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BASIC WRITING AND THE PROCESS PARADIGM

ABSTRACT: *Process approaches have become paradigmatic in the teaching of writing, but recent critiques claim that an implicit mode of instruction privileging mainstream students is typical of process approaches. Two central metaphors in the process paradigm support the criticism of implicit instruction: literacy learning as natural development and writing instruction as the facilitation of development. The article traces implicit instruction to the structuralist intellectual tradition and concludes that a poststructuralist appreciation of differences, especially differences among discourses, would be more appropriate for the teaching of basic writing.*

Over the past several years composition theorists have claimed that an implicit mode of instruction typical of writing-process approaches contributes to the difficulties nonmainstream students encounter in trying to master school-sponsored literacy. What does this critique mean for the teaching of basic writing? At first glance, criticisms of process approaches seem to be based on studies limited to the elementary-school level. Typical examples include the descriptions by Michaels and Cook-Gumperz of "sharing time" narratives in first-grade classrooms where teachers have an implicit model of literate discourse in mind, causing them to prefer the topic-centered stories of white children over the episodic personal narratives of minority children. However, the criticisms apply to analogous situations in secondary school and college. Cazden, for example, points out that the writing conference in high school

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and college is similar to "sharing time" in purpose and participant structure. Indeed both the nondirective writing conference and "sharing time" emerge from an implicit model of literate discourse.

Implicit instruction is teaching that works through nondirective suggestion and tacit implication rather than by explicit direction or modeling. Critics of process approaches to writing instruction, such as Delpit, Gee, and Kutz and Roskelly, repeatedly focus on the difficulties implicit instruction can pose for students whose discourse strategies and expectations diverge from mainstream literate discourse. Their argument is that mainstream literate discourse is the language of school but it is familiar only to students who use it regularly outside of school. If schools avoid teaching the mainstream code used tacitly in writing instruction, then instruction favors students who already know the code and how to use it to construct meaning. As one critic makes clear, writing instruction then imposes an inequitable burden on students less familiar with the mainstream academic code:

> [W]e should be aware that failing to focus on "forms," and stressing "meaning" and the student's own "voice," can privilege those students who already know the "rules" and the "forms," especially if grades are assigned partly on how well the writing ultimately matches traditional expectations, either in the "process writing" class itself or in later more content-based classes it is preparing the students for. The "process writing" class exists in an overall system, and it can become complicit in that system in replicating the hierarchical status quo in yet another form, and one that is, perhaps, more effective in that the students who fail, fail without understanding the basis of the system that failed them. (Gee 162)

Basic writers are disproportionately members of discourse communities other than the mainstream literate one, and if the process paradigm does indeed show a conceptual reliance on an implicit model of literacy instruction, then the critique of process approaches just reviewed applies to the teaching of basic writing. The process paradigm may actually perpetuate some myths that work against basic writers. As Lankshear and McLaren note, "the myths of dominant discourses are, precisely, the myths which oppress and marginalize" (44).

In what follows, I use publications from the writing-process

movement as artifacts to identify two central myths or controlling metaphors in process approaches: the beliefs that writing development is natural and that teaching is primarily the facilitation of development. An analysis of these metaphors shows that the process paradigm does indeed favor implicit instruction. I trace this bias to the structuralist intellectual tradition which analyzes phenomena in terms of binary oppositions; in this analysis, implicit instruction is a reaction to the highly directive, skills-based writing instruction which preceded the process movement. I conclude that a poststructuralist appreciation of differences, especially differences among discourses, would be more appropriate for the teaching of basic writing.

My starting point in reporting my analysis is an article entitled "Five Myths in the Teaching of Composition" by O'Dea. O'Dea perceived his five myths as popular beliefs among writing teachers thirty years ago, but they now seem curious and outdated:

1. Students learn to write well by reading great literature.
2. Students learn to write essays by analyzing professionally written essays.
3. Students learn to write well by grammatical analysis.
4. Students learn to write better by reconstructing other people's sentences.
5. Students learn to write better by taking into account extensive teacher criticism.

O'Dea's identification of these five statements as myths makes clear his opposition to what he saw as a popular approach to teaching writing through external models or directives, since that is what great literature, professional essays, grammatical analysis, other people's sentences, and extensive teacher criticism have in common. O'Dea concludes by recommending that writing be conceived as the communication of existing knowledge rather than as a gathering and synthesis of ideas new to the writer: "Try to establish a writing situation where there can be *real* communication, where the student is given a genuine opportunity to inform the teacher *and* the class about his specialized knowledge of bird-watching or whatever, or is encouraged to think that his opinion about the function of the witches in *Macbeth* might be interesting to the whole class" (330; emphasis in original). In rejecting methods employing an "outside-in" instructional quality, O'Dea anticipated the seminal Dartmouth Conference on the Teaching of English in 1966,

where participants decided to move "from an attempt to define *What* English is—a question that throws the emphasis on nouns like skills, and proficiencies, set books, and the heritage—to a definition by process, a description of the activities we engage in through language" (Dixon 7). This view of language as process and activity implied that it is a naturally occurring phenomenon and that literacy, like language in general, is latent within each student, an emergent ability which the alert teacher will notice and draw on. This led to pedagogical emphasis on emergent abilities and the means of drawing them out.

By turning from a skills model to a process model in the mid-1960s, writing instruction began to move in the direction of a developmental pedagogical stance. Considerable research on the writing processes of successful writers supported this movement, and rather quickly the profession came to believe in the existence of "normal" writing processes and a "normal" process of writing development; indeed research on the writing processes of unsuccessful writers used the norm for successful writers as a benchmark (Perl). Writing process researchers have studied the development of writing primarily in its relation to the development of thinking by borrowing a cognitive model from psychological and linguistic studies in child development, a model that emphasizes organic growth. An example of this borrowing is the notion of egocentric expression. Researchers in developmental psychology, especially those influenced by Piagetian notions made the assumption that developing writers undergo an initial stage of "egocentric expression" of their ideas, in which "egocentric" is a synonym for personally relevant writing or, as writing researchers termed it, "expressive writing" (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen; Emig). This assumption led to a belief that the majority of communication problems are stages along the path of the development of the writer. For example, in the stage of egocentricity, the developing writer was thought to assume that the reader "thinks and feels as he does, has had the same experience, and hears in his head, when he is reading, the same voice the writer does when he is writing" (Moffett 195). The teacher's task was not to intrude or discourage this kind of writing but to provide feedback, to encourage and facilitate elaboration and explicitness and thus overcome egocentricity; for "it is not so much knowledge as awareness that [the student] needs" (Moffett 195). Hence, teachers within this mode of instruction became "facilitators" whose role was to free students' personal stores of experience

and information for expression and to promote growth by sustaining a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere. This led to an avoidance of the study of model pieces of writing, the presentation of criteria, the structuring of instruction around sets of skills or strategies or rhetorical concepts, and the use of textbooks or teachers as sources of explicit instruction. These ideas found their fullest expression in Elbow, Graves, Atwell, and Calkins, where the emphasis is almost entirely on natural literacy development and implicit instruction to help students discover and elaborate meaning while allowing them to choose their own books and writing topics, freewrite to identify and develop ideas, and postpone attention to matters of conventional form, style, diction, and editing.

The process model in writing instruction today has the generic labels *writing process* and *process writing*; it is part of general pedagogical perspectives such as *whole language* and *new literacy* (Willinsky), and it has at least one specific label, *Natural Process Mode* (Hillocks). I prefer Hillocks' "natural process" label because the dominant metaphor in the process model—natural development—is suggested within the label itself. As Cook-Gumperz recently pointed out, the model has its basis in the self-discovery function of expressive writing. The process approach to writing instruction, in other words, is based on the belief that writing, especially early drafts of writing by inexperienced writers, is initially expressive in nature and characterized by a self-discovery function; only later, with subsequent drafts and increased writing experience, does it become more communicative. Underpinning this expectation are two related central metaphors. The first is the metaphor of natural development, as if literacy development were governed by a graphic version of Chomsky's language acquisition device. The second is the metaphor of instruction as the facilitation of writing development, as if the teacher's work were primarily to support writing development, rather than to initiate, shape, or direct it. Historically, these metaphors were juxtaposed against the previous axiomatic metaphor of writing as skill produced by "outside-in" influences, which is what O'Dea was opposed to. The outside-in model construed writing as artificial and static, and writing skills were often thought of as "things"—reified objects passed from teacher to student.

Translated into educational practice, the natural process model has meant encouraging students to trust themselves and their own designs, and it has meant conceiving of meaning-

making and writing development as unidirectional processes—from the inside-out. This spatial metaphor of writing as movement from the inside-out dominates the writing-process literature. Kirby and Liner with Vinz, for example, title their influential book on the teaching of writing *Inside-Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing*. The book opens with the following passage:

> It all begins inside: inside the heads of our kids. There are ideas in there, and language and lots of possibilities. Writing is a pulling together of that inside stuff. Writing is a rehearsal in making meaning. What we like to call "mind texts." The teacher's role in all this is to support those rehearsals, to help kids bring those mind texts to the page as powerful writings. (1)

In this model, students already have in their heads unconscious knowledge of the elements of writing, and the production of written text consists of "discovering" these elements. In other words, writing is a process of discovering latent inner representations of meaning and then relaying them to the outside world. The metaphor of writing as a natural process means that writing is an innate capability which needs only to be nurtured into existence through repeated practice. This viewpoint was reinforced by research in linguistics claiming that by the time a child begins school, he or she is very much a linguistic adult, possessing everything needed to produce a written text. Not only is linguistic ability imputed to already reside within the child, but in the case of secondary students, a fund of frames, images, observations, and ideas are waiting to be discovered by the writer. Romano describes this self-discovery function of writing this way:

> [It is] the aspect of writing that comes closest to magic. We write and soon find ourselves putting down facts we didn't know were in our heads. We write and explain something lucidly that had only been a foggy notion. We write and create examples that illustrate our generalizations. We write and suddenly "realize" or "notice" things. (18)

Romano's book is entitled *Clearing the Way;* in that title and throughout the book, he repeatedly uses images of letting writers grow, cutting them loose, freeing them from the constraints of rules and skills and directive teaching. Once implicit knowledge is established as the wellspring for writing, teachers need

only to keep ideas flowing, to suggest and encourage instead of explicitly stating, to trust developing writers to discover their own ideas instead of getting them out of books or elsewhere. The assumption of implicit knowledge in student writers is what permits implicit instruction by writing teachers.

The trouble with implicit instruction is that it is based on an assumption of natural development of language abilities. To return momentarily to the critiques of process writing with which I opened this article, implicit instruction is rooted in a middle-class educational ideology that favors students familiar with mainstream literate culture. Literacy development appears natural, that is, when there is a high degree of congruence between the language of home and school (Heath; Delpit; Gee). Since basic writers are disproportionately members of discourse communities other than the mainstream literate one, an implicit model of literacy instruction often is inappropriate in the basic writing classroom.

An example from a basic writing classroom will clarify and illustrate what I mean by claiming that implicit instruction and the developmental process approach based on it is inappropriate for basic writers. The example has three parts: The first part is an excerpt from an Hispanic first-year university student's initial draft in which she responds to her reading of Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," a short story describing the daylong arduous journey of an elderly woman, Phoenix Jackson, to obtain medicine for her grandson. The second part is an excerpt from a conference in which the student discusses the draft with her teacher. The third part is an excerpt from a conference in which the student discusses this draft with a tutor.

Excerpt from First Draft:

> "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty. When I first read this story, I could no understand what was going on. I did no know boys were all in the story. I thought Phoenix was the only character. I thought she was dreaming when Phoenix was going through the pines all the way up the hill and then down. I thought all this was nonsense. I could not understand why she kept on going and did not stop when she felt like it. From the beginning I did not understand why she started that trip in first place. Then I decided to read the story for a purpose. The first time I read it because it was my assignment. As I was reading for the second time, I could relate myself with Phoenix

but on a different path of life, my life. I forgot about Phoenix and I changed her. I picture walking on the difficulties of this, my own path of life. Since the time of the trip. I could see myself since the day I was born. Reading the story made me thought about life. While reading the story I thought of how many trips I have done. I also thought if my trip was worth something as Phoenix long journey. When seeing how long Phoenix journey was, I became more and more involved each time. I could relate to everything in Phoenix journey. Phoenix walking over the path was the meaning of determination in making that trip. As she walks through the maze where there was no path, I picture myself making my way through life somehow, even when there seems to be no way.

Excerpt from Teacher-Student Conference:

Teacher: It seems to me throughout this essay you keep saying, "Phoenix Jackson's life reminded me about something in my own life." Right?

Student: Uh humm.

Teacher: Well, we say that our essays need to draw from the story, not draw from our own life, right?

Student: See, I ...

Teacher: But, wait a second, wait a second. This is your first response, and that's really good. So I suggested, now, is there a thesis in this, for a paper on "A Worn Path"? And it looks like you are interested in the qualities that Phoenix Jackson shows, that have helped her in her life.

Student: Uh humm.

Teacher: You mention, um, you're relating to her [reads from student's paper] "through the path ... the meaning and determination .... As she walked through the maze where there was not a path, I pictured myself making ... through life somehow." OK, this one would be, you admired perseverance in spite of difficulties, right?

Student: Uh humm.

Teacher: You don't necessarily have to use how you had to persist. [Reads from student's paper] "I pictured myself making my way through life somehow."

Student: But I was comparing her to me.

Teacher: But, yeah, that's good, for your first response. Now I want you to be able to make a thesis statement where you can say something about Phoenix Jackson and illustrate it from the story. But you wouldn't have come to this point had you not written these first few pages of response. OK? So, what you can do is say, um, Phoenix Jackson faces life with blank, blank, and blank. This is not exactly, it shows, [writes and speaks her writing aloud] "illustrates a theme for the reader ... qualities in facing .... OK: Phoenix Jackson illustrates for the reader three important qualities necessary in facing life's difficulties." Now it looked like these were the things that you felt you noticed about Phoenix Jackson.

Excerpt from Tutor-Student Conference:

Tutor: What do you think of the essay you wrote?

Student: I like it, but she says it's not what she wants.

Tutor: I like it, too. This [points to student's last sentence] is your attempt to make a thesis?

Student: Yes. She told me to get a thesis and to take three points.

Tutor: Are you happy with that thesis?

Student: I don't know. I think it doesn't sound good. Because I don't, I always have trouble with the thesis. Like, I always put it at the end, and then I have to go back and put it out there. Then she told me that she wanted a new one.

Tutor: Why do you always put it at the end?

Student: I don't know. That's my style of writing. That's how I write.

Tutor: It's like you have to write what you think ...

Student: Yeah, then I ...

Tutor: ... before you discover your thesis?

Student: Yeah. That's how I write.

Tutor: Well, uh, do you think it would be possible to combine this thesis [pointing to student's first paragraph] with this evidence [pointing to the book containing the short story]?

Student: Yeah, this is why she told me to pick the three points, and then I'm gonna, these will be like my topics.

Tutor: Do you need help, or do you think you can pull that off by yourself?

Student: No, I think I can do it.

Tutor: OK.

Student: But, I don't, I'm not sure what she wants. Do you know what she really wants me to do? I thought this [points to her draft] was what she wanted.

Tutor: What you've done here is tell a story about yourself, reacting to the short story you read.

Student: Uh huh.

Tutor: That's a good way to understand the story. It's a good way to build an understanding ...

Student: But, see, what I'm trying to say, because in my old lit class, including every, she will tell us to respond to the story, saying, like, if you like it or no, whatever. Also, she say, critique the story, say what was wrong with it. But [the current teacher], she doesn't say that. She just say, "write." When I write something like this, then she says change it, but I don't know what she wants.

The writer's first draft is characterized by Flower's "writer-based" prose and Scardamalia and Bereiter's "knowledge-telling strategies" in that it reveals the writer's thinking in process. The draft records her attempt to make sense of the story. The writer notes that she didn't understand the story after her first reading and thought, "all this was nonsense." Actions in the story seem illogical to her: Why would Phoenix keep walking in the face of so many obstacles? Why did she start the journey in the first place? With her second reading of the story, however, she is no longer reading it "because it was my assignment"; instead, she attempts to connect the story to her own experience. What is being constructed by the writer is therefore a personally relevant account of the story's meaning, and her writing seems to fit the process model where early drafts are expressive and serve a self-discovery function.

The teacher gives token acknowledgement of process writing by stating that the writer's attempt to compare herself to Phoenix is acceptable for a "first response." The teacher wants the next draft to get beyond the expressive treatment to a more academic one: "We say that our essays need to draw from the story, not draw from our own life, right?" In the teacher's view, personal response may lead to personally relevant meaning, but achieving true explicitness of meaning is a matter of elaborating the content of the essay in a certain way. This involves gleaning pertinent information from the story and by writing in conformity with a "thesis statement and examples" code of discourse. The teacher implies that any further elaboration of the story's meaning should emerge from careful examination of the text itself to extract the necessary information and then writing about it in a fixed format, rather like filling in the blanks: "So, what you can do is say, um, Phoenix Jackson faces life with blank, blank, and blank." Clearly, this is an "outside-in" approach to writing instruction, since the teacher expects both the content and the form of the writing to come from outside the writer.

The tutor, on the other hand, uses the "inside-out" approach characteristic of process writing. His questions are nondirective, his conference style is student-centered, and he is apparently making every attempt to be supportive of the writer. He thinks the student is doing well because she is using writing to discover meaning; he believes that she needs to write more to discover her thesis and that by writing about herself she will discover the meaning of the story. The writer, however, is not

so sure her writing is going well. Several times she mentions the difficulty she is having figuring out and delivering what the teacher wants: "I like it, but she says it's not what she wants" and "I'm not sure what she wants. Do you know what she really wants me to do?" Finally, the writer openly admits to confusion: "When I write something like this, then she says change it, but I don't know what she wants," suggesting that the code governing academic writing in this classroom is too implicit to be accessible to her.

This example presents an apparent conflict between a "traditional" approach to writing instruction and a "process" approach. The teacher is representative of secondary and postsecondary instructors who have fixed expectations for academic writing: It should contain information from reading and other sources; the information should be logically and hierarchically arranged; clear transitions should connect ideas; and so on right down to conventional mechanics and spelling. The tutor represents expectations built into the process approach: writers should discover meaning as they go, initial drafts may be overly expressive and disconnected, revision should move the writing in the direction of communicative prose, and final editing should take care of any surface infelicities. So who is right?

My point is that the question I just posed is not the appropriate one. The expectations of both the teacher and tutor remain tacit. As a result, the writer remains unconscious of them in spite of her willingness to provide exactly "what the teacher wants," if she could just figure out what that is. It may be, in fact, that the teacher and tutor are unaware of this student's culturally determined pattern of discourse the writer is using, just as the writer is unaware of the culturally determined pattern of discourse that operates in composition classrooms (Dunlap). A more appropriate question than "Who is right?" is *How can we learn from each other?*

Writing development is a hybrid combining development in the sense of genetic maturity with development in the sense of learning from socialization and instruction (Collins). I think the teaching of basic writing always involves the balancing of direct modeling and instruction with culturally determined, habitual and therefore seemingly "natural" discourse patterns. Since basic writers are disproportionately members of discourse communities other than the mainstream literate one, an implicit model of literacy instruction is frequently inappropriate,

by itself, in the basic writing classroom. Implicit writing instruction calls out habitual discourse, and habitual discourse varies with culture more than with language development. As basic writing teachers we should set the same goal for ourselves that would be most appropriate for our students—to become more conscious of how culture influences linguistic forms, more aware of the patterns we use and how they differ from those our audiences expect. This means, of course, making explicit many aspects of language instruction that are currently implicit or taken for granted. Mina Shaughnessy expressed much the same sentiment:

> The special conditions of the remedial situation, that is, the need to develop within a short time a style of writing and thinking and a background of cultural information that prepare the student to cope with academic work, create a distinctive tension that almost defines the profession—a constant, uneasy hovering between the imperatives of format and freedom, convention and individuality, the practical and the ideal. Just where the boundaries between these claims are to be drawn in basic writing is by no means clear. (152)

What Shaughnessy referred to as "the imperatives of format and freedom, convention and individuality, the practical and the ideal" is, I suspect, the same difference I have discussed in terms of conscious and implicit instruction. Where Shaughnessy saw tension and a need for boundaries between opposites, however, I would advocate a poststructuralist appreciation of differences. Too many of us see educational change in structuralist terms, as a continual movement between poles arranged as a set of binary oppositions. This view makes educational innovation seem like an endless process of pendulum-swinging. Certainly the process movement fits the structuralist philosophy. Zemelman and Daniels, for example, use a table to "identify the key points of contrast between the old and new paradigms" (340), that is, between traditional teaching and process writing. Here are excerpts from their table, which they call a "comparison of polarities":

Old/traditional view	New/process view
Writing is a product to be evaluated.	Writing is a process to be experienced.
Writing is taught rather than learned.	Writing is predominantly learned rather than taught.
The process of writing is largely conscious.	Writing often engages unconscious processes.

According to this structuralist way of thinking, innovation is a reaction to tradition; process-writing was a reaction to directive, skills-oriented teaching. Once process writing has itself become the dominant tradition, we need another reaction or a new paradigm. Such a view runs the risk of oversimplifying education by suggesting that teaching always involves choosing between alternatives and establishing one alternative as the authoritative one. A poststructuralist or postmodernist view of education makes more sense because it rejects the claims to exclusivity of insight and authority of any one view and allows the inclusion of opposing views. James Gee describes this position:

> A given sign system (language, way of seeing the world, form of art, social theory, and so forth) can *claim* universality or authenticity or naturalness, but this is always a claim made from *within* the system itself. Outside the system, we are in another sign system that may well have different canons of universality or authenticity. . . . A sign system operates not because it is inherently natural or valid, nor because it is universal, but simply because some group of people have engaged in the past and continue to engage in the present in a particular set of *social practices* that incorporate that sign system. (281; emphasis in original)

The process paradigm is the dominant discourse in the teaching of writing, but that does not validate its claim to authority or exclusivity. The teaching of basic writing would benefit from rejecting the structuralist notion of two extremes in the teaching of writing in favor of a view that both ends—tradition and innovation, development and socialization, psychology and culture—are necessary. In this view, differing discourses represent differing social epistemologies and differing personal and cultural identities. Appreciating these differences gives us *both*

creativity and conformity in written expression, and it gives us invention and convention, discovery and communication.

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