A CONTINUUM FOR COMPOSITION

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One semester in a medium sized State College on the Great Plains, I inherited a course for future writing teachers that called for a "review of Composition." I was particularly interested, in part because I wanted to know what future teachers would think about ways to approach the teaching of writing but, too, because the assignment posed the question of how to review a process. I knew that writing is a process; Donald Murray had merely given me a rationale for what I suspect is a widely experienced intuition among writing teachers—that Composition is a process, not a body of knowledge. It is simple to review a body of knowledge like, for example, the grammar rules in a handbook—but review Composition? Thinking about the subject forced me to generate a framework broad enough for ideas at the possible extremes and flexible enough to contain everything between those limits. I soon came to believe that all of us who teach writing need to place what we are doing in relation to other approaches, as well as in relation to the theoretical concepts we read about in our professional journals. We need to know where we are—whether we are teaching in a curriculum devised by someone else, or whether we are devising our own. The result of my thinking on these matters is the Left/Right Continuum of approaches to teaching Composition, depicted below.

The Continuum

Left	Right
Whole to Part	*Part to Whole*
free writing	spelling
personal journals	vocabulary
personal reminiscence	usage
ghost writing	denotation/connotation
idea writing	verb forms
structuring ideas in essays	sequence of tenses
paragraphs	sentence grammar

The Continuum

Left	Right
Whole to Part	*Part to Whole*
structure within paragraphs	sentence rhetoric
sentence rhetoric	paragraphs
sentence grammar	whole essays
usage	
fine points of word choice	
spelling	

The continuum is not intended as a duplication of the concepts expressed by Richard Young in "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Inventions." As I hope to show, the continuum's extremes merely bear a surface resemblance to the choices likely to be made by followers of Young's "new Paradigm" at the left extreme or by followers of his "current-traditional paradigm" at the other.

The extreme left approach—incidentally recalling political liberalism, perhaps—assumes that people learn to write well when they need, and value, their attempts to express themselves in writing. At first the teacher of this method assigns free writing and personal journal writing to break down inhibitions toward experiencing writing as self-discovery. A teacher taking the far-left approach encourages students to write about what they find important, usually themselves, placing stress on developing a written "voice," a projection of self through the medium. C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon argue for something like the far-left approach when they discuss the writing classroom based on "modern rhetoric": "Since making meanings is regarded as a competence, with clarity and correctness among the more mature manifestations of that competence [teachers] can work from this essential competence, regardless of surface inadequacies, dialect problems, grammatical lapses, flawed lines of reasoning, awkwardness of expression, in order to nurture fluency and plant the motivational seeds for technical sophistication" (103). The early activities of the far left method would assume some competence such as that referred to by Knoblauch and Brannon and develop it toward the emergence of a personal voice. Only when the voice-revealing stage becomes firmly established would the teacher introduce the issue of audience as a logical goal of expression, encouraging the students to think of creating a reaction in another person, not in an abstract, distant, unproved concept: "the reader."

Now comes learning to vary the voice according to the circumstances, the audience, and the subject matter, accompanied by the idea that the shape of one's ideas must structure the writing, varying according to communication needs. The class next learns about paragraphs to help along this structuring of ideas, and then it reaches the point of discussing the internal structure of paragraphs with the effective combination of sentences.

If one is truly committed to the extreme left in this conceptual framework, one stops here. At this extreme one assumes that the study of sentence grammar and the details of word choice need not be specifically studied. The far-left practitioner may reason that native speakers already know all they need to and will learn to apply their knowledge in writing as long as the method responds to true student needs. Implied here also may be the assumption that pressing grammatical rules upon students may stifle individuality or ethnic and cultural freedom of expression. Knoblauch and Brannon say, for example, that "Rhetorical, logical and stylistic maturity comes through the steady exercise of verbal competence over extended periods of time, in any circumstances where the writer is motivated to seek improved facility because his or her efforts to make meaning, are valued by readers and therefore personally valuable as well" (103). Another reason for stopping at the level of "sentence rhetoric" in the left-hand sequence might be agreement with a view, also expressed by Knoblauch and Brannon, that "tacit permission" to assume the evaluative stance "entices people to regard some textual features as 'errors' which would probably not be so regarded were a nonevaluative posture assumed" (163). Teaching sentence grammar and usage would certainly encourage an evaluative stance for these factors.

However, if a teacher is only short distance from the far left, the instructor would continue down the offset column in the Continuum (near the left end of the figure). One would move on, discussing sentence grammar, usage, vocabulary, and spelling—but not in a vacuum, only as applied to existing texts produced by the students themselves, in response to their needs. Russell Tabbert's recent plea for teachers to respond to public pressure for specific instruction in grammar in a way that does not "distort the curriculum" away from a center consisting of "reading and writing" would fit with the left-hand method contained all the way to the bottom, through the offset column. The idea of embedding grammar instruction into the consideration of the student-produced writing would

be the hope that students should see grammar, not as mere polite "final polish," but as a direct aid in reaching their expressive and communicative goals.

My students found both negative and positive aspects in the left-hand or near-left hand method. The main negative point they saw was that teaching traditional grammar only at the end of the sequence might provide practice and even positive reinforcement for what the teacher later means to designate as "wrong" or substandard. One might at least avoid the student writers' feeling double-crossed if one constantly stresses that "we are not worrying about grammar now, but later we will want to pay attention to it"; the future teachers in my class felt that this might be a palliative but would not address the central problem. The students did see value in the left method, suggesting that it might increase confidence and reduce writing anxiety and help cure "battle scars" inflicted in previous writing classes. The ideas of Elbow and Shaughnessy would be most relevant to this observation of my students about encouraging the discouraged (or easily discouragable) writer. One student, a speech major, said that she had at first thought the method was cockeyed until she had suddenly realized that it exactly paralleled the principles she had learned in her Speech Methods class. One does not start off teaching children the art of public speaking by first giving them a speech consisting of one word, and then speeches of one sentence, and then several sentences, and finally an entire idea contained in a complete speech. Instead, one starts by breaking down inhibitions and building confidence, trying to create a sense that speaking is valuable and enjoyable—is a means of self-expression. That obtained, one proceeds to work on the larger structure, then gradually on more and more fine details of the speech. The student saw that the left-hand approach applies this philosophy to the teaching of writing.

The right-handed Part-to-Whole method reverses the process exactly; a teacher begins with words, moves on to sentence grammar, to sentence rhetoric, and then to stringing sentences together into effective paragraphs—each stage aided by the vocabulary gained in the previous step. In the far-right method, one can say: "Make the subject of the topic sentence a noun, and make the verb active and strong." One could hardly expect students in a left-ended curriculum to find such advice valuable since one is not planning to talk about the meaning of parts of speech or such concepts as active and passive voice until next month or next semester (or ever).

After discussing effective paragraphs, one can talk about connecting paragraphs together to make effective essays. If the students have been able to apply concepts like unity and coherence in connection with paragraphs, they should have little trouble applying these concepts to longer entities. But the same might not be true for the reverse; essay unity and coherence might be learned more intuitively and applied more loosely in the left-hand method, and such process might not be particularly useful in learning the more precise and stringent requirements of paragraph unity and coherence.

The far-right approach would appear at first glance to be closely akin to what Richard Young refers to as the "current-traditional paradigm," in the article mentioned above, and to the way Berlin and Inkster use the term (13-14). The right-end approach would also seem relatively akin to Knoblauch and Brannon's idea of "ancient rhetoric." However, at least two systems based on relatively recent thought begin with teaching sentences, proceed to paragraphs, and only then move to the whole essay: those of Francis and Bonnie Jean Christensen and of William Strong. The Christensen method relies on grammatical terminology such as "the absolute" and "restrictive and non-restrictive phrases and clauses," and so at least by implication requires a familiarity with grammar at the start, establishing it as an approach of the far right. Like Frank O'Hare's more central approach, upon which Strong's is partially based, Strong's method does not require initial familiarity with grammatical terminology, but in its direction of movement, from part to whole, the Strong system would place itself near the right end of the Continuum. Thus the far-right method's identification with "traditional" or even "ancient" thought would be at least inexact and perhaps inappropriate.

In evaluating right-end approaches, the students in my class were more positive than they had been about the left-end sequence, the students most often praising the advantages of step-by-step instruction of concepts. This strong right-end preference of the soon-to-be Composition teachers might interest a theorist such as Maxine Hairston, who believes that "we are poised for a paradigm shift" (85). The expanding weather front of revolutionary winds that Hairston sees had not yet blown its gusts of commitment to the more immediate application of the new paradigm upon my students. They did, however, see some disadvantages to the right-end method of teaching, especially the challenge of starting the semester with such

items as spelling, vocabulary, and grammar; the teacher, they agreed, would strain her or his resources finding ways to keep interest high. Perhaps most interesting to me was the students' response to the evidence that grammar, learned in drills, simply does not transfer to writing. They responded with skepticism to the forceful 1963 statement of this position made by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (37-38). The students reacted more sympathetically to Frank O'Hare's suggestion that repeated research on this same issue has proceeded for so many years because "English teachers must have *instinctively* felt that somehow, somewhere, someone would find the connection they 'knew' was there" (6). I suspect that they would have reacted with relief to Martha Kolln's recent claim that the 1963 statement derived from a misreading of previous research. The future teachers felt that grammar presented with student-written sentences might help overcome the problem of transfer between grammar instruction and student writing. They also thought that stressing the idea of learning the handbook—where things were in it—and having the students use it in revising, like they used a dictionary, might help. Their idea was that they would not be teaching memorized rules but a particular skill with finding the right explanation in the handbook. The transfer and student boredom disadvantages, my students thought, would be out-weighed by the advantages of each stage drawing on a commonly established vocabulary between student and teacher, as the method moved from step to step.

At the same time, we realized that few if any classroom teachers practice either a 100% pure left or right method; the students supposed that most teachers either use something near the center of the line or follow one sequence and selectively apply methods of the other extreme. For example, a teacher might follow the right-end Part-to-Whole sequence but still open every class with a ten minute free writing and collect a personal journal every week, both to be commented upon but not to be summatively evaluated. Alternatively, one might basically follow the left-end Whole-to-Part sequence or something close to it, while designating every Friday as "clinic day" for working on grammar. The right-hand sequence especially allows a teacher to start at a point appropriate to the students. If students are already competent in spelling and grammar and even sentence rhetoric, one might begin the right-hand sequence with teaching paragraph structure. However, the class warned against hybrid structures such as starting out with the left

sequence until confidence is established and then switching to "dig in" with words and grammar. The class felt that this method switch might disorient students and increase writing anxiety.

It was impossible to include in the class all the important ideas about approaches to teaching writing—just as it would be impossible to do so in this article; however, the very point of the Left/Right Continuum is to provide the person using it with a simple, workable method of elementary classification for approaches to Composition. The scale provides a framework for comparison, but makes no argument for the superiority of any method over any other. This article has included only enough references to theoretical concepts to demonstrate how the continuum can function to relate one's own approach to theoretical concepts, as well as to other approaches. The continuum's design also enables a person to locate a planning position for a unit, a course, a textbook, or even an entire curriculum. It especially gives a quick, easy starting point for evaluating writing texts, whether one has the duty to pick one or to understand the one that is assigned to him or her. As a teacher becomes more familiar with his taxonomy, she or he can identify increasingly specific needs, applying his or her judgment to texts as well as to methods of teaching Composition.

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