yourself of the time remaining for the project. Set goals so that you will be able to turn in the project on time.

This teacher asked students to use metacognition to describe their past research and to create goals to successfully complete the writing task. These questions assume, and teach students, that it is normal for a writer to change directions, face challenges, be surprised, and set goals. Here again, the teacher is guiding the process, but it is the student who chooses the direction and sets goals. Questions and activities such as these were common within most assignments. These activities incorporated within the essay assignments exemplify how teachers can encourage and cultivate student ownership of writing as a process.

Similarly, the revision worksheets were often checklists or a series of questions students could give to another person (classmate, parent) with their rough drafts. The expectation was that these exercises would result in suggestions and goals for revision. The revision worksheets commonly looked at both content-level and sentence-level writing concerns. Here are examples of the prompts that appeared on a peer revision worksheet in which students were asked to focus on various content level issues:

Tone (complete the sentence): The author's tone is _____ and it IS/IS NOT effective because _____.
Appeals

- *Write "Logical" in the margin next to the logical appeals.*
- *Write "Emotional" in the margin next to the emotional appeals.*
- *Write "Ethical" in the margin next to the ethical appeals (if any).*

In contrast, here is an example of a checklist within which students responded to a peer's text, editing for sentence-level issues:

☐ *Free from all spelling, grammatical, usage, and punctuation errors*
    ○ *Point out and/or correct errors directly on paper (no more than 10 errors allowed).*
    ○ *Highlight any pronoun-antecedent agreement errors.*
☐ *Parenthetical citations are included and in the right format—Ex. (Khan).*
        Yes   No   (circle one)
☐ *Paper is typed in a legible 12 point font and double spaced.*
☐ *Works Cited page is included using correct MLA format.*
        Yes   No   (circle one)

The variety of prompts and questions in the revision worksheets portrayed a fairly equal valuing of both ideas/content and mechanics/form. This shows that these teachers equally valued surface issues (grammar and mechanics) and deeper structures (voice, unity, argument, organization). Therefore, this example portrays one way teachers are able to move towards a more holistic view of instruction and assessment, and further away from the often narrower standards present on some standardized tests.

Conclusion

This study, which looked closely at the writing assignments of a sample of NWP trained writing teachers, can tell us much about how teachers express their assumptions of students and philosophies of writing in the assignments they write. It is clear that even within the constraints of standardized testing, teachers can allow student control over the texts they create, and can negotiate between the mimetic and transformative, the product and the process. Within their assignments, teachers can make

significant choices that either limit or encourage student reflection, metacognition, choice and agency.

Teachers can aid this process of creating reflective writers with assignments and instruction that give students space to critique rhetorical tasks and negotiate their personas on the page. If, as research has shown, the trend in our English classrooms continues to be a somewhat narrow valuing of essayistic texts that are focused upon more academic purposes, teachers must help students translate assignments through a clear explanation of the genre of academic writing, and by allowing students to practice constructing their writerly persona(s) (Clark). The choices and constraints written into such assignments can both clarify the genre of academic writing and allow student control within texts. This control may also allow students to understand connections and borders among various genres of writing, thus giving them more autonomy within their processes and generic positioning. Inadvertently, this may also "open up" the narrowing curriculum to allow more creative movements within the traditional essay form, achieving what Elbow describes as "rendering experience" (137).

Peter Elbow encourages teachers to teach students how to "render" experience as well as how to "explain" it. He critiques academic writing in high school and college classrooms for focusing only on the explanatory and authoritative stance. Rarely are students encouraged to write in ways that encourage more critical and reflective thinking. In other words, as seen in the choices given within these assignments, we should allow our students some discursive freedoms that deepen their and the reader's understanding of the topic. He says,

> We recognize the value of rendering experience when we teach reading. That is, most of the texts we teach in English courses are literary pieces that render experience. Yet we hesitate to teach students to write discourse that renders. And if we don't, no one else will . . . . [D]iscourse that renders often yields important new "cognitive" insights such

as helping us see an exception or contradiction to some principal we thought we believed. (Elbow 137)

The assignments in this study provide strong examples of how the curriculum can be opened while still responding to the requirements of standardized testing and the valuing of academic forms. This rendering of experience occurs when a writer feels personally connected to her text. Only then can a writer portray the experiential rather than the explanatory within a given topic. Allowing students to render as well as explain may require us to open up the curriculum, allow more student autonomy, and permit variances and experimentation in form and style. Only with this sort of opening up, of genre, structure and voice, can our students step out of the academic straitjacket we often place them in.

The results of this study portrayed a pool of assignments that spanned the realms of rendering and explaining because the teachers who designed them, gave students choices in genre, topic, and structure. These assignments portray practices of teachers who seem to value the overlapping aspects of process and product-based philosophies of teaching writing because they guide students through a process, yet allow students to make certain rhetorical decisions as they work through this process. While negotiating a thorough understanding of current pedagogy that encourages student agency and writing fluency through experimentation, these teachers also acknowledge their students must pass standardized tests and be able to write a structured academic essay in order to succeed in school and then in college. Therefore, these teachers use both obvious and subtle nudges moving their students into writerly processes and personas that will likely go on to serve them both in and out of school.

Note

[1]For more information and to view the results of studies that support this claim, I direct you to the website of the National Writing Project, and especially two

resources included there. The first is a study published in July 2010 that focuses on improvements in NWP participants' students' writing. It is entitled "Writing Project Professional Development Continues to Yield Gains in Student Writing Achievement" and can be found at <www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3208>. The second is an article from 2002 written by Carl Nagin regarding changes in classroom teaching of 2,731 NWP participants, entitled, "Inverness Report Surveys Benefits of Summer Institutes for Teachers and Students" and can be accessed at www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/367.

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