Hope A. Parisi

INVOLVEMENT AND SELF-AWARENESS FOR THE BASIC WRITER: GRAPHICALLY CONCEPTUALIZING THE WRITING PROCESS

ABSTRACT: *Even when students demonstrate new writing behaviors, they can remain several removes from recognizing them, at risk for returning to old, less helpful, patterns. The author proposes a metacognitive intervention not only for students to understand composing in the abstract but to appreciate their important roles in managing its complexities. Students are asked to diagram their processes and, in doing so, turn their attention to the moments in between writing tasks in which they planned, questioned, and self-evaluated. The effect is to redress the tentativeness with which students progress from basic to better writers.*

Taking what we know about the composing processes of experienced and professional writers, teachers of basic writing understand the ability of students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their work as a sign of growth (Sommers, Murray). Questionnaires, interviews, think-aloud protocols, and the like help to determine our students' changing attitudes about writing, and aid us in evaluation (Englebert, et al.; Flower and Hayes).

Hope A. Parisi is assistant professor of English at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York. She has given numerous workshops on the teaching of reading and writing and is currently cochairing a committee to facilitate a new sequence of combined reading-writing courses. Her fields of research include developmental learning and seventeenth-century poetry.

These practices, placing the student at the center of his or her learning, are crucial for learning and often highly valued by the students themselves (Miller, 179). But for the college basic writer, sometimes the invitation to reflection meets with suspicion or consternation. A brief survey of the different ways to describe composition demonstrates the profession's own difficulty with consensus. Teachers who share similar philosophies on language learning may employ divergent techniques, while those with conflicting perspectives might actually share some practices (Davis, et al., 52). Think of the basic writer who, often involved in a sequence of courses, encounters a range of instructors, each with a potentially different idea about what writing is.

At my institution, for example, Kingsborough Community College, the sequence of basic reading and writing courses for native-speakers can take three or four terms to complete. Frequently students get caught repeating a step, sometimes two or more times. By the time I meet some students in Basic Composition 2, they may have had two other teachers at the same level. Even after they have written well, when asked to articulate what it is about that piece that makes it good, or how they are developing as writers, these students fall back on a "canned" kind of metacognitive discourse. Reporting their "new" and better attention to such things as grammar, fewer run-ons, and better wording, they describe their writing in ways that confirm the gulf noted by Sommers between student and nonstudent writers, i.e., they characterize their work as "clean[ed] up speech" (122). At the same time, the real strides they in fact may be making—e.g., in planning, focusing, or revision—receive no mention. Success in writing, for them, has generally been "hit or miss," often dependent on a particular teacher's response and some lucky measure of accord with the focus of writing for that semester. Like most low-achievers, they do not ascribe their success to their own involvement in learning or to self-efficacy (Smey-Richman, 7-10).

Changes in writing behavior do not simultaneously ensure changes in assumptions about writing. Nor do they always promise changes in students' conceptions of themselves as learners. In helping students to reflect on writing, we tend to keep students narrowly task-oriented. They think about audience, purpose, text structure, or specific options to follow when problems occur (Englebert; Bruton and Kirby, 91). But rarely do we ask them to stretch these bounds to encounter themselves think-

ing about thinking. Even at their most basic starting-points, students do more complex questioning, decision-making, and evaluations than they know themselves capable of. For basic writers, metacognition can mean confidence when it is an opportunity for students to view themselves staging their own growth as they extend to writing their innate capacities as learners.[1]

During the past several years, I have devised a method to help students literally "see" for themselves the complexities of their thinking/composing processes.[2] I ask students to trace in a diagram the evolution of their work's progress from the initial scratchings to final form. Such diagrams invite the students to re-present the process, objectify it, abstract it. Instead of loading the students down with terminology of teachers and textbooks from past semesters (and perhaps some of my own invention), this method encourages students to devise their own shorthands, to represent not any *one* process but *their* processes. For many basic writers, it occasions a different kind of analysis than asking students about particular aspects, such as audience and purpose, or how they redressed problems in their writing. It accesses the writer *for* the writer, rather than a process which, by now for some, has been reiterated too long.

At the top of a partially blank standard size sheet of paper, I provide the following directions: "Draw a diagram which represents what you did in putting together your most recent written assignment." Lines are provided below the blank space so that students can explain their diagrams, or express in words what they are unable to convey graphically. (To reduce anxiety and uncertainty, I provide students with the option of starting either with the diagram or the words.) After some initial surprise, students soon settle into asking themselves something like, "What kind of diagram would most completely 'say' what I did?"

One student draws a series of rectangles and plus signs. Beneath the rectangles, she writes "Freewriting + first draft + inserts = second draft." Another student begins with circles, some concentric, some overlapping. I remind those who finish quickly about the space at the bottom of the worksheet for describing the diagram and/or filling in what was omitted from it. I also go around the room, pointing to the spaces between steps in the diagrams of students who had perhaps proceeded too hastily from the graphic to the linguistic dimension of the

exercise. "What did you do between those steps?" I ask, or, "How did you get from the freewriting to the first draft? Can you develop your diagram to also represent the step or steps that you are missing?" A new path of arrows, ellipses, or plus signs begins. Students gradually elaborate on their diagrams and expand their descriptions in response to my questions.

Making visible to basic writers their cognitive processes can aid what educational psychologists call *attribution retraining*, the development of students' awareness that their success in learning can be traced to their own ingenuity and effort (Smey-Richman 25-26). Diagramming asks students to take account of all that writing requires of them so that they can appreciate their roles in managing its complexity. Moreover, it focuses attention on the supposedly "empty" moments between tasks where they can best find themselves questioning, analyzing, criticizing, shaping new thoughts—all acts of self-investment.

The benefit of such an exercise, then, lies in optimizing the diagrams as an occasion for students to talk about their processes. Students first react with good feelings about the complication and intricacy that their diagrams convey. Most students come to this exercise having composed their assignments by integrating a variety of sources, e.g., freewriting, lists of questions, notes and/or journals, a first and second draft. To account in sufficient detail for this integration is a challenge, often beyond verbal articulation due to the simultaneity of its many tasks. The visual dimension of the exercise, therefore, conveys this all-at-once quality of much of the process, while allowing the students to construct a narrative in spatial terms of how, when, and why they did what. Talking about the diagrams, then, whether explaining them in writing or aloud to others, calls upon them first to re-engage the writing process: checking their diagrams over, students must ask themselves the same questions by which they evaluate their own writing: "Did I convey what I wanted to convey?" "Did I 'say' it as accurately and/or effectively as possible?" And, with the understanding that others will "read" these diagrams, "Did I relate it in a readily graspable way?" (Boiarsky, 70).

Personal interaction between student and teacher can help students toward a discovery of these issues. As already mentioned, I go around the room and talk with students as they are diagramming, much as I do while they are writing, not minding if others overhear the interview. Students explain to me the parts of the process they have represented so far. As a reader/

listener of their processes, I mirror back to them what I hear them saying, tracing the path of their diagrams with my eyes and finger as I try to paraphrase.

I notice that most of my students like to formularize their processes—this plus that turns into something else, as if they were throwing ingredients into a pot and then covering it while some mystery happens. At the same time, they may have a feeling for the evolution of a piece but less of one for their part in each transformation. For example, one student, Curlean, begins her diagram with a square patch of dark scribble in the top left-hand corner of the page. She labels this mass "Confusion." In the next part of her sequence, she draws a rectangle with lines going across it, like lines of writing, with the word "Error" marking several of them. The next rectangle has the words "Beginning" and "End" atop and at bottom, with an arrow pointing to it that says, "Almost perfect paper." She explains, "In the beginning I was doubtful and confused. As we met in class I learned how to set up drafts and write more. Now I am writing organized more and more." I repeat, tracing her progression, "So you went from confusion to clearer and clearer drafts. Each one was more organized." But her description, like her diagram, keeps her actual process hidden. I want to know: "Does what you have here represent separate drafts, each one a clearer one? Did you always start each new bit of writing as if you were beginning a new piece? What are some specific things you did—questions you asked yourself or decisions you made— in going, say, from the first to second draft?"

These questions direct Curlean's attention back to the process in more detail, yielding a new diagram of circles strung along an oblong path. Heading the oblong is a circle labeled "freewriting." The next circle, left of the path, is "reread, jot down questions." Directly to the right of this second circle is one that reads, "expand on questions, freewrite." Following the paths to the left again, she writes, "re-read, narrow down my thoughts." Directly to the right again reads "write in more details, corrections, and conclude." At the bottom of the oblong is the circle "Final draft." She shows me her new version, this time better able to describe it to me. When I ask her why the circular arrangement, she says that it is to show how one step leads to another. Perhaps now she can abstract her part in shaping her essay. "What does all this tell you about what *you* did as a writer?" I ask her, tracing her circle in the air. She answers in personal terms: "I would do the same things over

and over—write, read, write, read. I kept the writing going by asking myself questions."

This student became a reader of her process after an opportunity to objectify it in detail. Much the same can happen when students share their diagrams. My classes encompass a range of abilities, mirrored in the variety of diagrams I receive. While the better writers usually are the better diagrammers, some students sell short their processes. One student, Maria, wrote a successful essay from journals, freewriting, and drafts. However, when asked to diagram, she was at a loss. Instead of diagramming, she drew an illustration of her piece:


On the lines below it, she indicated only what the piece was about—a family get-together. "What I cannot explain in the diagram is all the good feelings, love, and joy that we felt there." She needed to see the graphic representation of others' processes in order to better think about her own.

In this particular class, students gathered to conference their diagrams much as they would a draft. As each group met, I moved among them, encouraging some students to fill in the details of what questions they might have asked themselves, what decisions they might have made, between steps. Roving, I catch only part of some explanations. "Talk about these steps," I say. Or "Andrej, ask Joanne a question about something she *didn't* explain." He looks at her diagram, and points to an arrow that connects two drafts. "What does this mean?" he asks. Joanne scrutinizes the line. She tries to explain to me but I'm onto a different group. So she returns to him. By now many of the students are reexamining their diagrams, rearticulating them. They are finding more to say about their involvement in writing.

Like my class, the diagrams of Maria's group show a range of facility and awareness. Charlie's diagram is very different:
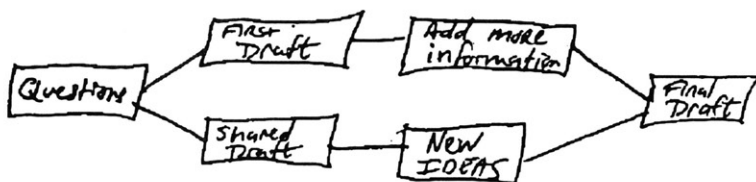
He narrates a straightforward progression: "First I asked questions about a decision I had to make. Then I wrote a first draft on the questions. Next I shared drafts and questions with two students which led to more ideas and more information which finally led to the final draft." For Charlie, the variables in his equation stay constant; they simply "add up." But they do account for the various bits and pieces of writing from which many students worked. In the same group, Dorian shares a diagram in ways similar to Charlie's but speaks more to what happened between steps: "It all started with a few questions which were focused upon. Then I expanded upon the freewriting a bit which was then pinpointed to certain areas. Those key areas were then blown up to form the expantion [sic] and interjection piece. This was then molded together to form a final draft."
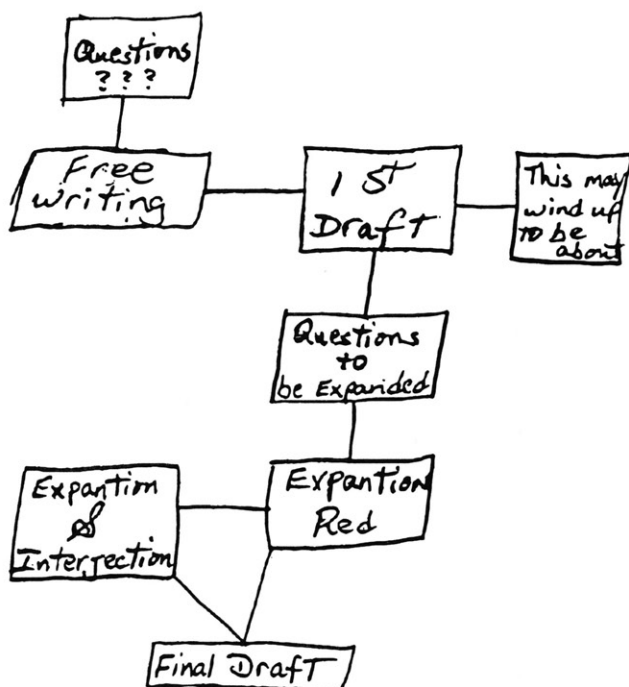
In both her verbal and written descriptions, Dorian gives the sense of a piece which depends for its focus on ideas that keep growing out of previous ones, determining and *redetermining* the writer's direction. It was much the same with Paul, a more advanced writer from another group, who wrote: "From the first draft, further questions arose that interrelated to the other pieces, which finally led to the final draft compiled of pieces from each." His diagram shows, in his words, the "interrelated[ness]" of one piece of writing to another:
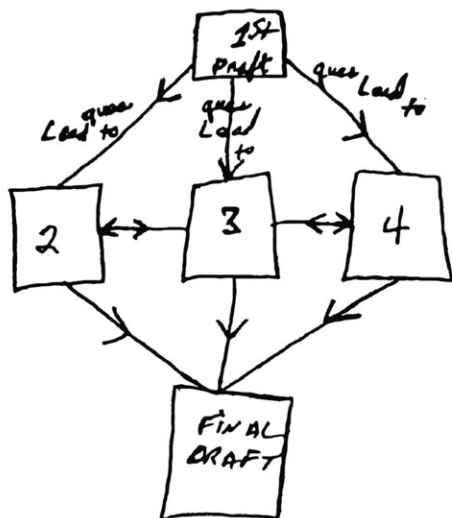
Different questions or sets of questions lead from his first draft to three separate expansions. At mid-diagram, horizontal arrows indicate a dialogue among the expansions. Each of these pieces is encompassed or drawn upon to compose something different again, which Paul calls his Final Draft.

An overview of other diagrams helps Maria to realize that she has steps in common with her partners. After the conference everyone is given a chance to revise his or her diagram. For Maria, having the chance to consider her process in light of others' yields a new result. She reconfigures her process this way:
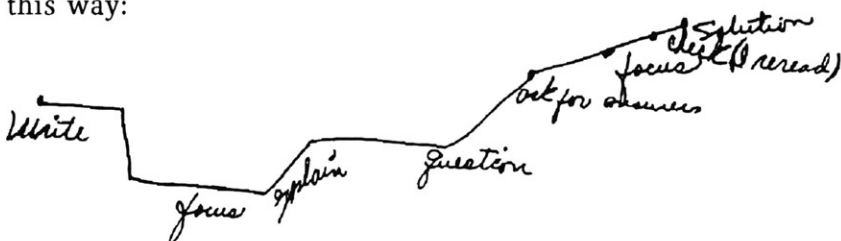
Here Maria, a basic writer, approaches an awareness of writing that comes close to how theorists and experienced writers characterize the composing process. Her diagram now includes peaks and valleys, moments of generating ideas and questions, and moments of standing back to evaluate them and begin again. She comments, "Focusing happens after writing, and explaining happens after focusing." At the same time, "question[ing]" is literally central. Like her partners, Maria comes to see writing as a continuum that self-duplicates even as it proceeds—a strong realization for a basic writer.

Asked to account for a process in steps and pieces, students are more apt to recognize or give names to those moments. Even when students seem to have followed similar courses of activity—e.g., starting out with freewriting or questions, then a first draft, peer conferencing, etc.—they do so while lending and maintaining different levels of attention to the various tasks of a project at different times. I would define diagramming's working principle like this: when classes of basic writers assume that they are more or less keeping together in their activities (although they may alternate between independent, small and large groupwork) and following a teacher's directions, asking them to then diagram their processes shifts the focus to the students' own input and self-direction. It is a moment for analyzing assumptions about learning in general, primarily that learning happens because of teachers' "instruction." To ask students to describe their experience of writing in detail, to account for their many acts of decision-making, focuses them on the complexity of *their* processes and *their* roles. It is a re-authorization, in a sense, that their growth as writers owes largely to *them.*

At the same time, if they ascribe little complexity to their processes, recalling, say, only a few steps, it is á chance for students to examine the process' interstices and invisibilities. Just as it is possible to diagram a full process, students can diagram part of a process—for example, what it was like to write a first draft, how they got from peer comments to a second draft, even how they found a focus. (I also like students to create and combine lists: "To find my topic, first I . . . then I . . . to do this I had to . . . then I . . . .") Shifting the angle of the lens, students can find frames for many different aspects of their writing experience. Suddenly each one emerges in similar detail. They are all complex. When I have asked students to trace what they did to get to their first draft, their diagrams

reflect others showing an entire process. In groups or as a class, we compare our samples. Students draw their own conclusions: "Whether you are writing a first draft, a second draft, or something else, you must still ask questions and evaluate them." "Reading your writing always seems to change what you want to say next." "Getting to your first draft is just like getting to your final draft." Basic writers are capable of these insights when they start to own the processes they describe.

One sure mark of this happening is when students reach for descriptive language. Dorian used the term "interjection piece" to describe a kind of writing that emanated from her questions and re-readings but which could not be called a second draft. She also used the shorthand "This may wind up to be about . . . " to remind herself of a sentence-starter she used after her first draft to re-evaluate her focus. To negotiate these many aspects of her process was to "mold" them together. Beth spoke of using "the 'circling process,'" her own term, by which she meant that, after freewriting, she "gathered [together] similar ideas and numbered them in the order in which I wanted them to appear in my first draft." (Her diagram on getting to a second draft shows this same pattern of generation and selection.) Dong Yun talks of freewriting "possibilities," i.e., ideas for development, and then of "specifying each possibility." He divided these ideas each into "several pieces," and matched them to more "corresponding points" later "taken out of the freewriting." The juxtaposition of these "pieces" results in his first draft.

Jane, duplicating a similar write-and-patch approach, worked from what she called a "freewriting puzzle." Reading over her freewriting and grouping similar ideas, she singled out, or "cut up," those "segments" that did not seem to belong anywhere, and worked to integrate them into a first draft. (She in fact may have used scissors.) Like her, Jean also grouped ideas from her freewriting, calling them "tiny chunks" sectioned into "little blocks," which "were then fitted into a long piece," the first of three drafts. Even the poetic enters into students' descriptions: reiterating both Jane's and Jean's puzzle theme, one student describes his diagram-collage of ameba-like shapes floating and colliding in space. Miguel writes: "Puzzled pieces fall together like laughs in a long dark hallway, echoing together and off each other, forming new sounds and different languages." (Clearly, he was placed in my class to learn about academic discourse!) But notably absent from most diagrams and descrip-

tions are standard terms like "main idea," "supporting details," "introduction," "body," "paragraphs," "conclusion," "thesis," even "topic." Another student, Hilda, spoke not even of drafts, or of freewriting, but of "drafts of freewriting." This grasp at language, when weighed with other indicators, suggests that students are making self-investments in their learning.

In truth, diagramming fits a classroom climate that involves students in their own learning as much as possible. To ask students to diagram their processes after many classes in which teachers have assigned topics, dictated their format, and/or lectured about writing would defeat the purpose of such an exercise, for students might well see it as a test. However, diagramming should only support an insight which students hopefully have begun to grasp: that learning anything involves bringing one's *fullest self* to the task at hand.

This implies a *set* of awarenesses, including not only what is required but also one's personal history, assumptions, past experiences with related tasks—in short, what one brings to learning. As learners, students constantly engage themselves in dialogue: "I can or can't do this." "Is this what the teacher expects from me?" "Does this paragraph make sense?" In order to proceed from one place to another, students settle or complicate their queries, or suspend judgment. Diagramming assumes that teachers value giving students' inner dialogues an audible voice. It works in concert with other questions of self-exploration that can find occasion throughout a course, like: "Did you begin writing right away or did you wait? If you waited, what did you think about? What ideas, thoughts, assumptions allowed you to get started?" "As you wrote today, were you aware of a censor, someone or something criticizing your thoughts? Who or what was it?" "How did you use your freewriting in order to get to your first draft?" "Where are you in the progress of your piece—beginning? middle? near the end? How do you know?" "If all the thoughts you had while writing today, but didn't write, suddenly appeared in the margins, what would they be?" There are sub-texts moving within and among writers. How they meet and combine can create freedom or self-censorship. When students have the opportunity to explore what they bring to writing, they can better define the different ideas, questions, and decisions that impelled their writing through its various stages.

On a pragmatic level, students who can diagram their processes are those who are proceeding more easily to longer and

longer drafts, focusing more on form and discovery than lexical economy. Diagramming's best effect is confidence. Exactly how or whether it improves writing depends largely upon the mode of learning in the classroom, but in general it serves the Aha! effect for writers who already are taking more risks, especially as they take more time to find their topics. For students who have yet to make this transition, the sharing of diagrams can point to its horizon. Once students have diagrammed a whole or partial process, I am asked less about what to do with writing that students generate between drafts, panic-filled questions like, "Where do I put this new information?" "Do I have to answer all my group's questions in my piece?" "Hey! Writing that letter you made me write—the one on what I think I am really trying to say—I got some new ideas. Do I just stick the whole letter into my first draft?" Having shared their diagrams, students have multiple models, multiple scenarios, for how the writing of any piece can go. When any one student feels that he or she has generated too much writing, there is a sense that others have worked with comparable amounts of material and found a form, thus I can too.

Diagramming has also meant increased confidence for me. After the midpoint in my course, I feel freer to help students renew and evaluate their topics even more—e.g., to restate their topics in letters to me or notes to themselves, to rewrite their first drafts from memory, to qualify several points, to read others' writing and then reread their own. I can suspend the time between drafts without fearing students' impatience (or anxiety) about where their essays are going. Students see that maps back from chaos are devisable—by them.

Notes

[1]Caleb Gattegno offers an optimistic perspective on self-involvement in learning and innate intelligence. His reflections on the untutored learning processes of small children speak to education psychology's recent interest in ways to encourage "learning to learn" abilities and better self-concept among low-achievers. See *The Universe of Babies* (New York: Educational Solutions, 1973).

[2]Roland Huff and Charles R. Kline, Jr. ask the relevant question, how can writing be taught as a recursive, multi-stage model without overwhelming the students conceptually? See *The Contemporary Writing Curriculum: Rehearsing, Composing, and Valuing* (New York: Teachers College P, 1987), 127-30.

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