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# APPLYING INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY TO COMPOSITION

**ABSTRACT:** After summarizing a scheme of intellectual development, and the debate that has taken place over applying such a model to composition, this article presents the findings and pedagogical implications of a study that focuses on intellectual orientation and multiple-source writing. The findings of the study suggest that first-year college students who write from sources can approach divergent points of view from a variety of intellectual orientations and that students' assumptions about paper topics and academic disciplines influence the approaches taken in particular essays. These results imply that to foster critical thinking, teachers can respond individually to students' papers in terms of their specific intellectual approaches.

Over the last decade, a number of researchers have applied models of intellectual development to composition studies, arguing that these schemes illuminate the difficulties of beginning writers and suggest pedagogical strategies for helping them improve. However, some teachers have criticized developmentalists not only for incorrectly attributing differences in student writing to variations in intellectual orientation, but for wrongly claiming that basic writers cannot think abstractly. In this essay, I would like to present one model of intellectual development and to summarize the debate that has taken place in the *Journal of Basic Writing* over applying

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such a scheme to composition. After briefly summarizing this debate, I would like to continue the discussion by explaining the findings and pedagogical implications of a study that suggests that beginning college writers can think in a variety of different ways.

According to developmentalists such as William Perry, and Karen Kitchener and Patricia King, as students progress through college—attending classes, writing papers, and participating in dormroom bull sessions—their implicit metaphysical and epistemological assumptions become increasingly complex to accommodate the diversity of values and opinions found in the college environment. Developmentalists further suggest that as students' assumptions about knowledge and reality grow more sophisticated, so do their ways of thinking about multiple perspectives and reaching and justifying personal judgments. Both Perry's and Kitchener and King's models describe an evolution from an early state of dualistic thinking, through a middle period of multiplistic thought, to a form of critical relativism.

Perry maintains that most college students who construe reality from a dualistic orientation have already begun to realize that complex topics generate a diversity of opinion, but that they accommodate this diversity in terms of black and white. While these students might not believe that they themselves have access to knowledge about reality, they believe that legitimate authorities do. Thus, they confront diversity from dualistic orientations, unreflectively adopting the point of view of the "right" authorities, and dogmatically denouncing the position of the "wrong" ones. Other students, however, those who have confronted the fact that even good authorities do not know everything yet, and in at least some areas may never acquire total knowledge, have different metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. These students, who construe experience from a multiplistic orientation, might implicitly assume that objective reality exists, but they do not believe that it can be known without uncertainty. And since multiplistic students assume that absolute knowledge is not available to even the experts, they believe that one point of view is as valid as another. Finally, according to Kitchener and King, there are other students who, having been confronted by teachers and peers who have asked them to support their opinions with evidence and reasoning, come to approach the experiences of college with reflective thinking constructs. These students accept the inherent ambiguity of knowledge and yet, through evaluating and analyzing alternative opinions, make judgments concerning which points of view probably offer better or worse approximations to reality. They realize that even though authorities cannot know reality without

uncertainty, some perspectives are more rational or based on stronger evidence. Since reflective students understand the knowing process to be fallible, however, their decisions are necessarily tentative and contingent upon reevaluation.

## **The Debate**

In "The Development of Discursive Maturity in College Writers," Janice Hays, a spokesperson for developmentalists in composition studies, refers to student essays as evidence that basic writers fit the lower level of this developmental scheme. For her research, Hays asked students enrolled in freshman writing seminars at Skidmore College to write essays on either abortion or marijuana, instructing them to imagine themselves speaking on a panel composed of representatives from appropriate community groups. Analyzing excerpts from these essays, Hays contends that the basic writer argues dogmatically without analyzing divergent points of view—that he or she "still perceives a multiplicity of perspectives as alien intruders into a dualistic universe" (133). In "The Conventions of Expository Writing," however, Myra Kogen challenges Hays' description of basic writers as cognitively immature, arguing that these students have problems with argumentative writing because they are unfamiliar with the conventions that govern academic discourse (36). Responding to Kogen's critique in "Models of Intellectual Development and Writing," Hays asserts that despite her efforts to teach beginning writers the conventions of argumentative writing, they continue to have difficulty with academic discourse because it is the "additional time in the college setting plus the nature of that setting itself that makes it possible for freshmen to progress cognitively until, by the time they are seniors, most of them perform like 'seniors'" (16).

In "Socio-Cognitive Development and Argumentative Writing: Issues and Implications from One Research Project," Hays presents the findings of a second, more sophisticated study. For this research she asked high school and college students to argue their positions on drunk-driving laws to both friendly and unfriendly audiences, conducting a statistical analysis of the relationships between the students' demographic characteristics, ratings on Perry's scheme, holistic paper scores, and audience adaptations. Hays concludes that "audience activity predicted strongly for overall writing performance with both friendly and hostile readers" and that the "level of Perry Scheme performance predicted most significantly both for overall writing performance and for certain kinds of audience adaption" (50). In "Reconsidering Cognition and the Basic Writer,"

however, Joseph and Nancy Martinez argue that "researchers' methodology is seriously flawed when essays alone are used to assess students' capacity for thought" (80). According to Martinez and Martinez, "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" (79).

### **Intellectual Orientation and Multiple-Source Writing**

For the study discussed in the remainder of this essay, I collected five papers from, and conducted an interview with, each student who participated. This design—both the use of interviews and the collection of several papers from every student—allowed me to consider some affective and situational factors and to observe a complex relationship between intellectual orientation and student writing. The study focused on twelve students, nine women and three men between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, who were enrolled in the same section of the 1987 Fall semester freshman composition course at Indiana University. The course required students to use specified sources to write two argumentative essays on assigned topics—the "Cinderella" fairy tale and Stanley Milgram's famous experiment on obedience to authority—and to find their own sources to write three argumentative papers on topics of their choice. I chose to analyze the papers assigned in this particular course because I reasoned that argumentative, multiple-source writing challenges students to read about several views on a complex topic and to stake out and justify their own positions. In addition to gathering these five essays from each participant, I interviewed the students after they completed the course.

The interviews consisted of three tasks: For the first one, students responded to a question inviting them to comment on what they found noteworthy in their own experiences with writing from sources—"Does anything stand out in your mind about the papers you have written over the past semester?" Unlike this opening question, which asked students only to respond in terms of what they found salient, the next two tasks were more structured. For the second one, participants read three student papers that reflected the intellectual orientations described by developmentalists—a dualistic essay on using animals in laboratory experiments, a multiplistic paper on watching soap operas, and a reflective composition on decreasing terrorism at U. S. embassies. The essay on animal experimentation, for example, summarized the contradictory viewpoints of antivivisectionists and scientists and, without evaluating

these perspectives, concluded that the people in favor of such experimentation were "right" and that those against it were "wrong." After reading the three papers, students ranked them according to "how well each one used sources" and then explained their ranking. The final task required participants to read a set of seven statements, which were typed on cards, about the relative/absolute nature of knowledge in different types of sources and disciplines, and then to arrange the cards into meaningful groups and explain them. For example, one statement read, "When two articles contradict each other, they can't both be right." To elicit illustrations and exact explanations without over-directing students' responses to these three tasks, I formulated a number of comments to probe for details without suggesting specific answers, responses such as "That's interesting, but I'm not quite sure what you mean" and "I think I see what you mean, but could you give me an example?"

Before discussing three essays of one student in detail, let me quote from several students' interviews. During their interviews, a number of students spoke of varying their ways of confronting divergent points of view according to differences in academic disciplines. For example, while responding to the third interview task, one student suggested that he approaches contradictory views differently in the fields of psychology and biology:

When you're writing a paper in areas like psychology, there is no true answer. You just have to do what you think is best. Biology is pretty exact. You've got reasons for what things happen. We can test and get exact answers, whereas in psychology it varies with the individual. There are so many different theories in psychology, you can never find *the* answer.

This student's assumption that in biology it is possible to find "*the* answer" seems to reflect the dogmatism of the dualistic intellectual orientation, but his assumption that the validity of psychological theories varies from one person to another seems to suggest the subjectivity of the multiplistic orientation. In response to the same task, another student commented that she approaches writing from sources differently in the fields of literature and history. She explained, "In literature, [two different interpretations] can both be right, but I [might] like one interpretation better." In the discipline of history, however, "There are more set things. It happened like this, like in chronological order." Judging from this student's statement, she approaches topics in literature with assumptions typical of the multiplistic orientation, but addresses issues in

history with assumptions associated with the dualistic orientation. As she summed up, "Literature is point of view, but history is all set stuff."

In addition to perceived differences in academic disciplines, affective factors seem to play a role in determining how the students write about multiple perspectives. During their interviews some students suggested that their perception of a topic's importance influences how they approach the divergent viewpoints in their sources. While ranking the three papers used in the second interview task, for example, one student indicated that the "seriousness" of a topic influences the appropriateness of an approach. Responding to the essays, she commented, "For that kind of subject [soap operas], I mean, it is your personal opinion, and there is advantages and disadvantages." According to the student, the conclusion of the soap opera paper—"It all depends on your own view of soap operas"—is "true because the viewing of soap operas is not as, I mean not as serious as terrorism or, I don't know, killing animals or whatever in laboratories, so [it's] your decision to watch it or not." Explaining the distinction further, she asserted, "It won't affect other people, whereas the other ones will affect things." This student's assumption about what she believes are insignificant topics seems to reflect the multiplistic orientation, but her assumption about what she thinks are important issues—those that affect other people's lives—seems to reflect an orientation from which she would make a judgment. These interview comments suggest that students can write about divergent points of view from more than one type of intellectual orientation and that students vary their approaches depending in part on affective responses to different topics and on perceived differences in academic fields.

One woman, Susanne, wrote essays that in many ways typified those of the students who participated in the study. She seemed to write some papers from a dualistic, some from a multiplistic, and some from a reflective intellectual orientation. Her essay on the Milgram experiment reflects a dualistic approach. Susanne understood that the experiment is controversial, for she writes, "Studies concerning the Milgram experiment have both praised and criticized the ethics and validity," explaining that "Richard Herrnstein emphasizes the validity of the experiment and praises its brilliance and genius while Diana Baumrind specifically criticizes its ethics and validity." Although she does not justify her judgments, Susanne insists that "Milgram performed everything possible to sustain the subjects' health and dignity and there is nothing unethical in his actions" and that "there is no question concerning the validity of the experiment." Ironically, however, she

also asserts that although "it is clearly evident that the experiment is valid and ethical," it is also "hopelessly worthless." Again illustrating the all-or-nothing type of thinking typical of the dualistic intellectual framework, she comments, "So we all know that people on the average follow authority. What good will that do? . . . Any information understanding human characteristics will not alter society's actions or benefit society in any form." Because she finds the experiment completely ethical and valid, Susanne's judgment that it is "worthless" seems even more dogmatic.

In response to the "Cinderella" assignment, which required students to write about two different interpretations of the fairy tale, however, Susanne approaches divergent points of view from a multiplistic orientation. In her introduction she writes:

Bruno Bettelheim, a distinguished psychologist and educator, and Modonna Kolbenschlag, a feminist author, have studied this fairy tale and developed their different analogies of "Cinderella." Bettelheim directs his ideas to interpret the "Cinderella" motifs in a Freudian view, using sibling rivalry as one of his supporting arguments, whereas Kolbenschlag bases her angle on the Prince motif to support her feminist interpretation of "Cinderella."

The body of Susanne's paper evenly presents Bettelheim's and Kolbenschlag's arguments; in the second paragraph, she explains Bettelheim's view:

When Cinderella's father re-marries, his new wife brings her daughters (how many will vary from version to version) to live with Cinderella and her father. To win more of his wife's love, the father gradually degrades his own daughter for the love of his new step-daughters. Throughout the fairy tale, Cinderella is treated like a servant . . . while her sisters enjoy life.

And in the next paragraph, she summarizes Kolbenschlag's interpretation of the tale:

She feels that this fairy tale has stereotyped the female as an innocent, pure, docile and fragile person who patiently waits and endures hardships until something comes along to sweep her away and care for her, as portrayed through the Prince motif.

This balanced, nonjudgmental presentation of the critics' interpretations seems to reflect a multiplistic orientation. Although Susanne realizes that the perspectives represent "two totally different



approaches," she does not argue that one view is more comprehensive or fully supported than the other.

It is difficult to understand why Susanne approaches contradictory views so differently in these two essays. Some developmentalists might suggest that she was in a transitional state in which she was moving from the dualistic to the multiplistic stage, but since I followed Susanne for only a short period of time, I cannot speculate on the sequential nature of her two approaches. It is very likely, however, that she tends to view topics in science and in literature from different intellectual orientations. Although Susanne does not hesitate to claim that the Milgram experiment was ethically and scientifically "right," while responding to the third interview task, she commented, "I think English, not just English but like reading literature or poetry, is more like opinion. You know, like we can both interpret it in different ways." The disciplinary concerns that Susanne and other students described during their interviews seem to play a role in determining how she approaches the multiple points of view expressed in her sources on the Milgram experiment and on the "Cinderella" fairy tale.

But in an open-topic paper, "Gun Crimes in the U. S.: A Curable Disease?" Susanne approaches her sources more reflectively. After explaining how "gun-related deaths and injuries in the United States are at epidemic proportions," she summarizes two contradictory proposals for addressing the problem. First, she explains that because "behavioral scientists have connected increased violence in society with the excessively violent television programming . . . proposals have been made to ban television violence, an alleged catalyst to excessive handgun crimes." According to Susanne, however, banning violent programming would not only fail to decrease gun crimes effectively, but would raise other controversies involving freedom of expression. Censoring programs "falls short in many ways because first of all, there are already crazy people running around with violent ideas implanted in their minds, and second, this idea raises controversy with the media and our constitutional rights of freedom of the press." Because of these major drawbacks, Susanne asserts that "this possible solution wouldn't go over well" and "would probably have little impact."

Following this evaluation, she explains a second proposal—"to strike all handgun control laws from legislature to give all citizens the natural right to protect themselves from possible gun criminals." One civil rights leader, she says, believes that "the gun control laws have done very little to disarm the criminal and everything possible to disarm the citizen," and other experts contend that "most



criminals receive their guns illegally anyhow, so why have a law restricting the innocent?" Although Susanne acknowledges that "these points are solid reasons why all laws restricting the use of handguns should be abolished to prevent excessive gun-related crimes," she asks, "What about the countless number of children and adolescents who manage to get a hold of these handguns accidentally or unintentionally?" "It is in those circumstances," she answers, "that accidents happen." Considering the idea that owning a handgun is a citizen's constitutional right, she asserts that "as a democracy, our individual rights only exist until they infringe upon another person, it is then, when someone must draw the line." "Having no gun control laws," she writes, "endangers other's rights as people and as U. S. citizens." Although she understands why people would logically want, and should philosophically have, unlimited access to handguns, Susanne reasons that this freedom would limit other people's freedoms and therefore should not be granted.

As she moves toward closure, Susanne suggests, "After researching other possibilities, the best solution to *help* prevent the injuries, crimes, and deaths resulting from handguns, is to establish the Handgun Crime Control Bill":

This bill still enables citizens to own guns if they are qualified and prove, by government standards, to be responsible and honest citizens, so if a person really wants to secure their defense with a gun, they can. At the same time it gives less access to handguns going through the black market and less access for criminals to buy these guns.

Although Susanne reaches a judgment in this paper, her decision that "as a whole, the bill would benefit society and should be seriously considered" does not resemble the dogmatic decisions she made in writing about the Milgram experiment. Concluding the handgun legislation essay, she reiterates that the bill, even with its limitations, is the best solution: "Injuries and death resulting from guns can never be abolished, but there is a definite need for a law to help prevent it in the United States." Susanne reflectively considers divergent perspectives, comparing their advantages and disadvantages, and, even after taking a strong stand, remains somewhat tentative in her claims.

I do not know exactly why Susanne takes a reflective approach in her paper on handgun legislation. The answer, however, might lie in her personal response to this topic. As a child, she witnessed a man accidentally shoot himself, and while answering the open interview question, she told me about the incident. "I had it happen

to me, not me but a friend of the family," she commented. Describing the accident in more detail, Susanne recalled, "I had been five years old, and there was a gun on the counter because he was a hunter, and he shot his hand." "You know," she explained, "he was playing with it. He was talking on the phone and snapping the trigger like. He blew a hole right through his hand." Susanne seemed to have more at stake—more personal investment—in the gun legislation paper, and perhaps this investment led her to consider the topic more analytically. It is interesting to speculate that she approaches handgun legislation from a reflective intellectual orientation in part because she thought her decision, which could affect the fate of other people, was more important than decisions about her other topics. Susanne concludes her Milgram paper by stating that the experiment is "hopelessly worthless" because it "will not alter society's actions or benefit society in any form," but she concludes her gun legislation essay by stating that "the bill would benefit society and should be seriously considered." The perceived importance of a topic—that is, its potential to affect the lives of other people—referred to by some students during their interviews seems to play a role in determining how Susanne writes about the multiple points of view expressed in her sources on handgun legislation.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The interviews and papers from this study indicate that freshmen writers can confront divergent points of view multiplistically and reflectively as well as dualistically, and that affective factors and assumptions about different disciplines influence the intellectual approaches students take in particular essays. Hays' research, however, indicates that the argumentative papers of basic writers reflect the dualistic intellectual orientation and that the essays of more advanced writers reflect higher levels of cognition, suggesting that college students progress more or less systematically through the stages described by developmentalists.

Based upon the findings of her research, Hays argues, "If we know that multiplicity follows dualism, we will not assign dualistic students relativistic tasks, a practice that would require them to respond two or three positions beyond where they presently are." She adds, however, that "students can be stimulated by assignments designed to challenge them with tasks just one position above their current level" ("Socio-Cognitive Development and Argumentative Writing: Issues and Implications from One Research Project" 52). But if a single student can think in a variety of different ways, we

will not design assignments for basic writers based upon the goal of moving them from dualistic thought to the next highest level of cognition. Rather, we will adjust our goals according to how a student approaches different assignments, responding individually to every paper written by each student. That is, if a basic writer takes a dualistic approach in one paper, as Susanne did in her essay on the Milgram experiment, a teacher could encourage the student to write more multiplistically. Or if a student writes an essay from a multiplistic orientation, as Susanne did with her paper on the "Cinderella" fairy tale, a teacher could help him or her to think more reflectively. And finally, if the basic writer already thinks about a topic reflectively, as Susanne did about handgun legislation, a teacher could foster the same type of thought in other content areas. This advice is appropriate for composition teachers, I think, because we already tend to individualize our responses to students' papers when we write comments on them or hold student-teacher conferences.

Applications of intellectual development theory to composition are obviously not problem-free. They can lead us to reduce the complexity of how students think to a series of sequential stages, encouraging teachers of basic writing in particular to pigeonhole their students into the lower levels of cognition. But while we need to keep in mind the potential problems with these applications, I believe that models of intellectual development can be very useful to composition teachers—that such schemes can, for example, help us to better understand not only basic writers' difficulties but also their successes.

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