Discovering Our Own Composing Processes

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Composing process research has made great strides since Janet Emig opened the door in the sixties, but getting teachers to employ "process" insights in their own classrooms is another matter. This vital connection between theory and practice seldom gets made until the teacher has actually consciously "re-experienced" her own writing history and her current writing practices.

For the last five years I have been teaching the writing practicum for beginning instructors in NYU's Expository Writing Program. All but a handful of these instructors are graduate students in academic areas, so they could care less about hearing me discourse on the subtleties of educational research in the area of writing. My way around such disrespect is to turn their own writing behavior into an artifact so it can be scrutinized and publicly shared. Since such artifact creation follows the general pattern of the course in which all aspects of the teaching act are somehow captured (observation, tape-recording, transcripts, composing aloud), analyzed, and recast in hopes of broadening the range and possibilities of the teacher, most instructors suspend disbelief and take a serious crack at the following assignment: "Who are you as a writer? How would you characterize your writing practices and what history do you have to tell that reveals how you finally became the writer you are today?"

In talking through this task before they actually go home and do it (and, of course, I give them this assignment several months before it is due so they have lots of time to percolate) we touch on a number of points. First, I want them to open their minds to all the past experiences that have affected them as writers. What was their earliest memory of writing? How was out-of-school and in-school writing separated or integrated? Were teachers influential, either positively or negatively? What kinds of home support (or lack thereof) can they remember? Is there a trunk of their old writing moldering in their parents' attic just waiting to be rediscovered?

Second, I want them to reflect on their immediate composing practices, both at the micro and macro levels. To do this I encourage them to try some composing aloud to capture their second-to-second acts when they are actually getting words down on paper. Then I suggest they record grosser behaviors that describe the

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completion of a large assignment from beginning to end. Where do their ideas come from? How do they do research? How do they revise and make use of readers? What kinds of blocks do they experience and how do they overcome them? How do they work in relation to the due date and how do they avoid procrastinating (to put it kindly)? The assignment as writ is, of course, overwhelming—it literally asks them to write a linguistic autobiography while supplying all the details of a current character sketch—but the results for five years now have been nothing short of startling.

These instructors generally produce carefully-written personal revelations from 10 to 20 pages in length which once and for all disabuse them of the belief that writing is a straightforward linear and mechanical procedure which can be taught students in any formulaic manner. By making such insights about themselves as writers public, these instructors learn the true value of the need for community in writing. Many of them reveal behaviors (like the midnight-before-it's-due paper) which they could never admit before, thinking they were the only ones marked by such peculiarities. And such open discussion in turn leads to these instructors actually beginning to modify some of their deeply ingrained composing behaviors.

By the end of this assignment the discoveries of composing process research are indeed their own. This allows them to envision new ways of helping their students with the complexities and recursions of writing. Typically they begin to loosen up with regard to the multiple ways students have of making assignments their own. Then they at last come to terms with the teacher's need to first emphasize fluency before later taking up matters of clarity and correctness. Their expectations as teachers become more realistic and they no longer cling to any mechanical panacea for "solving" the writing "problem." Having been forced to come face to face with their own writing practices they develop true tolerance, and their new willingness to give testimony about how they go about making meaning through writing provides yet a richer dimension to the ongoing dialogue that begins to make up their writing classes.

RESEARCH

John Mayher, Nancy Lester, and Gordon Pradl, Learning to Write/ Writing to Learn (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton-Cook, 1983.)