An Interview with Linda Flower

Research on writing is one of the most rapidly developing fields of educational research. In its approximately twenty-year history as a “discipline” it has gone from concentrating primarily on the cognitive benefits of school-like essayist writing to exploring the actual processes of writing and the multiple contexts in which writing occurs. Today researchers are looking at the act of writing from a vast variety of perspectives. Linda Flower was one of the first investigators to attempt to understand how writers go about composing. She is a powerful spokesperson for this particular approach to writing research, one which views cognition as the guiding link to understanding the problem-solving processes called forth in the act of writing.

Linda Flower is Professor of English and director of the freshman writing program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has been a co-director of the Center for the Study of Writing since its inception more than five years ago. She is the author of Problem-Solving Strategies in Writing (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 3rd Edition, 1989) as well as numerous chapters and articles, including studies in the recent book, Reading-to-Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process (Oxford University Press, 1990). Since 1975, Flower has collaborated with J.R. Hayes, also a CSW co-director, on research to study composing processes of college students. Most recently, Flower has initiated the Making Thinking Visible program funded by the Howard Heinz Endowment.

In this interview with Carol Heller, associate editor of The Quarterly, Flower discusses her beginnings as a researcher, her insights into the role of context in the composing process, her work with classroom teachers, her present involvement with community literacy projects, and how her ideas and research have changed through time.

CAROL HELLER: Retrospect always sheds light on the goals and means of the researcher. How did you happen to begin your research into the writing process?

LINDA FLOWER: One of the ironies of my life is that I went into publishing right after college instead of going to graduate school because I’d heard you had to teach composition as a TA and I was damned if I was going to have anything to do with composition. I had hated my freshman composition course so much…. So, I spent four or five years in publishing before going on to graduate school. Teaching composition wasn’t something that I saw as an immediate life goal! My own instruction was one of those “grammar today, an impromptu essay on some obscure topic tomorrow…” so all that was part of my mindset when I got into teaching.

CH: Where did you first teach and who were your students?

LF: My first teaching job was with masters’ students who only came to my class if it actually helped them do real writing. They were students in business school and my teaching there was an attempt to create a widening program of self-help. The test was whether I could show the students strategies that made a difference — the sort of things I would want to learn too. And that was what sent me looking into the research. I didn’t find much, but I did run into Dick Hayes working in psychology who was as curious as I was about what writers were doing.

CH: What kind of a writer had you been in your college days? Had you reflected much on the nature of
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your own problem-solving strategies as a young writer before getting into writing instruction yourself?
LF: Even though I did a fair amount of writing as a student, to me the real change as a writer was when I really had something to say, when I started doing this research. I had gone through all the turmoil of writing a literary dissertation, but realized that it was difficult to speak with authority if you weren't 50, male, and witty. Then I started to do research and suddenly, I couldn't get to my office fast enough in the morning; it was a real revelation. It's just been fun ... obsessive fun, but I think having something to say made a real difference for me.

CH: One of the things that is so lovely about watching you speak is the enthusiasm you have for what you're doing. It's wonderful to witness.
LF: It seems to me that that's something that all of us in composition really have that I didn't see in literary studies — because we have something new to say. It's partly a function of doing research; it's partly a function of how much there is to learn. We are really discovering things and I think we're helping students.

CH: In a 1989 article [“Cognition, Context, and Theory Building,” College Composition and Communication, 40 (3), 282-309; also published as CSW Occasional Paper No. 11], you say, “We need a grounded vision [of writing and writing instruction] that can place cognition in its context, while celebrating the power of cognition to change that context ...” [p. 284]. What do you mean here by “context”? In particular, how has your sense of the meaning of “context” changed over the years?
LF: For me, the interesting thing about context does not lie in a theoretical statement that tries in vain to define context or even in descriptions of specific contexts. The really interesting question for me is: What do writers make of the different contexts they find themselves in? Here's a student named Ron, from our study of how freshmen approached a reading-to-write assignment in their first few weeks in college, when they were still trying to get a handle on this new discourse community. The assignment called for them to interpret and synthesize.

You just got to listen. I don’t know if it sounds weird or what. But I sit there and I watch them during the lecture, I listen to key words that they use. They register.

This study really opened my eyes to the whopping role “task representation” plays in reading to write. Task representation is an image writers have of the task. In that sense it's something people construct; it's my mental representation; I create it. It isn't simply what the assignment is or what the genre looks like or what the task features should be. It also has to do with things like what my role is, how much authority do I think I have, what my voice should be, what's the point of doing this, what's the purpose? There's also the sense of rhetorical and social situatedness. Now, my representation may have very little information in it about my audience and yours may have a lot. It isn't as though we all fill in certain things; it's that we create an image of the things that really stick out for us about a task, so we not only differ in what we think the organizing plan should be, we may also differ a lot in what is foregrounded to us. You may be thinking about your argument and I may be thinking about whether my answer is going to be correct.

Students like Ron were “reading the context” and building their own representation of what it meant to interpret and synthesize. For many, the culture of schooling said: When in doubt, summarize and add your “opinion” at the end. But the more surprising problem was that students were giving themselves significantly different images of the task, often depending on what they called their “standard strategies,” but without realizing that their neighbor had a very different image of what that “obvious” standard task was — or that their instructor might be holding yet another image.

We embedded this study that Ron was part of in a course in which we came back to students with transcripts of their own thinking-aloud protocols, tapes they had made three or four days before while they worked on the assignment at home or in the dorm. We then used these transcripts, a template of options based on pilot studies, and interviews to help students explain how they had seen this task and their own process. This move not only helped us learn about the images students like Ron were constructing, but it let us teach students to see that they were in fact creating these representations and that they had more options than they may have realized. Given a chance to revise not only their paper but their “reading of this rhetorical situation,” students showed us that this knowledge made a difference. In a number of cases, the teachers' sense of what these freshmen “could do” — based on the paper they turned in — was really only measuring what students assumed they were supposed to do.

So this is how I would go about trying to understand the role of context. Other people might go about it differ-
ently, especially my CSW colleagues at Berkeley who are studying younger students. I went after this idea of task representation because this is a place where we can see the context through the writers' eyes and get a clue about how past experience with school writing, for instance, can be a more powerful voice than empty "god" words like "interpret" in a college assignment. These writers are actively interpreting the context and transforming their understanding into a plan for action; helping them read the options made a real difference for some freshmen.

CH: We often ask practitioners what they have gleaned from writing research — how, for example, it affects their daily work and interactions with students. I'd like to turn the tables and ask you what you've learned from those teachers whose work you try so hard to support in your own work. How have classroom teachers you've known and worked with affected the growth of your own work and your own thinking about writing?

LF: For me as a researcher, working with teachers and teaching writing myself are both essential to understanding what an insight derived from my research actually means, by seeing the meaning it has in practice. I'm presently in a classroom inquiry project called Making Thinking Visible with twenty-three other teachers from around the Pittsburgh area, who are adapting the idea of collaborative planning to their high school, community college, small college and university classrooms, using it to investigate how their students go about writing and where they can help. Collaborative planning means that two writers, a planner and a supporter, get together and the planner talks out, elaborates, explores her plan with the help of the supporter. We also show students a visual metaphor of the "planners blackboard," as a prompt to help writers think about those rhetorical features they tend not to look at. So it's a social support and also a piece of teaching that's saying, "Think about purpose, think about audience, and get your supporter to help you plan ... " This group, a CSW project supported by the Howard Heinz Endowment, meets every month to talk about teaching collaborative planning and doing classroom research, and to share observations. You learn a lot from these exchanges. When one member, Jean Aston, and her basic writers at Community College of Allegheny County began to reflect on their own planning sessions, they uncovered a set of depressing and disempowering assumptions about what teachers expect and how to write — ideas that reflected the limited expectations set for these students who went through high school on the "lower" track. As a researcher, I see the idea of collaborative planning changing before my eyes in productive ways, as other teachers interpret, translate, and adapt a set of principles to the needs of their own students.

In the Making Thinking Visible group we are also experimenting with a form of classroom research that differs in some interesting ways from some other kinds of teacher research groups. Most obviously, we start from a shared commitment to using, adapting, and observing collaborative planning and from a shared pocket of language and expectations. This isn't to say we hold a common set of beliefs about teaching, collaboration, or planning, but we have agreed to engage in a collaborative investigation where our different questions and observations will speak pretty directly to each other. Perhaps a second distinctive feature is that unlike most teacher research which, as Dixie Goswami has said, focuses on the teacher's effectiveness or on testing classroom techniques, we are more interested in close observation of how our students are thinking their way through problems and what they are doing when they write. Observation and reflection are key steps in the process of collaborative planning itself, and many of us use journals and tapes of collaborative sessions to help students observe their own thinking. Because we try to build in significant class time for students to reflect on their own observations, students are also engaged in the research process, not just to teach us something, but to learn about themselves.

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CH: How did you get involved in the project?
LF: This group really started as an attempt to explore the notion of collaborative planning in the hands of a diverse group of teachers, because that’s a critical laboratory where ideas grow and develop, or die. The superintendent of schools in Pittsburgh, Richard Wallace, supported our pilot effort in which a group of CMU and high school students used collaborative planning to make videos for each other about their own writing and planning. The next year the support of the Howard Heinz Endowment allowed us to invite a group of teachers from around Pittsburgh to join us, so we now include teachers from the South Side, where the steel mills were, to the inner city Northside, to Fox Chapel suburbs, from high school to college, university, and community center. We get together every month to eat, learn something, and talk about what we’ve seen. A lot of time is spent on the discovery memos, which we all write each month, talking in small groups, or doing collaborative planning on the casebook papers we are writing. We’re trying to share both what we learn about our particular students and ways to adapt and use collaborative planning. When Len Donaldson uses collaborative planning in his social studies classes at Peabody High, he wants students to see Marx and then themselves as writers with a purpose, while Jane Gargaro down the hall is using it to help students experiment with metaphor in their writing. Both these adaptations look quite different from Rebecca Burnett’s effort to generate productive conflict or what the people who are hot to use their Macintoshes and Tom Hajduk’s Writer’s Option program are doing. So in this sense we are an instructional laboratory for an idea, discovering what we can make of it. But even more importantly, all of us are using this as an opportunity to learn about our students and get new insights into them as thinkers. We have a draft now of a casebook based on these discovery papers.

CH: Where can readers find out about what some of your conclusions are?
LF: You can always write to Linda Norris, the Educational Coordinator at the Center for the Study of Writing at Carnegie Mellon. We have some video tapes, three newsletters, an introductory guidebook, and now we’ve got the project casebook by the teachers. And by teachers it’s real important to get clear that I mean all of the CSW researchers are also in this as teachers. The case book is really beautiful. It has papers on teaching, such as how to help students become good supporters or deal with conflict, while other papers trace what students did or discovered, and still others talk about the teacher’s experience. I think we’ll probably all spend this next year rewriting our chapters. There’s a process of acculturation going on among us that’s been interesting — a kind of forging of community people, high school and college teachers, and research folks. The community has clicked, and it wasn’t clear that it was going to in the first little pilot. We’re all getting used to working together as writers — that’s a kind of a nice evolution.

CH: Do you think of documenting that as part of the casebook?
LF: Yes, we are trying to. Linda Norris has tracked the skeptical questions and hard problems teachers raised about collaborative planning in our initial meetings, and how they answered those questions for themselves over the course of the year. Nancy Spivey is writing about the different ways we evaluate and reflect on ourselves as a project, and Dave Wallace has developed a questionnaire to track both students’ changes in attitude about collaboration and themselves as writers.

CH: Many insist that for all of us truly to consider ourselves as powerfully and flexibly literate people, we have to have opportunities to write from the core of our lives and histories. What are your thoughts on this?
LF: If you see literacy as a way of shaping meaning and taking action in the world, you are likely to extend status to practices that achieve people’s goals in a given context. For example, the Allegheny Presbyterian Center, an inner city community center that is a partner in our Making Thinking Visible Project, involves teenagers in a series of literacy projects, where the teens can develop a sense of themselves as writers at the same time they contribute to the discussion of genuine problems such as hunger, teenage pregnancy, or affordable housing in that community. In his study of neighborhood literacy, Wayne Peck, who is the community center director and a CSW researcher, is showing how writing in this context is tied to action. And this presents some interesting problems for envisioning what literacy could mean here and helping these students write.

In one of these groups, teenagers join in the process of rehabilitating affordable houses. The kids are helping to find out the kind of engineering/decision-making needed to rehabilitate a house, to get the financing, and to do the contracting plans. The powerful literate abilities needed here are ones which can engage readers in action not by moving them with a vividly told, compel-
ling experience, or by telling them what to do. The function of these texts is to start a conversation that puts problems on the table, that gives a voice to different viewpoints and values, while it challenges assumptions and images. These texts provide a small starting point for beginning to work through social, economic, and racial tensions wrapped up in the history of inner city housing. They're attempting to make the chancy creation and maintenance of affordable housing a neighborhood endeavor everyone understands.

In trying to develop a writers' handbook that might help these writers create a "community conversation" in text — through interviews, commentary, dialogue, and occasional analysis — I found myself searching for models that were not to be found in our school texts. I would welcome suggestions or models from readers of The Quarterly. In working with these writers, I have seen how the personal stories and critical incidents they collect from the neighborhood play a valuable role in this literacy event, but a role that for these writers is embedded in the much larger purpose of using writing to achieve some goals in the life of this community. That's a real alternative way to think about literacy.

CH: How did you meet Wayne?
LF: He's a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric at CMU, and the minister of the Allegheny Presbyterian Church. He didn't have enough to do so he decided to get a Ph.D. too. He had a degree in divinity from Harvard and somehow he decided he needed more activity. I don't know how he does it. He's been a real catalyst in my thinking about how you can combine theory and practice on a community level; he's got such a celebratory notion about life, and especially in a situation like that.

CH: His community center is in a very poor neighborhood?
LF: It's in an inner city area in Pittsburgh, an area that's a real cultural mix. There are working class white people who don't necessarily get along with the black people and there are some real tough housing projects. There are many senior citizens. It's got an enormous amount of diversity. It has problems, but it's also an old Pittsburgh neighborhood and it's got real neighborhood leaders. One of those neighborhood leaders works at the center with Wayne. Most such centers offer social work activities, children's services, and the like. What Wayne decided to do was make it focus on not just maintenance activities in the neighborhood but on literacy. And so he's trying to do an unusual thing, I think — to see his social mission in terms of both acknowledging the community literacy that's there and supporting perhaps even more effective community literacy by getting kids and other people involved in projects, helping them develop skills or, ideally, develop skills and do real projects in the same breath. He's dedicated to combining theory — rhetorical theory, cognitive theory — with a strong social perspective ... and making an argument that this kind of theory and research has a lot to bring to the social setting. He thinks maybe Aristotle can help you figure out ways to operate here, in the city council, doing advocacy. The cognitive work is helping to make the thinking visible again — to people who often aren't even aware that they are thinkers. In the social world he's unique in trying to make this community center a literacy center and in the educational community he's kind of unusual in saying theory and research can be real, vital parts of community.

CH: How is he being perceived in his community? Are people rallying for what's happening in the neighborhood?
LF: It started with a brochure teens wrote about the Northside. Now there is another group writing about teen pregnancy based on interviews that tell the story from the teen's side, and another that is linked up with a grassroots housing rehabilitation effort. A number of local leaders support all this, but for me one of the marvelous events was when they started holding meetings at which people from the community center and the church were reading Shirley Heath and coming in to discuss literacy, reading Mike Rose. These conversations were opening up this education literature to a mix of people who were asking, can this tell me something about my community?

CH: You said that Wayne has influenced your own thinking. How?
LF: Partly, he's just a personal inspiration but other people that I haven't mentioned are too. So, he's not alone in that. When you perceive that your strength is as a researcher, you need a vision for how your research — the thing you do well — can contribute to making a difference that's not seen just in the classroom — it's a real dilemma to know what to do. Some people move to political action, but for me, I see community literacy as a place where focusing on thinking can make a real difference, because it gives people power and it gives them control, especially over this business of entering new discourses and speaking for themselves. It's the same thing that's going on in college, but the stakes are a lot higher for these people because they don't have all the back-up conditions and support to make it easier to move among these discourses. So giving them a more conscious control over the practices they already have and how they can figure out how to move into worlds that seem beyond their reach can provide support. The boundaries between communities are stronger when
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you live in that neighborhood. So I think cognitive rhetoric, the problem-solving work, speaks to a real need there. We have a lot to learn, especially as teachers, and as people living in that city together. So, the influence from Wayne was a kind of vision of something that was possible.

CH: How have you been pleased or not so pleased with how your own work has been interpreted in the world and utilized in the classrooms?

LF: I am delighted when people use my work as a stepping stone to answer their own questions about how writers think their way through problems, and dismayed when it is reduced, as though problem-solving excluded problem-finding, or cognition excluded feeling. Although conflict is part of the fuel for research, cognitive research comes under attack from humanists because it’s research and from people in our own field who are suspicious that cognition somehow means you don’t care about other social or affective issues. I think the only thing that has surprised me about attitudes toward research is that from a research perspective, you see yourself as contributing to a discussion and wanting people to take what is useful out of what you’re doing and build on it. One of the other kinds of discourses in English studies right now, the critique, is a discourse that has no interest in building a more synthetic vision because it works on opposition and dichotomies instead of acknowledging diversity and multiple perspectives on a complex thing. And that’s where I find myself most at odds with some of the other writing in English, because that’s not what’s valuable to me in scholarship and academic discourse. So, insofar as my work becomes an occasion for somebody to mount his or her own case by creating an opposition, I’ve not been very impressed with the value of that perspective. But issues like the relationship between the social processes and how a rhetorical situation becomes part of your thinking — those are rich, meaty issues. It’s the dichotomizing that disappoints me.

On the positive side what makes me feel good are little events such as, after the talk here last week [Flower gave a talk on collaborative planning at CSW in Berkeley on October 12, 1990] this young man comes up and says, “I’m just an undergraduate but this is wonderful. Why didn’t someone tell me this before?” And you get this from students a lot when you teach thinking strategies. “Why didn’t somebody tell me this?” You know that what you’re talking about is not esoteric, but it’s obviously a different way to think about writing. Not every student is ready to click and seize that as relevant, so there’s a big job of teaching thinking strategies for writing students who aren’t quite ready to see them. That response is to me exactly what this research should be about. It should be about making thinking strategies clear and accessible to students, to help them gain the understanding and control that can make a little difference in their lives.

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