Reading the Writing Process: Toward a Theory of Current Pedagogies

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Physicists (so the science digests tell us) have recently begun to imagine the possibility of a theory that combines the quantum forces, gravity, and electromagneticism, thereby providing the basis for an explanation of any physical event, the ultimate Theory of Everything, or T.O.E. as they call it. In recent years writing teachers might well appear to be closing in on their own T.O.E., a theoretical and practical consensus about writing and its nurture. Because we seem to agree so overwhelmingly on fundamental issues (there may be teachers resistant to “teach process not product,” but they will soon be outnumbered by members of the Flat Earth Society), recent efforts to distinguish different versions of “process pedagogy” have been extremely valuable.

In particular, James Berlin’s “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories” and Lester Faigley’s “Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal” masterfully analyze and order an astonishing body of work, helping us think in broad theoretical terms about different views of composing—to understand where we are and what we are doing. Berlin defines four competing pedagogies (Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, Current-Traditional, and Epistemic), which are distinguished by their different epistemologies. Faigley identifies three views of composing (expressive, cognitive, social), which derive, we may infer, from theorists’ differing goals—to foster “authentic” writing, to construct models of mental processes, or to expose the historical and cultural determinants of writing.

These and other surveys (by William F. Woods and Richard Fulkerson, for example) are powerful in their penetrating economy. But it may also be useful at this point to explore the potential of a different approach. My premise is that the in-depth analysis of a few selected texts might well further illuminate the diversity of process pedagogies available. In other words, rather than attempt another broad survey, I will apply to three representative theoretical statements the sort of close reading that only recently would have been reserved for the literary canon, but has proven increasingly fertile in historiography, popular culture, philosophy, the history of science, and other fields. The assumption behind such close reading is that any text may yield important insight into its particular field.

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of knowledge. Thus, any one of a multitude of texts might have been selected for this project, but the three chosen are obviously well-known and influential: Maxine Hairston’s “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing,” C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon’s Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing, and Ann E. Berthoff’s Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination. Each of these works typifies a particular orientation; taken together, some interesting and surprising relationships emerge. There is, to be sure, a useful study to be written on the genealogy of process teaching, tracing current practices back to Britton, Graves, Moffett, Langer, Klein, Dewey, Vygotsky, and others. But I want to raise in this essay the question of where we are, not how we got here. Therefore, I examine closely the conception of process pedagogy that each of these texts enacts.

How these versions of process pedagogy—Hairston’s, Berthoff’s, and Knoblauch and Brannon’s—differ can be seen most immediately in their conceptions of what writing is. For Hairston, writing is “a recursive rather than a linear process”; pre-writing and revision are “activities that overlap and intertwine” (86). This familiar perspective may not at first glance appear far removed from Knoblauch and Brannon’s assumption that writing is an “organic, undifferentiated process” (90). In practice, however, the contrast is great. If writing is alive, or “organic,” it cannot be dissected without injury; if it has no identifiable parts, or is “undifferentiated,” then it cannot be divided and analyzed. Thus, not surprisingly, Hairston assumes that the process approach “teaches strategies for invention and discovery” as well as patterns for connecting ideas, while Knoblauch and Brannon discount the possibility of “teaching” writing in the usual sense. They reject any “production recipe” (88), or heuristic, maintaining “teachers cannot provide students with ‘skills’ of thinking or ‘skills’ of forming assertions and connecting them as discourse.” Teachers, they say, can only “create incentives and contexts for thinking and writing” (93).

According to Berthoff, “Composing—putting things together—is a continuum, a process that continues without any sharp breaks” (11). This formulation suggests both the organic, undifferentiated activity of Knoblauch and Brannon (it is “a continuum,” Berthoff says) and the overlapping, intertwining stages of Hairston (it seems to have distinguishable activities, although these proceed, as Berthoff says, “without any sharp breaks”). Similarly, Berthoff says her book presents “everything at once” (4), a strategy that at first glance accords with the conception of an undifferentiated process. But what does such a statement mean when applied to a written text? Even if it were possible to present “everything at once” in writing, the prior existence of discrete parts that are collected and exhibited simultaneously would seem essential. In the final analysis it is difficult to say whether writing is in Berthoff’s opinion “undifferentiated,” although she may think it pedagogically advisable to present it that way.

Given Berthoff’s interesting all-at-once pedagogy and her ambivalence on the nature of writing, we may well wonder about the feasibility and value of teaching. Berthoff tells students “You are born a composer” (46) and “We are composers by virtue of being human” (12), thus appearing, like Knoblauch and Brannon, to downplay the importance of teaching. But Berthoff also complicates
this innatist position by distinguishing writing from composing: while we learn we are born composers in one place, elsewhere we read “we aren’t born knowing how to write.” Instead, “we are born knowing how to know how” (11). If we already know how to know how, then teaching is at best auxiliary, creating at best “incentives and contexts,” as Knoblauch and Brannon say.

Again, however, Berthoff complicates this position: “Up to a point,” she says, “writing can be explained and taught as a skill,” although beyond that point, it is “more than a skill,” “more than a craft” (11). Berthoff’s list of what her book will teach its readers looks unmysterious, very much like a differentiated model of the composing techniques, moving from “How to get started writing” to “How to know when to stop” (8). In between the entry and exit of writing, Berthoff lists other activities that would probably be considered “skills”: “How to repeat yourself on purpose with effects that you are controlling,” “How to define, limit, expand, eliminate, amalgamate, subordinate, coordinate, recapitulate.” In fact, the series of readings and exercises designed to develop these capabilities, the bulk of her book, is organized in a way that Hairston, or even Alexander Bain, would find familiar: listing and classifying is followed by naming and defining, followed by specifying and supporting, and so forth.

Even so, what we might call anti-pedagogical statements recur in Berthoff’s book: “You can set about learning to write, confident that composition is not a matter of hammering together words and phrases, sentences and paragraphs, according to standard patterns that somebody else tells you to superimpose” (46); “When you write, you don’t follow somebody else’s scheme; you design your own. As a writer you learn to make words behave the way you want them to” (11). This idea that “standard patterns” are not helpful appears to be based on the assumption that each act of composing is unique, thus requiring the writer to invent a “scheme” for each particular occasion.

Hairston takes for granted the idea of distinguishable kinds, telling us that process teachers make “rhetorically based” writing assignments, allowing their students to practice “a variety of writing modes, expressive as well as expository” (86). Thus Hairston’s position on “standard patterns” must be aligned with Berthoff’s directions on “how to” perform this or that activity (“define, limit, expand,” and so forth). Knoblauch and Brannon, however, reject the idea of practicing different “modes,” and their remarks obviously accord with Berthoff’s emphasis on the uniqueness of each act of composing. In Knoblauch and Brannon’s classrooms “there’s no syllabus to cover, no next ‘mode’ to practice, no compelling reason to deny the opportunity for getting closer to an issue than syllabus-centered classes are able to do” (111). In their minds, classifying aims and modes is as pointless as identifying the activities involved in writing. If aims and modes could be identified, we may speculate, then recurrent rhetorical strategies could be isolated, thus opening the door to reproducible patterns, thereby contradicting the notion that we must make our own schemes.

Hence, when Berthoff says that “storytelling and exposition have a lot in common” (3), calling into question the distinctiveness of these two genres, she is, like Knoblauch and Brannon, undermining the idea of patterns and modes. At
the same time, when Berthoff proceeds to the bolder claim that "The misconception of affective and cognitive domains is responsible for much of the trouble we have currently in teaching reading and writing" (3), she is, like Hairston, assuming the existence of separate domains of discourse: we see exposition (that which has successive generalizations) and storytelling (that which does not); and we also see "affective and cognitive domains," a division apparently analogous to storytelling and exposition. By the same token, Berthoff's assertion that the book will offer "lots of repetition" (4) suggests there are aspects of writing that are repeatable, or at least aspects of talk about it that are reproducible. Yet Berthoff seems eager both to obscure and draw attention to this repetition: even though we are advised the book is "full of echoes" (5), we are also told these will not be pointed out. If something "isn't remembered," she says, "the mere mention will not help, and if it is remembered, why spoil the fun?" The strangeness of this remark (isn't "mere mention" often enough to bring back a flood of memories and connections, and wouldn't the satisfaction of having our connections confirmed enhance "the fun," not to mention our knowledge?) can be explained on strategical grounds: drawing attention to the shared features of the various "exercises" would undermine Berthoff's thesis regarding the uniquely creative status of every writing act and the illusory status of domains of discourse. These ideas are essential to her claim that writers invent their own schemes and patterns.

In other words, Berthoff in some respects appears to endorse what Hairston calls an axiom of process teaching, that writing is "a disciplined creative activity that can be analyzed and described" and, more importantly, "taught" ("Winds" 86). Yet she also appears to accommodate Knoblauch and Brannon's notion of an undifferentiated process beyond valid analysis or partitioning into skills. Berthoff's name for her exercises, "assisted invitations," reflects the ambivalence of her stance. An invitation is a stimulus, an opportunity, an opening allowing students to discover things for themselves; yet "assisted" suggests an instructional role for the teacher, offering help, analysis, perhaps even "teaching." Similarly, when Berthoff says "form-finding and form-creating is a natural activity" (2), her singular verb tends to obscure the importance difference in "form-finding" (locating and selecting a pattern of discourse appropriate for a particular utterance), and "form-creating" (inventing a unique structure out of unshaped materials): focusing on one term or the other implies a strikingly different pedagogy.

If classifying aims and modes is suspicious, what of another kind of classification—grading? Knoblauch and Brannon's attitude toward grading is, not surprisingly, philosophically consistent with their view of assignments and aims and modes. In other words, such classifications are untenable, and they advocate abandoning the role of "Arbiter or Judge." Not only, they say, is it "extremely difficult to determine" "whether or not a second draft represents improvement over a first draft in some objective sense," but also such classifications are "irrelevant to the value of the process itself" (133). Thus, the "idea of response" for them "is to offer perceptions of uncertainty, incompleteness, unfulfilled
promises, unrealized opportunities, as motivation for more writing and therefore more learning’ (123). Although Knoblauch and Brannon do in fact claim that unfinishing students’ texts this way produces ‘more learning about a subject as well as more successful communication of whatever has been learned’ (123), we should keep in mind that perceptions of such success are for them ‘extremely difficult’ and ‘irrelevant.’ More writing, more learning, and not a better text or transmission of what has been learned, is the teacher’s focus. ‘What matters,’ they say, ‘is not one person’s estimate of improvement or degeneration, but the process of writing, responding, and writing again’ (138). Hairston’s process teachers, on the other hand, ‘evaluate the written product by how well it fulfills the writer’s intention and meets the audience’s needs’ (86).

Berthoff appears to share Knoblauch and Brannon’s Sisyphean view of the student’s learning: like them, she asserts that ‘the composing process rather than a composition is [the student’s proper] concern’ (13). The teacher’s job then is to ‘encourage students to compose continually, habitually’ (4). Berthoff is not worried that texts are never finished, since more can be learned ‘from a dozen starts than from a single finished job’ (4). Given such a perspective, which outprocesses Hairston’s version of writing as a process, Berthoff naturally agrees with Knoblauch and Brannon that papers ‘should not be ‘graded’’ (4)—they may never be finished!

Berthoff explains her censure of grading by noting that ‘measurement is appropriate to what can be measured’ (4). Although we might expect her to argue that writing cannot be measured, and therefore cannot appropriately be graded, such is not the case. ‘Compositions can be factored and judged in terms analogous to those used in judging apples and eggs,’ she writes, ‘but the price is high: we begin to attend to the factors and not to the process’ (4). The appeal of attending to the process and not some system of classification will be evident to anyone who has returned a set of carefully annotated papers and watched students flip immediately to the grade on the last page, never to examine the paper again. Berthoff goes on, however, as with the other issues examined here, to complicate her own position: ‘But to say that writing should not be graded is not to say that it should not be evaluated’ (5). Rather than ranking each paper by the traditional letter grades, she advocates only two classes, ‘pass’ and ‘incomplete.’ Although these terms tend to obscure the fact that grading has taken place, the class ‘incomplete’ must contain those examples excluded from ‘pass.’ ‘Incomplete,’ students will quickly realize, is ‘not passing,’ momentarily anyway.

At this point it may be useful to summarize the differences in these three perspectives, attempting some articulation of their underlying philosophies. At one end of an imaginary spectrum, valid classifications are possible, and hence (as in Hairston’s pedagogy), stages in writing, kinds of writing, grading, the successful organization and transference of knowledge are all possible. At the other end of this spectrum, language constructs reality—as Knoblauch and Brannon say, ‘creating discourse is equivalent to the process of coming to know’ (51). Words and things are ultimately separate, and our various classifications reflect our composing, not reality. Thus, for Knoblauch and Brannon’s teacher, the most
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responsible task is the undoing of students' texts, showing them how any particular, personal act of composing is naturally open to decomposition from another point of view. Classifying parts of the writing process, aims and modes, levels of goodness and badness, and much else, denies the dynamic, situational, Heraclitean nature of things.

In between these two extremes, verbal classes—stages of writing, kinds of writing, and so forth—are constructed, not found, but these constructs are submitted to social validation. Although words may not connect to things in any pure, Adamic, unmediated way, communities by means of dialectic can agree on a particular vision of reality, and can even test and adjust it. Thus, as in Berthoff's pedagogy, from this in-between orientation one's attitude toward writing (and everything else) is ambiguously divided: grading, for example, makes sense (from a particular vantage point, within a coherent community), and it doesn't (in the abstract, or from a pluralistic stance).

Which of these underlying philosophies of language should we endorse? And should we then embrace the resulting pedagogy? The first of these questions is not easily answered. When Knoblauch and Brannon declare, "The statement that words name 'things' in 'reality' is not a matter of opinion: it is false" (78), they fly not only in the face of Johnsonian stone-kicking common sense, which tells me I can ask for a hot dog by name and eat it in reality, but they also ignore an impressive body of informed opinion to the contrary. To be sure, Knoblauch and Brannon cite impressive support for their view, but many contemporary philosophers, especially philosophers of science, would agree with Richard Boyd that language can name things in reality, that even metaphor, as Zenon Pylyshyn puts it, participates in "the reference-fixing process by which linguistic usage eventually accommodates the 'causal' structure of the world" (425). J. L. Mackie argues that even words like "suicide" refer "to the real existence of things" (90). Although this debate is a fascinating one, for my purposes we need only observe that among serious scholars it is, indeed, still a debate. In fact, according to Richard Rorty, certainly a name to conjure with in philosophy, the history of philosophy from Locke to the present has focused on this very problem—unsuccessfully. Although it is essential that writing teachers understand the issues involved, it may be unwise for us to wait on a consensus.

Thus, my second question takes on a new shape: Which of these strikingly different versions of process pedagogy should we then adopt? Knoblauch and Brannon's subjectivism, for example, seems to me a radically liberating pedagogy ("intrinsically subversive," as they say), and the excitement of their approach is nicely captured in this quotation from Henry Miller, which Knoblauch and Brannon present as a statement of what writing is really like:

I begin in absolute chaos and darkness, in a bog or swamp of ideas and emotions and experiences... I am a man telling the story of his life, a process which appears more and more inexhaustible as I go on. Like the world-evolution it is endless. It is a turning inside out, a voyaging through X dimensions, with the result that somewhere along the way one discovers that what one has to tell is not nearly so important as the telling itself... From the very beginning almost I was deeply aware that there is no goal. I never hope to embrace the whole, but merely to give in each separate fragment, each work, the feeling of the world as I go on, because I
am digging deeper and deeper into life, deeper and deeper into past and future.
(qtd. in Knoblauch and Brannon 62)

Such a statement takes most seriously writing as a process, since “the telling itself” is more important than what is produced. Miller’s statement highlights Knoblauch and Brannon’s refreshing commitment to nurturing the student as a whole person and not as an assemblage of unperfected writing skills, a mechanism for a series of activities; his statement also suggests their emphasis on the student’s power to shape reality—the student as romantic adventurer, “voyaging” out, as Miller says, creating a personal world of meaning. It is easy to imagine how students might find this stance inspiring.

On the other hand, one wonders to what extent all writing can usefully be thought of as a “turning inside out,” a telling of one’s own life. Sometimes writers may well begin an endless story in “absolute chaos and darkness,” having “no goal” other than to capture “the feeling of the world.” But sometimes, surely, writers know what they want or need to say. Sometimes they cannot, as Berthoff puts it in a subjectivist moment, design their own schemes and make words behave the way they want them to (11). Students who really view all writing as expressive, “open-ended,” and “eternally renovative” surely encounter serious problems in many situations—writing business letters, progress reports, legal briefs, technical instructions, and many other projects requiring a reasonable subservience to form and content.

No doubt many of our students are too focused on grades (although their obsession is understandable), and perhaps Knoblauch and Brannon’s philosophical opposition to grading papers would help transfer students’ attention to the business of learning. But, in ways unrelated to grading, Miller’s remark that there is “no goal” appears uncomfortably close to Knoblauch and Brannon’s pedagogy: I have already noted both Knoblauch and Brannon’s idea that the teacher should dismantle student essays, pointing out gaps and inconsistencies, and Berthoff’s similar belief that students learn more from a dozen starts than a completed essay. Such a lack of closure, thwarting students’ sense of completion and accomplishment, might well be frustrating and counterproductive.

From a certain perspective, then, Hairston’s confidence is refreshing. At least in her view the teacher has something solid to teach—a writing process, patterns of various kinds of writing, precepts of what makes writing more and less successful. And the teacher can determine if this something has been learned. In her textbook, to be sure, Hairston carefully cautions students about “pigeonholes” that are “too neat and limited” (24), but classification as such is not in jeopardy: more complicated pigeonholes would presumably be more accurate (although more unwieldy). By the same token, in her description of the writing process, Hairston reminds us that “the stages can be highly flexible and their characteristics vary greatly,” but she still talks about “the process” and “the stages.” For some teachers, such traces of a monolithic, unitary paradigm of the writing process may well make Knoblauch and Brannon’s retreat into mysticism and organismism more appealing; for others, such generalization and simplification describe writing well enough to be valuable. Both positions have evident strengths and weaknesses.
Of Hairston's three kinds of writing, two—"message writing" and "self-contained writing"—have little to do with writing as a mode of discovery. Rather, because Hairston assumes that words do refer to things, she tends to see writing as a tool for transmitting information. Even when Hairston talks about "discovery," the writer appears more to be uncovering or revealing some existing truth or insight than creating or imposing meaning. It would be difficult to locate the informational, expository sort of writing Hairston stresses within Henry Miller's statement or Knoblauch and Brannon's pedagogy. Knoblauch and Brannon tend to see writing as an experience, not an implement; a mirror, not a window.

Berthoff's divided epistemology may begin at this point to look rather attractive. Why can't we move back and forth from one world to another, drawing on the strengths of each orientation? The problem in such an alliance is implicitly raised in Robert M. Holland's enthusiastic review of Berthoff's book. He writes: "By putting the active mind at the center and conceiving writing as a particular operation of its fundamental processes, Berthoff is able to revive torpid rhetorical terminology (classification, definition, cause and effect)" (198). Holland correctly senses here the essence of the problem, as I have outlined it; but he does not say how Berthoff constructs a bridge from the active mind in process to static textual patterns, how she gets from language to world, linking a subjectivist view ("the active mind at the center") to an empirical one (modes of presentation—"classification," for example) grounded in reality.

The problem of reconciling the differences in these approaches, of creating workable and articulated bridges, is similar to the conflict inherent in invention versus editing, coaching versus grading, expression versus persuasion, right brain versus left, and a host of other oppositions enlivening our profession. We need somehow to move beyond such either/or choices, into a realm of both/and where our writing instruction can self-consciously and coherently draw on or evolve out of conflicting pedagogies. That is, perhaps, an impossible sentence I have just written, but we might recall that the most useful view of light (to return to my starting point, physics), involves seeing it as a particle and a wave, even though the two perspectives clash. When physicists arrive at the ultimate Theory of Everything, it may well involve fundamental contradictions. Developing the most powerful approach to writing instruction may involve a similar creativity. It will certainly involve understanding more clearly and in detail what many writing teachers already know intuitively—that different versions of process teaching are currently available.

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