WRITING RESEARCH, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Recently, I reviewed some sixty articles on writing, looking for information on revision. As a result of this reading, I was bothered by the feeling that some of my own assumptions about writing were not as well-founded as I had supposed. Though it is true that much has been accomplished since Janet Emig’s important study of the writing process, it is also true that the sheer number of studies completed so far might give us a false sense of security about what is known about the writing process and about teaching writing. Like a search for the Holy Grail, there has sometimes been a search for The Writing Process as if there were one process which could describe all composing activities. In fact there is not such a process, but rather many different kinds of writing processes both among and within individuals. These processes may change depending upon several variables which have not been systematically researched to date. Some of these variables may be entirely idiosyncratic while others may be related to various situations and constraints under which an individual writer is working. Some variables which have been virtually untouched in the research may be particularly significant; variables such as the effect of topic selection on the writer’s process, the effect of audience, the importance of time when writing and revising, the function or purpose of writing, and, most importantly, the interaction of these variables on a writer’s process.

The Basic Writer/Experienced Writer Research Paradigm

One concern regarding writing research has to do with the paradigm of comparing basic writers with experienced writers. It would seem that there are some assumptions that are not stated when researchers compare basic writers and experienced writers. One such assumption appears to be that if basic writers were only more like experienced writers, then they too would become proficient writers.

Researchers studying how basic writers and experienced writers compose, of course, are attempting to understand better the processes of proficient writers so that they can assist teachers in aligning their instructional strategies accordingly. But one certainty about experienced writers is that most have very different writing processes. How, then, will teachers know how, when, and whether to change students’ writing processes based upon these studies? Will we simply just know that students must be flexible so that they will develop different writing processes for different contexts? Most of the research does not address these issues.

Another difficulty concerning studies comparing basic writers with experienced writers is that they often compare the two levels but do not address the question of how a basic writer becomes an experienced writer. It might be helpful if we also concentrated on the ways basic writers develop into competent writers or the way a competent writer came to be so. Longitudinal research might assist us in identifying the most salient developmental features of the writing process.

Finally, some research compares professional writers and basic writers, ignoring the differences in the conditions under which each group writes. Professional writers usually choose their own topics.

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They often have intimate knowledge of their audience. They may have a great deal of time to write and revise, and they usually write in places where they are comfortable writing. In addition, these writers often share their writing with colleagues. Basic writers rarely have even a few of these conditions when they compose for research studies. Consequently, they might compose differently partially because of the contexts of their writing.

**Protocol Studies**

A second concern I have with writing research is the use of protocol studies. These talk-aloud studies have been valuable so far in giving information about the writing process that might not be otherwise available, but they may also be limited in the amount of information which we can ultimately draw from them. There are several problems involved with using protocols. First, writers do not ordinarily talk aloud while they write, thus talking aloud is an unnatural act. As a result many writers, especially more competent writers, either have great difficulty producing protocols or simply are not able to produce them at all. Thus, researchers relying on protocols may be getting a certain kind of composer who can write under these special constraints, a writer whose process is different from others. Similarly, because protocols intrude on the writing process, they may not be eliciting the actual writing processes of their subjects. Evidence for this weakness can be found in studies which indicate that poor writers tend to write higher quality essays when they perform protocols whereas more proficient writers' essays are lower in quality under protocol conditions. These issues alone should make us cautious in interpreting the findings of research obtained under protocol conditions. At the same time we can recognize the value of the information which cannot be obtained by any other method.

**Case Studies and Writing Research**

A third concern is that there is a preponderance of case studies in writing research. It is important to be cautious when using and reporting case studies. These studies represent what a few students can do under varying conditions and may not represent the larger population. Unfortunately, some authors and speakers may unintentionally give the impression that we have definitive information on the writing process, using a few case studies to support their ideas. If we rely too heavily on the case study approach, we may miss some very important information and misinterpret our own case studies. For instance, there are hints throughout the case studies that the operational definitions of revision in classrooms and textbooks may explain why many writers revise at the surface level. Perhaps many of the revision strategies described in research studies are simply artifacts of classroom practices. If we wish to study writing, we must do more than observe a few students under special conditions. We will need more ethnographic observation of writing and writing instruction in classrooms over long periods of time. In particular, we will need to look at individual writing development in conjunction with classroom instruction if we are to have a more complete picture of student writing processes.

**The Role of the Pretext in Revision**

A special difficulty in researching the composing process and revision strategies involves what Stephen Witte of the University of Texas, Austin, calls the pretext. A pretext is what writers do before they put anything in writing. There are many different kinds of writing processes and some writers develop elaborate pretexts before writing while others develop almost no pretext at all. These writers can be divided into two groups which represent almost opposite approaches to the writing process: I call them planners and discoverers.

Planners are the writers who must have a perfect first sentence before they will move on to a second sentence. They develop an elaborate plan before beginning their writing, starting with a clearly developed opening sentence or thesis which creates a foundation for subsequent sentences and parts of their texts. The first thing they do when writing a paper is develop a strong introduction. Most of their revising takes place in their heads while they are developing the pretext, deciding the rhetorical shape and tone of their paper. Their writing process is very much like the process an artist employs in creating a mosaic. First, a complete plan is made, then each title is set carefully in place with grout before the artist moves on to the next tile.

Discoverers, in contrast, may begin writing before they know what they have to say. They often do not have a thesis until after several drafts. They use their first drafts to sort out their thoughts about a subject and to help them discover central themes and find effective shapes for presenting their ideas. Instead of beginning with a plan, they develop a plan as they discover the route their words are taking them on their writing journey. They write their introduction near the end of their writing when they are sure about what they want to say.

Of course, there are many different kinds of writers between these two extremes, but the important point is that we might identify these two types of writers quite differently if we were investigating revision strategies. We would be wrong if we stated that planners did not revise extensively or as much as discoverers. If we do not somehow investigate pretexts and plans in the writing process, we might wrongly
identify the effect of revision on the writing process. Indeed, one possible reason why we have not been able to find a robust positive correlation between extensive revising and quality of writing may be that we have not investigated the pretexts and plans of writers.

Lack of Systematic Approach to Writing Research

One final concern with writing research, the most crucial one in my opinion, is its lack of a systematic approach. Most studies have not been replicated and most studies have worked with so many variables that it is nearly impossible to either compare or contrast their results. Consequently, there has been no systematic approach to discovering the nature of the writing processes of either basic or experienced writers. For example, two or three studies might investigate the effect of audience on the writing processes of students, but unfortunately they cannot be compared because of differences in their approaches to topic selection, audience selection, and their selection of different writing contexts. One study allows students to select their topics and gives them a specific audience of twelfth grades, while another assigns topics and designates the teacher as audience. Yet another study does not designate an audience, allows students to select a topic, and has them produce protocols while composing. It is difficult to learn much about the effect of audience on the writing process if there are so many variables which are not controlled.

Future studies of the writing process need to control for as many variables as possible. There is a need to control for topic selection, audience, conditions under which the writing takes place, time for planning, time for revising. If some of the variables are not accounted for, then findings will continue to be descriptive of individual cases and contexts, and will not lead to a comprehensive theory of the composing process. The case study research and other research has brought us a long way, but now it is time to replicate studies and to control variables in an attempt to investigate how writers at all developmental levels plan and discover their meanings.

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