Contexts for Competence in Composition

As every writer knows, it is easy to write badly. Even the best of writers will do so some of the time. Sometimes we try to account for our poor writing or that of our students by citing unfavorable contexts: we lacked time or attention or interest; we didn't know our subject well enough, or we misunderstood what was expected of us. Such excuses for poor performance in writing may suggest that there is a difference between a writer's performance and his or her competence, and that certain conditions or contexts for writing—time constraints, topics, audiences, and so on—can constitute performance blocks for otherwise competent writers.

On the other hand (without taking up the debate among linguists about the problem of distinguishing competence from performance in linguistic theory [Hymes, 1971]), we may note that virtually every act of composing takes place in a variety of contexts and entails conditions some of which are as likely to be enabling as others are to be disabling. If I may say that an uncongenial topic blocks my performance and misrepresents my competence, must I not also say that a particularly congenial topic enhances my performance and therefore also misrepresents my competence? Or is it the case that what we may call a writer's competence is largely a creation of the contextual conditions under which he or she writes?

THE NOETIC CONTEXT

Let me describe the noetic context by telling of an overdue epiphany of mine that helped me to see its importance. For a number of years I had been trying to find in the successful practice of the best teachers of drawing and painting some instructional analogues for the teaching of writing. I had marveled at the clear sense that many of the best artists seemed to share about the steps through which a student must pass in learning to draw and paint. For example, to teach the use of color, art teachers will first teach value—restricting their students' palettes to black and white and, of course, shades of gray. Once a student understands how value works, he apparently will be well on his way to knowing how to choose colors for their impact on a composition by virtue of value relations. Similarly, to help students learn to draw figures as three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface, art teachers will not allow their students to draw outlines, but to discover volume by using line to cut cross sections through and around figures at places where the eye discerns volume and shifts in density. Drawing figures upside down also helps the student to see the actual figures he is studying rather than the anticipated objects that he holds in his mind and that he might be inclined to outline if he were more tied to his usual perspective.

Looking for analogues in composition for such instructional procedures I could come up with no comparable instructional steps until I realized that in these lessons the focus of the art instructor's attention is not on the activity of drawing—the business of eye-hand coordination or the use of tools—but on how to observe and explore the objects in the world that are the subjects of drawing and painting: figures in space, objects in light and so on.

What this translates to in the teaching of writing, of course, is precisely the kind of attention to subject matter—to literature and literary analysis, for example—that many composition courses have recently been redesigned to avoid. Yet without a substantive subject at their center composition courses are often left with the non-focus represented by the anthologized essay topics thought to be of general interest, but rarely pursued with sufficient
intensity to provide any genuine interest at all. Moreover, without extensive study and discourse experience no student can come to know a topic outside of his own personal stories with the kind of conceptual familiarity that even a generalist writer would have to have before he would presume to write on a topic with sufficient authority to imagine that anyone would read him.

Our own experience, along with recent ethnographic studies (e.g., Dyson, 1987), and a growing body of theory (see esp. Bruffee, 1983 and 1984) about how knowledge is "socially justified belief" (Rorty, 1979) which we acquire through our membership in an "interpretive community" (Fish, 1980), should persuade us that it is only through an ongoing long-term engagement with the spoken and written discourse that constitutes a field of study that a student can learn the ways of seeing and talking that will render him competent for discourse in a field—competent in the sense that he will begin to sound like an insider rather than an outsider and will know, as only a member of a discourse community can know, what kinds of statements go without saying and what kinds require explanation, or what is generally known to be true and what needs to be demonstrated. Only in such a context, moreover, does one become able to use the vocabulary and concepts that shape perception and authorize knowledge in any field.

Flower and Hayes, in their most comprehensive account of the writing process (1984), describe how a writer discovers and generates meaning through a process of representing and re-representing meaning to himself in stages, beginning with pre-verbal feelings, abstract concepts, rough gists and so on, moving toward states of greater and more distinct expressibility. In elaborating what they call the "multiple representation thesis," they demonstrate just how much an expert writer's competence at the stage of actual composing depends upon his prior knowledge in his field, knowledge possessed as a meaning structure that is already in place and semantically coded in ways that mark an intermediate step between raw perception or unassimilated knowledge and knowledge represented in the communicable form of written language. A physician who sits down to write a clinical report on a patient, for example, has much of the substance and language of the report already present in her memory or notes and even before that in the disciplined perceptions and categories which guided her initial observations and make her observations and inferences useful to other physicians. A non-professional observing the same patient would not be guided by the same schema for observing, remembering, note taking, drawing inferences, or reporting.

We have become accustomed to speaking of academic fields as governed by paradigms or as undergoing paradigm shifts or suffering from pre-paradigmatic uncertainties. It may also be useful for us to recognize the degree to which every student entering a new field, every freshman entering the university, is himself pre-paradigmatic. The competence for composition that he is able to display within the intellectual context in which he finds himself will be at least in part a function of his limited experience with the categories of thought and perception that are authorized within the discourse community into which he is being initiated. And that initiation can only take place over time through engagement with the problems and topics that define the field in which he is learning to write (cf. Bartholomae, 1985).

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

In speaking of a student's acquisition of competence within an intellectual community, I have already shifted my focus to the social context for competence in composition—a context which has received a good deal of attention recently from theoreticians and classroom practitioners who would make use of writing groups, peer tutoring, and other collaborative strategies for turning classroom writing events into socially healthy as well as intellectually collaborative interactions (see Bruffee, 1983, 1984; DiPardo & Freedman, 1987). Discussions of the social context for composition often begin by pointing to the work of Paulo Freire in Latin America and A. L. Luria in early post-revolutionary Russia suggesting that literacy can become functional for an individual only when it is accompanied by the acquisition of social power within a larger social context—which is to say, when the person who would become literate can perceive himself as sharing in the power which literacy promises to confer.

Such a perspective on literacy has seemed particularly relevant to proposals for restructuring the curriculum and altering intellectual power relations in composition classes for non-traditional students in universities—those we usually refer to as Basic Writers. But the problems of power relations may always be an important dimension of writing competence, helping to explain differential competencies among students and adult writers even within groups where all the members seem relatively privileged in economic or cultural background.

I do not think it merely an accident, for example, that in a recent attempt on my own campus to enlist freshman participants for a paid research experiment (conducted outside the Department of English and ostensibly not

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involving writing), using a list of some 60 white middle-class students rated by their composition instructors as either among the best or the worst writers in composition classes, almost no volunteers could be recruited from the pool of poor writers. Yet virtually all of the good writers who were asked volunteered readily. Moreover, the poor writers typically expressed attitudes toward university research and similar intellectual enterprises which suggested that they perceived themselves as outsiders with respect to the university community rather than merely its youngest members. The best writers responded in the opposite way.

Marilyn Cooper (1984), in her analysis of the pragmatics of written discourse, has shown that even such an apparently non-political rhetorical problem as that of establishing a context in which one's discourse can be seen as relevant can be a function of the status or authority of the speaker or writer in relation to his auditors. The greater the acknowledged authority of the speaker the more he is free to tell what he has to say about a subject without having to contextualize what he has to say by referring to what other authorities have already said or why the topic is relevant given the current state of knowledge. In other words, as an audience our sense of the authority of a speaker can relieve him of the responsibility he would otherwise bear for having to establish a reason for us to attend to his discourse. We regard his discourse as relevant because it is his.

I think we can find evidence of this phenomenon even in the highly ritualized discourses that appear in scholarly and professional journals. Note, for example, in our field how Ross Winterowd will jump into the midst of whatever it is that he has to say about a subject.

We see a dramatic instance of how a lack of socially authorized knowledge (the noetic context) can disempower an otherwise socially powerful author in Carol Berkenkotter's (1983) illuminating study of the composing processes of Don Murray. Given an hour to write (in an experimental setting) on the concept of death for ten-to-twelve-year-old readers of Jack and Jill Magazine, our Pulitzer prize-winning colleague Murray could come up with no more than: "Dear 11-year-old, You're going to die. Sorry. Be seeing you. P. Muglump, Funeral Director." Berkenkotter's account of Murray's composing-aloud tape suggests that he was stumped by the problem of imagining himself ever being asked to talk about such a topic for such an audience. That is to say he could not reconstitute himself as a speaker with sufficient authority to discourse on the assigned topic in that context. His solution is to abandon the problem of his authority by distancing himself from it with comedy. He mugs in the fictive persona of the inarticulate lump, P. Muglump, funeral director. That solution to a paralyzing rhetorical double-bind is not unlike the mugging our students do when they resort (less wittily) to English.

THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT

Here I hasten to note that I still I am already speaking of what I want to discuss as a third context for competence in composing: the experiential, intrapersonal, or phenomenological—the way a writer experiences himself in his own act of engagement in the process of composing, an experience strongly influenced by the other two contexts I have identified, but also instrumental in shaping them.

"What all of these descriptions... suggest is that a writer's competence for performance is a function of his operating in a context in which he experiences himself as essentially self-directed in his composing..."

Most comparative studies of the composing processes of better and poorer writers include a finding which shows poor writers to be engaged in a phenomenologically different kind of activity than the better writers. This as much as anything else is what we see in the differences that Nancy Sommers (1980) and others have noted in the revising practices of skilled and unskilled writers, where the unskilled writers are tinkering with surface features of their text at the word and sentence level, while the good writers are busy trying to reconceive or better understand their own emerging ideas. We see a similar pattern of differences in the projective structuring—focused on correctness—that Sondra Perl (1980) finds as the principal focus of poor writers in their composing in contrast to the focus of better writers on retrospective structuring, that is, on turning what is experienced as an inchoate but important felt-sense of an idea into an expressible, communicative meaning.

James Britton (1975), in describing the writing performances of school children, notes a similar close connection—observed by most experienced teachers—between apparent competence on the part of a student writer and the degree to which he or she is either involved in a writing task or else engaged in it perfunctorily.
Involved writers, he notes, treat even assigned writing tasks as if they were self-imposed and they attend to such tasks in order to satisfy themselves as well as whatever constraints are imposed by the assignment. Perfunctorily engaged writers seem to experience the writing assignment they are engaged in as externally imposed, offering no intrinsic satisfactions and worth no more than the minimal amount of attention required for completion.

In one of the most illuminating accounts of the differences between better and poorer writers Marlene Scardamalia and Carl Bereiter (1982) have reformulated Britton's observations within a cognitive science framework, describing how poor writers construe writing in school as a routine knowledge-telling task, while more expert writers—even quite young ones—tend to transform that routine task of knowledge-telling into one of greater complexity, one serving all of the constraints set by the assignment yet taking on higher-order goals that they set for themselves.

What all of these descriptions of more and less competent performance in writing suggest is that a writer's competence for performance is a function of his operating in a context in which he experiences himself as essentially self-directed in his composing, even while he also observes whatever external constraints happen to be mandated by the task environment. This view of competence probably fits our own experience as writers and is further supported by case studies such as Faye Peitzman's (1981), showing how college writers who have displayed only a minimal competence in composing are transformed into highly skilled writers even in the midst of their work on a writing assignment when they begin to reconstitute the assignment in a way that enables them to make it their own.

This phenomenon, which we may be inclined to dismiss as a merely affective dimension of competence, may begin to take on more importance for us when we examine it at another level and ask why it should be the case that writers perform more competently when they perceive the activity of composing as one that serves their own internally generated purposes. The answer to that question starts with the assumption that composition—almost by definition—is a cognitively demanding activity, one requiring enormous resources of concentrated attention at virtually every stage in the process. Moreover, studies of attentional processes (Csikszentmihaly, 1979) show us, first, that attention is a limited resource, and second, that the intense concentration of attention required for high levels of achievement in complex activities such as composing is available only when attention is given willingly—which is to say, when the attending person experiences his allocation of attention as voluntary. To experience a demand for one's attention as involuntary apparently reduces the total resource of attention available for focused use—perhaps because a certain portion of one's attention must then be allocated to the task of directing the will in the struggle of the divided will.

Thus, insofar as a writer engages in the composing process in the service of his or her own intrinsic rhetorical or communicative purposes, serving all other task constraints in the process of serving a superordinate self-selected goal, the writer will have far greater access to his or her resources for concentrated attention than will someone who engages in a writing task that is experienced as externally imposed.

This principle of attention explains the paradoxical finding reported by Scardamalia and Bereiter (1982) that in school more skilled writers characteristically construe teacher-assigned writing tasks in a way that makes those tasks more rather than less difficult to complete. They become more difficult tasks by virtue of the greater complexity they entail once the writer has imposed his own higher order personal goals on what would otherwise be a routine knowledge-telling task. In so reconstruing their assignments, however, the best writers make the allocation of their attention to the whole task voluntary rather than forced, thus giving them greater access to their own attentional resources. We also see in this analysis how it is that skilled writers can claim with truth that as they become better writers, writing becomes more rather than less difficult for them.

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