**Joseph G.R. Martinez**
**Nancy C. Martinez**

# RECONSIDERING COGNITION AND THE BASIC WRITER: A RESPONSE TO MYRA KOGEN

In her 1986 *Journal of Basic Writing* article "The Conventions of Expository Writing," Myra Kogen questions some current application of cognitive theory to basic writing research and criticizes statements that basic writers are cognitively immature. While Kogen's arguments rely primarily upon her background and experience as a writing instructor, her position can also be defended from the perspective of cognitive psychology.

False assumptions and flawed methodology undermine the work of many who attempt to apply the cognitive theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, or Perry to composition research. Specifically, some researchers mistakenly assume that stages describing patterns of physiological and cognitive development in children must also describe the cognition of adults. Other researchers confuse cognitive development with the acquisition of specific types of knowledge or a particular world view. In addition, the common method of analyzing essays as though they provided a direct measure of cognitive processes ignores the myriad affective and situational factors which can influence learning outcomes.

Describing the cognition of adults in terms of children's developmental stages may be akin to using plane geometry to measure a three-dimensional world—that is, the limitations of one are not adequate to assess the complexities of the other. A definitive component of children's

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*Joseph G. R. Martinez is assistant professor of Educational Foundations at the University of New Mexico. His publications include articles in* Reading Research Quarterly *and* Rice Literary Review. *He and Nancy C. Martinez coauthored* The Holt Workbook, *a composition textbook published in 1986 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Nancy C. Martinez was formerly dean of General Studies and director of the Developmental Academic Program, University of Albuquerque.*



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cognitive development, as Piaget defines it, is physiological. As John H. Flavell explains in *Cognitive Development*, "The cognitive systems of infants are indeed fundamentally and qualitatively different from those of older humans. . . . The older mind might look almost as immature as the younger one when operating in domains in which it too is an utter novice" (114). However, the similarity is apparent rather than real. For example, children may reduce complex questions to decisions between good and bad, right and wrong, lawful and unlawful because their information-processing capacity restricts them to binary operations (Halford 62). Adults in a basic writing class may produce similarly dualistic responses but for different reasons. They may have incorrectly assessed the topic or the instructor's expectations. They may be inexperienced in writing about or in making such judgements; conditioned culturally to respond to certain topics in certain ways; or uninterested in the subject to explore it meaningfully. Adult basic writers may even be trying clumsily to accommodate a complicated topic to a comparison/contrast mode of discourse. Moreover, in some cases, as with children, responses may be governed by "emotional reaction rather than cognitive possibility" (Collis 76).

Certainly, cognitive development continues into adulthood, as Janice Hays points out in her 1987 response to Myra Kogen (11-13). However, the qualitative differences between children's and adults' cognition precludes using the stages in children's development (such as Piaget's Concrete Operations stage) to describe adults' development.

Another faulty assumption of Hays' undermines attempts to use William Perry's Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development to evaluate students' level of cognitive development. Perry's Scheme, as Patricia Bizzell argues, is culture-bound (447-454). The development Perry charts from basic duality through relativism to affirmation and commitment reflects the response of a specific group of learners to a specific learning situation—a liberal arts education. In fact, Perry qualifies his findings in precisely these terms. He writes:

> We have considered our students' milieu in terms of a generalized "liberal arts college.". . . With the qualification we have made—that we mean by a "liberal arts college" a pluralistic institution where the teaching of the procedures of relativistic thought is to a large extent deliberate—we are confident that our findings would hold. (206-207)

Given this limitation, Perry's Scheme is task specific—that is, it describes students' progress toward acquiring a particular world view rather than students' cognitive development in a universal sense.

Finally, researchers' methodology is seriously flawed when essays alone are used to assess students' capacity for thought. While cognitive development is a characteristic of the learner, an essay is a learning outcome, the quality of which depends upon the learner's interaction with instruction and other variables (Biggs 108). Affective and situational factors such as motivation and familiarity with a task as well as cognitive

factors, can effect a level of response lower than the learner's cognitive capacity. In addition, channel inefficiency—lack of facility in using the medium selected for response—will impede "sophisticated levels of responding" (Biggs 112-113). Since basic writers usually lack channel efficiency in the predominant mode of academic discourse—writing—we can assume that the level of learning outcome will be adversely affected. If the students are allowed to shift to a channel they are proficient in, their performance will usually improve. One researcher who labels basic writers "cognitively immature" does say that many times she has found "students who were having writing problems . . . quite able to explain verbally what they intended to express in the written assignment" (Bradford 15). The difference in the quality of the outcomes suggests that the problems are not a result of cognitive development—or the lack of cognitive development—but rather are specific to the task of writing academic prose, as Myra Kogen argues (25).

Since cognitive, affective, and situational factors could all intervene to produce what instructors read in a student's essay, the likelihood that the student's cognitive abilities can be reliably inferred from that learning outcome is small. For example, in both the study criticized by Kogen and in the response to that criticism, Janice Hays uses excerpts from student essays to assess students' positions in the Perry Scheme ("Development" 132; "Response" 20-21). In both cases, a student who assumes an adversative judgmental stance—violating the expository convention "that the world is a place of reasonableness and good intentions" (Kogen 35)—is assessed as being at Perry's Position Two, Multiplicity Pre-legitimate, in intellectual growth. However, lack of knowledge about expository conventions (a conceptual prerequisite to this learning task) and problems with channel efficiency (basic writing skills) are two cognitive factors that could have impeded a sophisticated level of response. Situational factors influencing the outcome might (or might not) have included a tense testing situation or external noise but probably did include lack of familiarity with the task. In addition, since the topics of both excerpts are emotionally charged, affective factors such as the writer's personal experiences or emotional reaction at the time of writing, could have influenced the outcome. (See Biggs, 111 ff., for a paradigm of cognitive, affective, and situational factors affecting learning outcomes and their relationship to cognitive capacity.)

Is assessing the cognitive maturity of students an appropriate concern for teachers of writing? Probably not. Janice Hays pinpoints the problem when she qualifies her initial position on assessment in "Response": "To assign students narrowly into precise 'positions' is risky business for we are probably not equipped to make such judgments" (25). Psychologist John Biggs gives a similar warning to teachers of all subjects and takes the caution a step further: "The teacher is concerned with the immediate outcomes of learning, vis-à-vis the particular learning task. He or she is not a psychologist whose job it is to 'diagnose' from a particular task performance the student's 'level of cognitive development'"(108). Researchers who purport to diagnose without being

diagnosticians, and research that ties cognitive assessments to task-specific schemes or equates learning outcome with learning ability, must be suspect. If the implications of such research also demean a group of students and lessen instructors' understanding of students' needs, it is time, as Myra Kogen suggests, to reconsider our methods and rethink our conclusions.

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