

TOWARD A HUMAN GEOGRAPHY: THOUGHTS ABOUT IN-CLASS WRITING ENVIRONMENTS

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Since at one time or another during the length of each semester most instructors expect their students to write in class, lately I have wondered why the physical environment of the classroom had not been afforded greater consideration over the years. Having myself decided long ago that in-class writing assignments followed by immediate peer and instructor feedback were absolutely essential to effective college composition pedagogy, I further wondered why issues of "human geography" had not played a larger role in my own sense of learning environments. Faced with Flower and Hayes' fiat that "task environment includes all things outside the writer's skin," I wondered why I had not personally evaluated the findings of ergonomic science for possible use in my composition classroom (372).

Of course, I had always run across a textbook chapter devoted to aligning writer and working environment, but never had I seen a developed and well-founded analysis as it had practical bearing on the college composition class.¹ It seemed a forsaken matter at this high level: equations of person/place fit relegated to liberal second-thoughts and unwieldy stabs at experimental air. But, after speaking to many of my students recently and in rattling through some complex labyrinths of my own creation, I decided to formalize my interests. Did I have a basis for true concern: was the working environment vitiating productivity and creativity in my college composition classes?

To begin with, I have found that we in composition studies have not so much willfully ignored this matter of environmental psychology as we have by default relegated its treatment to purely common sense

dictates. Whether due to what we consider more “substantive” demands facing us in the teaching of writing or due to curricular demands of a political nature, scientifically documented studies of environment and creativity, environment and stress, et cetera have stood as interesting but ancillary concerns. What stands, for instance, as verifiable and practical data in the arenas of business and industry regarding worker and working environment goes virtually unheeded in the composition classroom. Therefore, it is my intention in this brief paper to urge our discipline in a direction that pays both pedagogical and theoretical due to writer and writing environment.

WHAT WE HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED

Beginning formally with the research of Rohman and Wlecke in 1964, composition theorists began to recognize writing to be both a matter of intellection and communication *and* of psychic completion. Where once we thought writing pedagogy only a matter of teaching students the *dos* and *don'ts* of grammatically, syntactically, and logically correct arrangement and style, we began to view it as that and a bundle more. As Rohman and Wlecke state in their Cooperative Research Project on prewriting:

writing is a form of human behavior, but more specifically, is a form of self-actualization, and in writing a person is satisfying his basic needs for self-affirmation as well as the immediate practical needs for communication. (10)

Writing pedagogy, then, no longer restricted itself to matters of convention but moved on to consider human encoders and decoders in an ever-changing situational context.

Later, Moffett further formalized the very human concerns of Rohman and Wlecke in his “student centered” curriculum, a pedagogical system that appreciated the “dramatic” nature of discoursing. As he then offered:

while acknowledging that artificiality cannot be eliminated from the classroom situation, somehow we must create more realistic communication “dramas. . .” (12)

By virtue of these findings and of countless others to date, composition teachers have learned to view rhetoric and rhetor in organic fashion. Yet in this move toward humanizing discourse instruction, it seems that we have bypassed a central issue, and a seemingly simple one at that: the *where* of discourse instruction and practice.

WHAT WE ARE SLOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE

College composition curriculums are by their very nature often overstuffed versions of their ideal selves. Where we plan to have time enough to direct students in expression, persuasion, and information,

in narration, description, classification, and evaluation, in a given semester often we are held--by calendrical stricture--to but a portion of these. Often, as well, we are forced to assign most of this work as "homework." But homework does not necessarily satisfy our needs fully. In fact, research has shown that in-class peer review and other types of workshopping are far superior, instructionally, to individual work done away from the class (Barcelow-Hill, Rowan). Therefore, and without fail, I find myself assigning the most important work as in-class work. I pass among the students as they write in class and attempt to offer immediate feedback, praise, and criticism; for I know that to address an issue as it appears is superior to effecting a "remedy" long after the inventive fact.

What we do not consider with great enough alacrity about in-class work is this: that writing attempted in pressured space, in less than optimal conditions, is hardly an accurate, representational, or worthwhile reflection of a student's capacity. Further, we neglect the fact that poorly received in-class writing often tempers the "homework" or "rewrite" versions. Students writing not well taken within the classroom often produces substandard writing at home. It seems both a pedagogical and psychological reality: what a student perceives as a threat in class, she will perceive a threat at home. It follows, I believe, that we cannot truly address the issue of self-actualization, then, if we underestimate the lowgloss, yet essentially pragmatic and valuable concerns of learning environments. How do we--but with advanced myopia--disregard the work of applied psychologists who relate that "studies revealed adults working in 'ugly' environments felt more discontent, fatigue, monotony and greater desire to leave than those working in more 'beautiful rooms'" (Ahrentzen 228). Which one of us has not faced a horde of malcontents evaporating in boredom's great sauna five minutes before the opening bell?

Just as business and industry, fueled by the findings of commissioned studies, has taught itself the value of constructing positive, individually correct workplaces, and just as our sisters and brothers in elementary and secondary education have come to learn the same, so too must we in composition courses make operational a plan to encourage *synomorphous fit*.² While it is true, of course, that "environment does not do the teaching," as Levy-Leboyer has maintained, it does clear the pedagogical pathway (141). In the same manner, communicative acts, whether efferent or aesthetic, are subject to noise of all types at the discourse level; they are subject to psychic congestion associated with ill-planned or unplanned writing environments.

For example, in discussing the effects of excessive heat on a subject performing a simple, manual task in *Environment and Human Efficiency*, E. C. Poulton found "accuracy deteriorated reliably as the body temperature rose" (139). Further, he found that

noise, either presented intermittently or on a continual basis, was equally debilitating. The first and obvious effect is simply distraction, of course, while the second much worse:

The second effect of noise is to increase the level of arousal. The person feels more alert and on edge. In dull routine tasks, this may help. The person tries harder and does better. But in difficult tasks which require thought rather than effort, too high a level of arousal may be a hindrance. Noise may make the person try too hard. As a result, the insight which he is searching for may not occur to him. (225)

Furthermore, poor lighting may effect students in much the same manner as overheated rooms or excessive noise. Concerning "visual acuity," Poulton states, "a person sitting at work needs a light near him which he can point in any direction. It should be screened from his eyes so that it does not glare" (241).

To deal effectively with the rhetoric and/or composition of the mind, we must consider psyche with soma, coordinate concerns. Consequently, we must strive for "geographic" compatability between rhetor and rhetoric whenever we can. Although this is not always a reality in the real world, when we are classbound we can certainly make this work. And this brings me to the matter at hand: attitude questionnaires about work habits and environment in regard to composition classes.

Through a series of questions directed at unearthing what I initially hypothesized as a preeminent discontent over in-class writing assignments (due to negative interaction with the task environment), I began to list student opinions about work habits and related matters. Only a marginal first step on the road to a truly scientific exploration, I found answers practically important to my pedagogy. As Von Eckartsberg highlights: "an individual's description of experience may be limited in range and understanding. Yet it is an important 'first trace of the event' " (24). And I desperately wanted that first trace.

WHAT I ASKED AND WHERE I ASKED IT

The three questions I posed quizzed the students on (1) the in-class writing situation as a whole; (2) the at-home writing situation; and (3) the ideal writing situation. The questions read as follows:

Do you think having to write in class affects your writing? If so, in what ways? (Be as specific as you can. Nothing is trivial.)

How does the in-class writing assignment differ from the assignment you complete at home? (Speak about the place(s) you write in.)

What do you consider an ideal environment to write in?

(Address yourself to any possibility--even the outlandish.)

One hundred and eighteen students in six classes completed the surveys (in class). The rooms in which the questionnaires were administered were not identical in makeup, but shared many common characteristics: each was under 350 square feet, had at least three banks of operable (and operating) fluorescent fixtures, and were lined on one side with working (though not open) windows. In each classroom, the instructor's table (many times the physical dimension of the student tables, with lectern) was placed about two feet ahead of the student desks. A chalkboard covering the width of the room ran from door to windows. In addition, the other walls were, though varying in color from one class to the next, painted one, solid shade--an off-white or drab green (high gloss finish).

Only one of the classrooms had immovable seating, bolted seat/desk combinations; the others, seat/desk systems that could be rearranged to suit varying needs. The average number of seats in a class was thirty-five; one class had forty-three. The days on which these surveys were given were warm, daytime temperatures ranging from seventy-eight to ninety degrees fahrenheit, outdoors. Each class was supposedly "climate controlled." And although I could not determine the exact indoor temperature, it was--in my own estimation--comfortable at all times, in all classes.

WHAT THEY ANSWERED

Of the respondents to question one, ninety answered that the classroom had a debilitating or stifling affect on their in-class work. One such response notes typically that:

Since it isn't a personal surrounding, I find it more difficult to express my thoughts in writing. It's more difficult for me to organize my thoughts and ideas in a classroom of students than in my very own room filled with my belongings, memories, and beliefs.

Almost all of the responses tended toward distinguishing the classroom from a student's "usual," creative environment. "Just about anything that is different from the normal situation definitely affects my writing," another answered.

Even those who did not come out directly in disfavor of the in-class environment, took a sarcastically irate tones. As a respondent so tellingly indicated:

I don't think that the classroom layout affects my writing. There is always someplace I would rather write besides an uncomfortable chair with people on every side of me. If you have to write in the classroom you learn to live with this.

But learning to live with "this" is certainly not what instructors of the new composition are after. Perhaps it would have worked well enough for this kind of adjustment in years past. Now, however, merely trying to overlook the negative is insufficient, even recognized as debilitating. Trusting that students would, finally, and through whatever means "adapt" is no longer our desire. In this regard Seamon points out in *The Geography of the Lifeworld* that there are important differences between feeling minimally comfortable with one's surroundings and feeling wholeheartedly integrated with them: "The person who feels *inside* a place is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed" (25).

Creativity, simply put, is fostered when a creator feels at home in a task location. This centeredness or "at-homeness," as Seamon terms it, delimits associative possibilities. Taken most recently perhaps from the phenomenologists' oeuvre, Seamon's theory advances the necessity of secure link to dwelling. His definition alone may shed some light on the issue: "At-homeness," he posits, is "the usually unnoticed, taken for granted situation of being comfortable in and familiar with the everyday world in which one lives and outside of which one is 'visiting' " (70). It is not shocking, then, that student answers reflected the belief that "writing at home is easier than writing in the classroom."

Furthermore, by considering the writing place an alien locale, writers begin to fear the assignments themselves. In fact, opened as it was, question one made manifest any number of student dissatisfactions with their in-class workplace. These included: lack of imagination in color schemes; lack of privacy; lack of visual landscape; rigid, non-human seating; ineffective lighting; cramped floor plan; bolted seats; impersonal furnishings; sterility; and on. The most bothersome of the physical properties, however, was the desk/seat itself. Of an all too common variety, these one piece--mostly right-handed, cricket paddle top desks--were mentioned unfavorably in nearly every response. Some students couldn't help but ask if we were indeed serious about having them explore and compose without going through elaborate contortions.

As the next question brought to the fore, students prefer writing at home for the same reason instructors do: ability to manipulate surroundings to fit need, purpose, and mood. Some students mentioned a need for isolation, while others a need to write with music, with food, et cetera. In almost every instance, the single most influential factor in reconciling task and environment was individuality--the ability to readjust, rearrange, in short, to react as necessary.

The last of the three questions did not necessarily unearth the "outlandish" that I allowed for, but did tend toward the edenic on certain occasions. Notwithstanding, the ideal place included conditions well worth considering and often well within our means to

provide: tiltback seating; bright, personal lighting; background music; wall-to-wall rugs; personal booths or study carrels; round rooms.

WHAT WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT

Clearly, students are able to identify "at-homeness" and distinguish at-home security from in-class, visiting insecurity. They recognize intuitively or in fullblown articulation that a classroom is not made with them in mind, nor arranged to fit their needs. It is a generic hall, and in that can only produce generica. On one occasion, perhaps, it is a mass communications classroom and on another a forum for current events. With this in mind, it would be foolhearty to establish a room-management paradigm divorced from context. As Levy-Leboyer maintains, "perception and evaluation of the environment cannot be analyzed independently of the actions and behaviors of those who perceive and evaluate" (141). And I would further qualify that by saying, environment cannot be "improved" by those not working within it.

What we require in the composition classes--in fact, in all classrooms--and I recognize that the variations are certainly profuse, is a kind of town meeting: a gathering early in the semester in which students could actively participate in determining the shape of the writing room and its special properties. Judy suggests this "artsy/craftsy" approach in his work, as do Dan Kirby and Tom Liner, but such still seems aimed merely at the secondary teacher. Environmental concerns, as hopefully I have proven, do not lose validity at any age, though--not at seventeen or eighty-three. If we as teachers expect classroom writing to evidence any creative thrust, any legitimate, sincere outpouring, we must reconsider the world of the classroom. Perhaps we must insist, as is often the case in high school, that writing classes be held in "writing rooms."

As Von Eckartsberg comments, creative environments "result from a process of negotiation, explicit *or* implicit" (24). When students are thrown into a classroom on the first day of their college careers and asked to perform, what can we truly expect of them? What would we expect of ourselves if asked to compose solid prose in the midst of a crowded subway station during the rush hour on the day before Christmas Eve? Cognition, self-actualization, creativity . . . these are but fleas on the ear of human geography. It is time we consider *place* along with *product* and *process*.

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NOTES

In aiming this particular paper at instructors of college composition, I do not in any way mean to alienate instructors of composition at any other level. I am aware, for instance, that the learning environment is as important to a ninth grade English teacher as it is to any university English teacher. I do, however, intentionally avoid detailed discussion of the primary and secondary situations for two reasons. First, I do not instruct at these levels (and have a poor memory regarding my own experience there); and second, as I mention in due course, I have seen attention paid to this matter in journals similar to *JTW* and have also seen high school writing "rooms" used to remedy this problem.

Synomorphous fit, as the name suggests, addresses the notion of form complementarity in the workplace--and is used with regularity in the science of ergonomics (work efficiency centered on muscle sensations).

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