



Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process

Author(s): James A. Reither

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *College English*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (Oct., 1985), pp. 620-628

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377164>

Accessed: 26/08/2012 23:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College English*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

James A. Reither

Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process

Who is this that darkeneth counsel
by words without knowledge?
Job, 38:2

Composition Studies was transformed when theorists, researchers, and teachers of writing began trying to find out what actually happens when people write. Over the last decade or so, members of the discipline have striven primarily to discover and teach the special kinds of thinking, the processes, that occur during composing.¹ The goal has been to replace a prescriptive pedagogy (select a subject, formulate a thesis, outline, write, proofread) with a descriptive discipline whose members study and teach “process not product.” Although the methodologies of process research have been challenged, its contributions to our understanding of composing have been applauded by theorists and practitioners alike. The consensus has generally been that process researchers have done a good job of answering the questions they have asked. Still, some are beginning to point to questions that, if they’ve been raised at all, have certainly not been answered.

Richard Larson, for example, has asked, “How does the impulse to write arise?” And, “How does the writer identify the elements needed for a solution [to a rhetorical problem], retrieve from memory or find in some other source(s) the items needed in the solution, and then test the trial solution to see whether it answers the problem?” (250-251).

1. Some well-known examples: Emig combined composing-aloud sessions, observation, and interviews to examine the composing processes of twelfth-grade writers. Perl used thinking-aloud protocols to uncover patterns or subroutines that occur and recur during composing. Flower and Hayes also tape and analyze thinking-aloud protocols, created by skilled and unskilled writers; their special concern has been to construct an accurate model of what happens as writers manage such subprocesses as planning, translating, and reviewing. Matsuhashi video-taped writers in the act of writing, paying special attention to planning and decision-making processes during pauses in composing. Sommers interviewed skilled and unskilled writers after they had revised pieces of writing, and then analyzed the pieces to determine the kinds of writer-concerns that motivated changes made from draft to draft. And, just as important, Murray has written to watch himself writing to learn what was happening as he wrote.

Director of the Writing Program at St. Thomas University, James A. Reither is also founder and editor of *Inkshed*, a Canadian newsletter devoted to writing and reading theory and practice. An earlier version of this paper was presented under the auspices of the Division on the Teaching of Writing, Modern Languages Association, in Washington, DC.

Lee Odell, in a Four Cs paper entitled "Reading and Writing in the Workplace," observed that our questions about composing and inquiry processes have tended to stay "too close to the text." Odell's own research has led him to conclude that writing and inquiry are often (if not always) "socially collaborative" and that invention, discovery, and inquiry are closely tied to institutional relationships and strategies. Interpersonal and institutional contexts are, according to Odell, far more important than our literature has acknowledged, and he urges us to study more closely these contexts and strategies as necessary components of writing and inquiry processes.

Taking a different tack, Patricia Bizzell has divided composition theorists and researchers into two theoretical camps—those "interested in the structure of language-learning and thinking processes in their earliest state, prior to social influence"; and those "more interested in the social processes whereby language-learning and thinking capabilities are shaped and used in particular communities" (215). Bizzell laments the dominance of the "inner-directed" camp, arguing that Flower and Hayes, for example, pay too little attention to the role of knowledge in composing (229), and that "what looks like a cognitive difference [between unskilled and skilled writers often] turns out to have a large social component" (233). She thus argues that student writing difficulties often stem not from faulty or inefficient composing processes but, rather, from unfamiliarity with academic discourse conventions. "What is underdeveloped," she suggests, "is their knowledge of the ways experience is constituted and interpreted in the academic discourse community . . ." (230).

One result, as John Gage notes, is that the classical concept of *stasis* has all but vanished from the textbooks. The typical writing situation, according to Gage, is one in which reader and writer already share knowledge, "and it is the difference between what they know that motivates the need for communication—in both directions—and which therefore compels the act of writing" (2). Our practice, however, is to "send students in search of something to intend, . . . as if intention itself were subject to free choice. Students do not begin writing in order to fulfill an intention; rather, they are assumed to begin intentionless to search for something to want to say" (2).

What Larson, Odell, Bizzell, and Gage all point to is the tendency in composition studies to think of writing as a process which begins with an impulse to put words on paper; and the issues they raise should lead us to wonder if our thinking is not being severely limited by a concept of process that explains only the cognitive processes that occur as people write. Their questions and observations remind us that writing is not merely a process that occurs within contexts. That is, writing and what writers do during writing cannot be artificially separated from the social-rhetorical situations in which writing gets done, from the conditions that enable writers to do what they do, and from the motives writers have for doing what they do. Writing is not to context what a fried egg is to its pan.² Writing is, in fact, one of those processes which, in its use, *creates* and *constitutes* its own contexts.

2. I owe the metaphor to my colleague Alan W. Mason (personal communication).

Assisted, however, by the notion that writing is itself a mode of learning and knowing, and by the popularity of such developments as the attacks on “Eng-fish” (with the concomitant emphasis on the values of expressive writing), process research—precisely because it has taught us so much—has bewitched and beguiled us into thinking of writing as a self-contained process that evolves essentially out of a relationship between writers and their emerging texts. That is, we conceptualize and teach writing on the “model of the individual writer shaping thought through language” (Bazerman, “Relationship” 657), as if the process began in the writer (perhaps with an experience of cognitive dissonance) and not in the writer’s relationship to the world. In this truncated view, all writing—whether the writer is a seasoned veteran or a “placidly inexperienced nineteen-year-old” (Schor 72)—begins naturally and properly with probing the contents of the memory and the mind to discover the information, ideas, and language that are the substance of writing. This model of what happens when people write does not include, at least not centrally, any substantive coming to know beyond that which occurs as writers probe their own present experience and knowledge. Composition studies does not seriously attend to the ways writers know what other people know or to the ways mutual knowing motivates writing—does not seriously attend, that is, to the knowing without which cognitive dissonance is impossible.

The upshot is that we proceed as if students come to us already widely-experienced, widely-read, well-informed beings who need only learn how to do the kinds of thinking that will enable them to probe their experience and knowledge to discover what Rohman calls the “writing ideas” (106) for their compositions. We teach them to look heuristically into their own hearts, experiences, long-term memories, information- and idea-banks to discover what they have to say on the assigned or chosen subject. In so doing, we send several obviously problematic messages. One, identified by Bizzell, is that “once students are capable of cognitively sophisticated thinking and writing, they are ready to tackle the problems of a particular writing situation” (217). Another is that composing can be learned and done outside of full participation in the knowledge/discourse communities that motivate writing. Another is that other kinds of learning which can and do impel and give substance to writing—those, for example, that result from deliberate, purposeful learning through observation, reading, research, inquiry—are not really part of writing.³ Yet another is that those kinds of learning have already occurred sufficiently to impel and “authorize” writing. That is, writers do not need to know what they are talking about: they can learn what they are talking about as they compose; they can write their way out of their ignorance.

3. This reductive notion of writing allows one widely-adopted composition textbook, Cowan and Cowan’s *Writing*, to advise students that in writing a research paper “you have to have a large number of skills—some writing skills, some nonwriting” (428). Students learning the shape and scope of the writing process from this textbook are advised that using the library, taking notes, incorporating notes into an essay, documenting sources, and using appropriate research paper forms are “nonwriting skills” (428). Inquiry outside the mind and memory of the writer, and the knowing required for conducting such inquiry, are not necessarily related and therefore readily separable from “writing.”

We need to broaden our concept of what happens when people write. Writing is clearly a more multi-dimensional process than current theory and practice would have us believe, and one that begins long before it is appropriate to commence working with strategies for invention. If we are going to teach our students to *need* to write, we will have to know much more than we do about the kinds of contexts that conduce—sometimes even force, certainly enable—the impulse to write. The “micro-theory” of process now current in composition studies needs to be expanded into a “macro-theory” encompassing activities, processes, and kinds of knowing that come into play long before the impulse to write is even possible.

To bring about that expansion, we need to press some new questions; and we need to know more than we now know, not only about cognitive processes during composing, but also about processes involved in coming to know generally. The focus of composition studies is presently on the first three of the five parts of classical rhetoric—on invention, arrangement, and style. It is time to look for ways to bring *stasis* back into the process and to learn more about its role in writing. We should use case studies, ethnographic studies, longitudinal studies, textual analysis, thinking-aloud protocol analysis, to answer such questions as these: What is the precise role in composing of substantive knowing—of concentrated participation in a knowledge/discourse community; of, simply, a fund of information on and ideas about the subject at hand? What, in this regard, is the precise relation between writing and reading? Where do we get our language for talking about things? What exactly *are* discourse conventions,⁴ where do they come from, and how do we learn them? Are writers who know a great deal—who have engaged in direct and indirect sorts of inquiry within specific knowledge/discourse communities—likely to be better or different writers? Are writers who *know how* to find out likely to be better or different? What happens when people conduct inquiry and research? How *do* writers acquire the authority that impels writing? What *kinds* of knowing, and what kinds of knowing how, enable and assist writing?

Bizzell (238-239), Elaine Maimon, and Kenneth Bruffee (“Peer Tutoring”) all argue that we must analyze and teach the conventions of academic discourse. It seems clear, however, that that’s not enough. To do that is to continue to confine students to the “impoverished” “meanings carried by the conventional rules of language” (Cooper 108). Bruffee, citing Richard Rorty, notes that “In normal discourse . . . everyone agrees on the ‘set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it’” (8). He goes on to say, rightly, that “Not to have mastered the normal discourse of a discipline, no matter how many ‘facts’ or data one may know, is not to be knowledgeable in that discipline” (9). But the obverse is equally true: What counts as a relevant contribution, question, answer, or criticism is determined not only by

4. In this regard, see Bazerman, “What Written Knowledge Does.” See also, on a different level, the two textbooks that have come out of the Beaver College writing-across-the-curriculum program: Maimon, et al., *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* and *Readings in the Arts and Sciences*.

adherence to a set of discourse conventions, but also by such concerns as whether or not the contribution, question, answer, or criticism has already appeared in “the literature”—whether or not it is to the point, relevant, or timely. A writer addressing dead issues, posing questions already answered, or voicing irrelevant criticisms is judged ignorant and viewed as, at best, an initiate—not yet an insider, not yet a full member of the discipline. Rather more basically, what counts as relevant is a contribution in which the writer’s version of “the facts of the matter” accords with the version held in general by the community addressed by the writing.

To belong to a discourse community is to belong to a knowledge community—an “inquiry community”; and the ways things are talked or written about are no more vital than the content of what’s talked and written about. As Bruffee says, “Ordinary people write to inform and convince other people within the writer’s own community. . .” (8). Because that’s true, we must think not merely in terms of analysis and explanation; we must also think in terms of the other kinds of knowing required to belong to a community. We need to extend our understanding of the process of writing so that it will include not only experience- and memory-probing activities, but also inquiry strategies and techniques that will enable students to search beyond their own limited present experience and knowledge. We need to help students learn how to do the kinds of learning that will allow them, in their writing, to use what they *can* know, through effective inquiry, rather than suffer the limits of what they already know. We need to bring curiosity, the ability to conduct productive inquiry, and an obligation for substantive knowing into our model of the process of writing. To do that, we need to find ways to immerse writing students in academic knowledge/discourse communities so they can write from within those communities.

The writing-across-the-curriculum movement, when it’s done well, seems to have a chance of doing that. So also does Bruffee’s own collaborative learning, if it can be untied from the notion of peer tutoring. As matters now stand, however, neither of these adequately addresses the problem of teaching students how to come to know so they can write literally as “knowledgeable peers” (Bruffee, “Peer Tutoring” 6) in academic communities. Neither gives students opportunities to “indwell” (Polanyi) an actual academic knowledge/discourse community, to learn, from the inside, its major questions, its governing assumptions, its language, its research methods, its evidential contexts, its forms, its discourse conventions, its major authors and its major texts—that is, its knowledge and its modes of knowing. Only this kind of immersion has a real chance of giving substance to their coming to know through composing.

The title of a course in which this immersion is to occur does not really matter. Neither does the name of the discipline or department in which the course is taught. It need not be a writing course. (In fact, obviously, this immersion need not occur in the context of a course at all. Most of us learned to do what we do on our own—perhaps in spite of the courses we took—and some students continue to do the same.) What does matter is that the course should be “organized

as a collaborative investigation of a scholarly field rather than the delivery of a body of knowledge.”⁵

As I have claimed above, discourse communities are also knowledge communities. The business of knowledge communities is inquiry—coming to know. In academia, inquiry necessarily begins with reading in the literature of a “scholarly field” (which may be almost anything: rhetoric or evolution, for instance; or deviant behavior, the literature of eighteenth-century England, the comedies of Shakespeare, Islamic religions, literacy, and so on). Because, in an essential way, the literature of a scholarly field *is* the scholarly field, reading in that literature is elemental to all other kinds and levels of investigation, including writing; and for all of us, but particularly for students, reading in the literature normally means library research. Furthermore, academic writing, reading, and inquiry are collaborative, social acts, social processes,⁶ which not only result in, but also—and this is crucial—result *from*, social products: writing processes and written products are both elements of the *same social process*. Hence, academic writing, reading, and inquiry are inseparably linked; and all three are learned not by doing any one alone, but by doing them all at the same time. To “teach writing” is thus necessarily to ground writing in reading and inquiry.

In general terms, then, this immersion—this initiation—should image in important ways the “real world” of active, workaday academic inquirers. The course most effectively operates as a workshop⁷ in which students read and write not merely for their teacher, but for themselves and for each other. In fact, students and teachers function best as co-investigators, with reading and writing being used collaboratively to conduct the inquiry. Organizing a course in this way allows an incredible range of reading activities—in everything from bibliographies to books; and a similar range of writing activities—from jotting down call numbers to writing formal articles of the sorts they are reading. What matters is that this should be language in use. In such a context, writing, reading, and inquiry are evaluated according to their pragmatic utility: the important question is not “How good is it?” but, instead, “To what extent and how effectively does it contribute to and further the investigation?” The inquiry is made manageable in the same way all such inquiries are made manageable, not by

5. Russell A. Hunt, my colleague at St. Thomas University, phrased it this way in a course description.

6. Bizzell’s article and Bruffee’s “Peer Tutoring” (or his recontextualization of that article, “Collaborative Writing and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’”) are important here, not only for their discussions of the social grounding of writing, but also for their references to much of the important literature in this particular scholarly field. See (for example) the following theoretical works: Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*; Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, esp. Part III; Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*; and, most important, Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Finally, for a sampling of various kinds of research in this area, see Bazerman’s “What Written Knowledge Does”; the work of Odell and Goswami—for example, “Writing in a Nonacademic Setting”; and Myers, “Texts as Knowledge Claims.”

7. For a model of the kind of workshop this might be, see Knoblauch and Brannon. A major difference between their ideal workshop and mine is that I would embed the discourse community of the workshop in the socially-constructed knowing available in the record of the larger conversation going on in the literature of the scholarly field being investigated.

“choosing” and “focusing” a topic, but by seeking answers to the questions which impel the investigation.

Out of this immersion in academic inquiry and out of the ways they see themselves and others (both their immediate peers and those who have authored the literature of the field) using reading and writing to conduct the inquiry, students can construct appropriate models. That is, they can see effective and ineffective writing, reading, and inquiry conventions, strategies, and behaviors at work—not just as those conventions and behaviors can be inferred by reading in the literature, but also as they are evolved and used by their teachers and *each other*. Student and teacher roles in the workshop evolve out of their own participation in the investigation: reading and writing; exchanging and using each others’ information, ideas, notes, annotations, sources; defining goals and making plans; applying “truth-seeking procedures” (Bach and Harnish 43); bringing to bear topic and world knowledge to conduct what Bereiter and Scardamalia call “reflective inquiry” (5-6).

At the core of composition studies is the virtually unchallenged conviction that what we have to study and what we have to teach is “process not product.” By process, however, we presently mean something that encourages in our students the notion that through writing they can, like Plato’s Gorgias, “answer any question that is put to [them]” (20). Because we routinely put our students in arhetorical situations in which they can only write out of ignorance, they have little choice but to “hunt more after words than matter” (Bacon 29), and we stand open to the charge that we advocate “mere rhetoric” over writing informed by a profound relationship between writers and their worlds. It is time to redefine the writing process so that substantive social knowing is given due prominence in both our thinking and our teaching.

Works Cited

- Bach, K., and R. M. Harnish. *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1979.
- Bacon, Francis. *The Advancement of Learning*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1951.
- Bazerman, Charles. “A Relationship between Reading and Writing: The Conversational Model.” *College English* 41 (1980): 656-661.
- . “What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 11 (1981): 361-387.
- Bereiter, Carl, and Marlene Scardamalia. “Levels of Inquiry in Writing Research.” *Research on Writing: Principles and Methods*. Eds. Peter Mosenenthal, Lynne Tamor, and Sean A. Walmsley. New York: Longman, 1983. 3-25.
- Bizzell, Patricia. “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing.” *PRE/TEXT* 3 (1982): 213-243.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. “Collaborative Writing and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” *College English* 46 (1984): 635-652.

- . "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 3-15.
- Cooper, Marilyn M. "Context as Vehicle: Implicatures in Writing." *What Writers Know: The Language, Process, and Structure of Written Discourse*. Ed. Martin Nystrand. New York: Academic, 1982. 105-128.
- Cowan, Gregory, and Elizabeth Cowan. *Writing*. New York: Wiley, 1980.
- Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Urbana: NCTE, 1971.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Fleck, Ludwik. *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. 1935. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.
- Flower, Linda, and John R. Hayes. "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 365-387.
- Gage, John. "Towards an Epistemology of Composition." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 2 (1981): 1-9.
- Knoblauch, C. H., and Lil Brannon. "Modern Rhetoric in the Classroom: Making Meaning Matter." *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1984. 98-117.
- Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed., enlarged. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970.
- Larson, Richard L. "The Writer's Mind: Recent Research and Unanswered Questions." *The Writer's Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking*. Ed. Janice M. Hays, et al. Urbana: NCTE, 1983. 239-251.
- Maimon, Elaine P. "Maps and Genres: Exploring Connections in the Arts and Sciences." *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*. Ed. Winifred Bryan Horner. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983. 110-125.
- Maimon, Elaine P., et al. *Readings in the Arts and Sciences*. Boston: Little, 1984.
- . *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1981.
- Matsushashi, Ann. "Pausing and Planning: The Tempo of Written Discourse Production." *Research in the Teaching of English* 15 (1981): 113-134.
- Murray, Donald M. "Write Before Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 29 (1978): 375-381.
- . "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning." *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*. Ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland. Urbana: NCTE, 1980. 3-20.
- Myers, Greg. "Texts as Knowledge Claims: The Social Construction of Two Biology Articles." *Social Studies of Science*. Forthcoming.

- Odell, Lee. "Reading and Writing in the Workplace." Conference on College Composition and Communication. New York City, 31 March 1984.
- Odell, Lee, and Dixie Goswami. "Writing in a Nonacademic Setting." *New Directions in Composition Research*. Ed. Richard Beach and Lillian S. Bridwell. New York: Guilford, 1984. 233-258.
- Perl, Sondra. "Understanding Composing." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 363-369.
- Plato. *Gorgias*. Trans. Walter Hamilton. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962.
- Rohman, D. Gordon. "Pre-writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process." *College Composition and Communication* 16 (1965): 106-112.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.
- Schor, Sandra. "Style Through Control: The Pleasures of the Beginning Writer." *Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition*. Ed. Donald McQuade. Akron, OH: L and S, 1979. 72-80.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 378-388.

Call for Papers

The NCTE Committee on Film Study will combine efforts with the editors of *TETYC* to publish a special issue (December 1986) of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* on FILM, TELEVISION, AND VIDEO: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH. The following types of manuscripts are welcome: papers reporting on substantive research in the field, essays that provide a theoretical framework for integrating visual media into the teaching of English, and pedagogical articles describing specific approaches (thematic, structural, rhetorical, linguistic, aesthetic) to the study of film, television, and video within the English curriculum.

Please follow the *MLA Handbook*, 2nd ed. (1984), and submit two copies to William V. Costanzo, Department of English, Westchester Community College, Valhalla, NY 10595. Manuscripts will be returned only if accompanied by a stamped, return envelope. Deadline for all submissions: April 1, 1986.