Interchanges

Process Theory and
Representations of the Writer

Optimism, Writing, Teaching

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As always, context is productive: in this case, the near juxtaposition of "A Portrait of the Student as a Young Writer," by Steven Schreiner, and "Teaching and Learning as Part of Whose Conversation?", a review article by Gordon M. Pradl (CCC 48.1, February 1997, pp. 86–104 and pp. 111–26). I read both articles as narratives, one of which left me with a sense of profound loss and one of which opened up a small window of hope.

Schreiner tells us that he began teaching writing guided by principles and practices which included some degree of adherence to the tenets of the "process" movement and some measure of faith in his students' potential to be writers. He does not specifically say that he became disillusioned, but I sense in his tone a foreshadowing of change, often a generic trait of fictional narratives. After the introductory stage setting, Schreiner's piece moves to a consideration of the sources of his practices and specifically to Janet Emig—whom he considers one of the parents of the process movement. His analysis of her work leads him to question many of its assumptions and conclusions and, most particularly, to a criticism of "reflexive" writing which he equates with "expressive" writing, particularly the writing of literary authors.

Although Schreiner asserts that "the terminology of process pedagogy—the reflexive/extensive dichotomy, for instance—has been superseded" (88–89), he remains within the context as he questions Emig's research. Schreiner asserts that "important topics often amount to themes of loss in expressive writing, and such themes are favored throughout the process movement" (95). Though I have never made a study of whether my students, in their expressive moods, favor "themes of loss," at some level
Schreiner himself is setting forth a theme of loss in his article. Still, I wonder what the basis of his generalization is.

I question also other generalizations that Schreiner makes in the course of his analysis of Emig as a founder of the process movement. "Process"—as in "the process movement" and in "process texts"—is a slippery term, with no universally accepted definition that I know of. For instance, not all adherents of the process movement would agree that writing must be difficult (at least not all the time). Not all would agree—in fact, I suspect most would disagree—that only the process of the elegant writer can be studied. Nor would all agree that the concept of authorship was necessarily borrowed from the literary world, since surely we can speak of technical manuals as being authored also. I do not see that "process texts" by directing "attention to a single writer within failed to account for differences not only between students and literary authors but among students themselves" (102). In fact, if there is "a single writer" within each of us, that seems to me evidence that we are all different.

Schreiner rightly points to Emig's use of literary authors as touchstones by which to judge her students' protocols. Nonetheless, I believe he views at least one of the techniques she makes use of—an attention to the sound of language—in too narrow a sense. One of the classroom techniques I often employ is to request students to read their writing aloud, but Schreiner seems to be suggesting that reliance on the sounds of words is connected specifically to poetry and literature. My own scholarship in the field of Anglo-Saxon oral poetic techniques suggests otherwise: all language is always sound first and I find it difficult to believe that the sounds of language do not have a rhetorical effect on everyone. I thus fail to see that reliance on sound is necessarily literary, even though it can obviously be effectively employed in literature.

After reading Schreiner's article, I began to feel depressed. I found myself wondering what my options are in the writing classroom if there is no process involved in my students' writing. How do they get words on a page? If they have no ear for the sounds of language, what point is there to asking them to read aloud? I then found myself wondering what I should assume about my students if I don't assume that they have the potential to be writers. Numerous research studies demonstrate that teacher expectations have significant repercussions in the classroom. What can I expect from my students? Schreiner himself never tells us what has replaced the strategies with which he began his teaching career. The narrative for me here is one of loss.

Pratt's review presents a somewhat more complex narrative. He does not deal directly with the issues in Schreiner's reading of Emig, but he is
certainly far more optimistic about his students' linguistic potential, although he focuses on "talk" rather than writing. "Talk is what has given our species its unique survival advantage. The foundation of all reflection, talk has the potential for freeing us from the chains of our immediate perspective, even as it answers our profound need for association and solidarity" (112). Reading these words, my faith in my ability to accomplish something in the classroom slowly begins to return. I read on. "In the past 30 years especially there has been an emphasis on process: the writing and language across the curriculum-movement imagines students as animated and involved learners" (112). But, almost inevitably because of the sequencing of my own reading, I wondered if Schreiner would not intervene here to point out that this concept of "process" is a result of mistakenly conceiving students as similar and as equally prepared for school activities.

Pradl's narrative, while first seeming to share the optimism of the authors of the books he is reviewing, darkens as he begins to question the principles in these books. He notes that "The vision put forth by Myers and Applebee...is certainly one that progressive educators can rally behind" (119). However, Pradl goes on to say that "the desire to institute practices that will unmask privilege that is unearned and unwarranted"—a desire he sees in the books he is reviewing—"continues to be thwarted by special interests" (119). Thus Pradl seems to advance in his narrative from a world of sunshine to a world of threatening clouds. He concludes that both Myers and Applebee set forth models which "can be seen as an argument for efficiency or instrumentalism in education," functioning to serve "those controlling the economy" (120). At this point, I foresee another narrative of loss, a loss of the beliefs underpinning the philosophies of progressive educators. And I feel that loss personally as I try to understand what I might do in my individual classroom to counteract economic and political forces against which I feel quite helpless.

It is here in his narrative that Pradl speaks approvingly of the "reflexive quality" of language which provides a means for seeing the "discrepancy between the world and the languages we've constructed to represent it" (121). His use of reflexive to mean the state "in which the text continually refers to its own language and to the language of others" (as quoted from David Bartholomae) leads Pradl to see reflexivity not as limiting but as potentially liberating. He acknowledges that both Myers and Applebee share this view, but criticizes them for not being sufficiently focused on the need to make literacy in the classroom formative. I find it instructive that the word reflexive plays an important part in the arguments of both Pradl and Schreiner, and that the former who views it positively comes to more encouraging conclusions than the latter who views it negatively. But Pradl becomes even more negative than Schreiner before his slight upward turn.
for he asserts that a focus on race and gender may actually "deflect attention from how money and influence have come to be concentrated in capitalist economies" (123). His conclusion rings a most discouraging note: "...any proposal for educating students that does not entertain their material circumstances fails to pass the privilege test, and thus leaves the conversational mission defeated in advance" (125). But there's also a way in which I could see him chastising Schreiner for avoiding what he sees as the true culprit. "Unfortunately, we've become conditioned to believe these students [those who have been excluded from the American dream] require some as yet undiscovered teaching method if we are to be successful" (125). I wonder to myself if Schreiner is not looking for "some yet undiscovered teaching method" for the students who are unlike Lynn.

Schreiner appears to have lost the basis for teaching he once had; his narrative ends in discarding the notion of "a real writer." As I finish reading his piece, I feel that loss personally. What can I possibly do in a classroom of students who do not have the potential to become writers? As George Hillocks warns us so tellingly: "The point is that the assumptions we make and the theories we hold have a powerful effect on what and how we teach" (Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice, NY: Teachers College P. 1995, p. 28). But despite Pradl's implicit message that progressive educators may be fighting a futile battle in their attempt to lessen the privilege of the economically powerful, I finish my reading of his review article feeling far more positive than I had when I began it. Even though he airs his pessimism, he believes that students do have the potential to be powerful users of language and, by extension, suggests that there is a writer inside all students somewhere, conditioned perhaps even constructed by culture, ethnicity, race, and economic status, but still there. Pradl is engaged in a battle field where "ignorant armies clash in the night," but there is some light on the horizon. To return to Hillocks: "Holding strong to a belief that students would like to and can succeed is necessary is not in itself sufficient for effecting change in learning" (22). I recognize both the insufficiency and the necessity of positive expectations in the classroom. The latter gives me a place to start from and enables me to read a slightly upbeat conclusion into Pradl's narrative, for he too believes in students' potential. Pradl reminds me that I have the right to be optimistic, calling out of my memory the words of Ann Berthoff:

I believe we can best teach the composing process by conceiving of it as a continuum of meaning making, by seeing writing as analogous to all those processes by which we make sense of the world.... Thinking, perceiving, writing are all acts of composing: any composition course should ensure that students learn the truth of this principle, that making meanings is the work
of the active mind and is thus within their natural capacity. ("Learning the
L&S Books, 1980, p. 76)

These words send me back to the classroom with the enthusiasm I need
to encourage my students to put words on paper.

**Conversing with Pat Belanoff**

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The power of conversation lies in the startling revelations we discover
about ourselves and our interlocutor, if only we will listen, if only we will
find our way into the words of the other. So Pat Belanoff’s response arrives
and here I am, quite uncomprehending of what she is saying. Surely, she’s
misreading Schreiner’s insightful rediscovery of the roots of Janet Emig’s
“process” constructions. His position seems not gloomy, but looks forward
to a balanced position on writing and writing processes. I was pleased how
he exposed my inclination to see some “natural” writer within—not a writer
with numerous faces, each resulting from some deliberate struggle occasioned
by the social instruction and positioning of one’s education. Indeed, Schreiner helps me gain a new perspective on how controlling can be the
high ideal of teachers expecting endless profound seriousness from individual student acts of self-expression.

On the other hand, my own argument seems to me to hardly open up
any prospect for optimism. As English teachers we all too often find ourselves trapped in furthering ends not our own. And while our efforts at promoting “critical literacy” may touch in important ways the lives of some of
our students, the larger machinery of vested interests proceeds mostly unchecked, pulling more and more dollars, and thus more and more advantage, to its side of the equation. Yet in resisting or “correcting” Belanoff’s view—her soliloquy on loss—what will I gain? Only by attempting to live
within her reading, rather than defend against it, might I find suddenly
some striking insight. In this instance, she sparks important considerations
about the force and dominion of narrative. Certainly, our narrative perspectives are what determine how, as teachers, we knowingly or unwittingly construct our student/writers (who are both our clients and partners after
all) and the circumstances in which we find them and they find us.

The narrative of loss warrants particular attention because in working
with student/writers we occupy peculiarly shifting spaces. We find ourselves balancing many role relations: midwife, parent, friend, ... coach, critic, cheerleader. The “writer” at any given moment may be experiencing
the lightness of being, but always around the corner stands our presence and the impending gaps that our assignments and our “responses” open up for these other beings in our midst, “student/writers.” Even as we form a bond together in class we angle toward distinctions meant to separate students from beliefs and prejudices, stories and loyalties, that in our “wisdom” we know to be inadequate, indeed fallacious. Learning to write in this sense is as much about what one has to lose as about what one will gain. But this burden of discrimination is only prelude to the personal loss we wrestle with on a regular basis as teachers—that profound sense of separation we feel as “our” students depart from the learning environments and connections we have helped convene for and with them. Each teaching/learning cycle can be a fresh loss of innocence as we discover once again how difficult it is to match execution with intention.

Belanoff, of course, is right to speak up for the centrality of “process” and “reflection” in these moves that we initiate to support student/writers in the various phases of their never-ending development. But what works best for me at this point is a good dose of pluralism. Multiple selves and enabling constraints seem like a useful way to proceed here. The danger with concepts like “process” or “writer” is not their dichotomous yes/no existence; rather, the danger lies in our tendency to ignore their changing complexity as we find ourselves glibly substituting “the” for an initial “a,” an “a” that if we stuck with it would continue to instruct us in its mysteries. Process and writer, like much else in life, fall prey to the demands of the certainty principle—our desire to know the outcomes in advance and then to dictate them to others accordingly. So we begin speaking, and as we shut down our capacity to listen and attend, we fail to sustain the useful and necessary muddles of reciprocity and self-discovery. We need to concern ourselves with access and distribution in our writing classes precisely because we can imagine a literate person in every student, one capable of realizing the kind of complex distinctions that make civilized living possible—the mere expression and exposure of feeling is never enough. For such conditions of literacy in our contentious, pluralistic society only work for individual students when we can imagine them working for all, and this is what Belanoff insists that none of us lose sight of.

Loss and Enrichment

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I thank Pat Belanoff for her provocative response to my article re-examining Janet Emig’s seminal study. In my article, I intended to raise one question in particular: What did Emig mean when she used the term “writer?” As I
indicated, I found Emig’s notion of the writer to be closely tied to the idea of the literary author. In turn, I felt that Emig’s study, like the process pedagogy it helped shape, diminished the attention paid to how writing abilities were acquired, preferring to see students as containing a kernel of genius that had been thwarted by school-sponsored writing. Based on my response to process discourse, I have to agree with Pat Belanoff that my article may be read as a narrative of loss. Whereas I once strove to activate the writer within my students and within each writer the true voice, and within that voice the means to correct inequities in educational background, I now, like the profession, attend to the ways in which I believe we acquire literacy: reading, a study of the conventions of discourse, collaborative authorship. If I once taught as though writing abilities were innate and needed to be awakened through writing on meaningful topics, I now teach believing they are learned and require much and varied practice to be achieved.

Belanoff first questions why I claimed expressive writing was closely connected to themes of loss in process discourse. I reiterate that this finding is the result of a close reading of Emig’s and other texts’ illustrations of the type of writing able to effect the most significant impact on student and reader alike. In Emig’s study, for instance, expressive writing is construed as an examination of deeper, more painful experiences, the type students were thought to resist writing about. Emig hypothesized that expressing the self on an important topic involved the most complete process, in part because she believed that self-sponsored writing would demand more of students than school-sponsored writing. She anticipated that Lynn, were she to write about her fear of losing her grandmother, would give more time to prewriting and revision, as well as derive a kind of writerly satisfaction from the task. Pat Belanoff might find similar illustrations in important process texts, Ken Macrorie’s *Telling Writing* and Donald Hall’s *Writing Well*, where writings that deal with themes of loss are also lauded.

Regarding my claim that Emig’s concept of authorship borrowed from the literary world. I first cited Emig’s copious examples paralleling Lynn’s struggle—or lack of it—to write expressively to the struggle of authors composing difficult modernist literary masterpieces. I contended that the call to increase the amount of reflexive writing in schools—not only by Emig but by major proponents of the process movement—drew upon the value of artistic expression, a value increased through identification of expressivity as a difficult feat that resulted in a rewarding product. In these terms only did I then suggest that expressive writing and difficulty were coupled in process discourse, and that behind Emig’s view of the writing process lay a literary legacy. A singularly powerful illustration of the description of writing as difficult is *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), where Peter
Elbow frequently refers to the “poems and stories” that students are struggling to compose in the voice they first must discover.

Further, Belanoff challenges my suggestion that a unified, somewhat narrow view of authorship informs Emig’s study, by proposing that technical manuals, which have little in common with the topics Emig proposes her students compose on, likewise constitute authored texts. I think her point is instructive. When, for example, Elbow views the writing process as a struggle to be honest with the self, by allowing “unacceptable thoughts and feelings” (WWT 5) to emerge, the kind of writing associated with “process” bears little resemblance to the process ascribed to or taught in technical writing. Technical writing, precisely because it is defined by rhetorical constraints—know your audience, know your goal, know the self you wish to present—spells out the writing process in more detail. Nor was technical writing ever concerned to pit students against their tendency to shy away from meaningful topics, or encourage them to break free from artificial demands made by writing for the teacher—both of which mainstream process pedagogy prompted students to accomplish. My critique, far from dismantling the benefits of seeing all writing as process and all students as writers in progress, aimed to re-examine a constructed discourse, for the benefit of a more equitable, insightful and informed pedagogy. For me, that constitutes a narrative of enrichment.

“I recognize both the insufficiency and the necessity of positive expectation in the classroom,” writes Pat Belanoff (413). I believe I have come to a similar awareness. Wallace Stevens, confronted by the difficulty of faith in the modern era, recognized the need for a supreme fiction, a belief in the power of belief, the necessity of faith. “The right to be optimistic” (413), which Pat Belanoff has sought regarding our students’ promise, exists as it ever did, but it should not be blunted by unexamined assumptions about what we mean in composition when we call someone a writer.