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Process Turned Product: Formula in Composition

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Structure

Structuring the Writing Class

Language Sub-Systems

Process Turned Formula: A New Structure
Rules

Process Turned Formula in Composition

The current emphasis on process rather than on product in composition research has had a great impact on the way writing is taught in school. Or has it?

If we use our textbooks as measures of the shift from the product to process paradigm in composition teaching, then we must recognize that little has changed. Most current textbooks have not fully incorporated the findings, pedagogical implications and philosophical assumptions of the process paradigm. The composing process, when and if it is discussed, is typically addressed in the majority of our textbooks as a linear, formulaic set of steps.

Signs of Change

The term "paradigm shift" was coined by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn theorizes that the ideas, assumptions and methods of a discipline determine the way problems and issues are defined and addressed. Change occurs within a discipline when outside demands are placed on the discipline and when seminal figures within the discipline propose new methods and assumptions because contemporary beliefs and methods cannot solve significant problems.

In 1974, when Richard Young posited that the movement away from product to process in composition research reflected a pre-paradigmatic shift, he offered the definition of paradigm as:

...a system of widely shared values, beliefs, and methods that determines

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the nature and conduct of the discipline. A paradigm determines, among other things, what is included in the discipline and what is excluded from it, what is taught and not taught, what problems are regarded as important and unimportant, and, by implication what research is regarded as valuable in developing the discipline (p.29).

In 1978, Donald Stewart supported Young's contention that the composition field was moving toward a process paradigm. Maxine Hairston further elaborated this interpretation in her 1982 article, "The Winds of Change." Young, Stewart, and Hairston persuasively argued that our movement away from discourse products to the writing process in writing instruction is a classic example of the initial stages of a paradigmatic shift.

"However, most writing textbooks have not changed. And in most books, when the writing process is discussed, it is considered as a set of linear stages."

At first glance, in fact, this interpretation appears extremely well warranted. For example, as stated above, new paradigms are called for when figures or events outside a discipline demand solutions. Certainly, our profession has been subjected to this pressure, in the form of increasing numbers of basic writers and non-traditional students in college classes and demands from the professions for more competent writers. The need to improve writing instruc-

tion has even come before state legislative bodies. As Maeroff has pointed out, students must now pass a writing test to receive a high school diploma in New York, and in Florida, districts which reduce class size and require one composition per week now receive extra money. At the college level in Florida, students are required to pass a writing test and to take at least four writing courses in order to advance to junior-level standing. In these states and in others across the nation, the need to improve writing skills and writing instruction has reached crisis proportions. Each year new Ph.D. programs in rhetoric and composition are developed, joining the ranks of older, more established programs at major universities. Without doubt, these legislative actions, combined with the ever increasing needs for communication skills, reflect external demands for changes in our discipline — a characteristic which precedes most paradigm changes.

Moreover, our discipline meets another characteristic of a field which is likely to experience a paradigmatic shift: Leading figures within our discipline have rejected the product paradigm. For the past twenty years, major theorists have addressed the emphasis on products. For example, in 1975, Rohman wrote: "In fact, to continue to teach rhetoric without attention to discovery reinforces that indifference to meaning that characterizes the modern world and advertising" (p. 112). Also in 1974, Young offered these two assumptions as the defining features of the product paradigm: "1 - rhetoric is primarily the art of presenting ideas and information, not generating them, as the primary subject disciplines do, and 2 - 'that creative pro-

cesses, which include the composing process, are not susceptible to conscious control by formal procedures" (p. 181). The "old" methods — teaching writing by prose models, grammar drills and error hunts — were challenged by major theorists.

Finally, our discipline meets one more characteristic of a field which is likely to experience a paradigmatic shift: rigorous research has defined the parameters and interests of the new paradigm, the process paradigm. We have come to hold the following assumptions based on this new research:

1. Composing is not a linear process, but a recursive one (Emig). Writing is a process of continual revision. Some activities, such as planning, occur throughout composing. As Sondra Perl pointed out in "Understanding Composing," writers continually return to the topic they are writing about to see if they are digressing from their original notion. Composing is not simple, straight-forward, formulaic.
2. There is no single "correct" composing process. Even professional writers possess diverse writing strategies (Britton; Emig). Thus, we cannot contend, for example, that all writers brainstorm to find a focus; draw an issue tree to help organize developing ideas; write; revise; and edit in the same way.
3. Writing, for both inexperienced and professional writers, is a creative, organic process of forming meaning and structure from chaos; it is not simply finding a form and then filling in the spaces. Purpose and desire to communicate to an audience motivate writers.
4. Experienced writers recognize that form does not inevitably precede content. Writers wish to allow ideas to evolve before they worry about the development of an accessible, overall structure.
5. Writing involves bridging social forms, themes, and expectations with internal, personal experiences and values; hence, the writing assignments students are asked to complete must relate to students' interests, values and experiences.

The above assumptions reflect a dyna-

mic shift in theoretical perspective away from writing as product.

Classroom techniques have understandably lagged behind these studies and philosophical observations; however, writing instructors have been encouraged to turn their classrooms into writing workshops, where students actively write, while the teacher confers

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with them. Many of our classrooms have been transformed from teacher-centered examinations of prose models and the modes of discourse into writing workshops. Writing teachers ask students to practice all stages of composing, rather than focusing solely on editing. Experienced teachers allow students to select topics, but they ensure that students write to a variety of audiences and purposes; moreover, teachers attempt to sensitize students to the divergent demands of these varied audiences. And sometimes, because writing is an important way to explore and learn material, students are asked to write in journals. To ease the dissonance and difficulties experienced in the chaotic, early stages of composing, teachers show students how to brainstorm, how to use heuristics and problem-solving strategies. We have widened the audiences for students' prose by employing peer groups and by having students analyze the needs, attitudes, interests and knowledge of alternative audiences (such as, experts, decision-makers or operators).

Now, it has become clinched to argue that writing instruction has become less prescriptive, formulaic, product-centered. For two decades we have been encouraged to reject the product paradigm because it dissuades students from thoughtfully exploring ideas and emphasizes **how** something is said over **what** is said.

"The Winds of Change" or Resistance to Change?

Despite our increased knowledge of

composing behaviors, I sometimes believe writing instruction has not significantly changed. Most composition textbooks still do not address ways of applying our knowledge of composing with classroom activities. Young, Stewart, and Hairston suggest that change can be observed in a discipline by studying the textbooks of that discipline. Young writes: "Textbooks elaborate and perpetuate established paradigms; they are one of the principal vehicles for the conduct of a discipline in a stable state. As such, they are a particularly valuable source of information about the paradigm" (p. 31). In 1978, Donald Stewart lamented his discovery that only seven of the thirty-four best selling handbooks, rhetorics and readers of the time discussed the writing process. Stewart explained these books did not mention Rohman and Wlecke's pre-writing techniques, Pike's tagmemic theory, the common topoi of classical rhetoric, or Burke's pentad. Stewart believed the values, beliefs and methods held by English teachers — teachers who are primarily trained as literary critics — prevented them from perceiving the need for a shift to a process paradigm. More recently, however, Hairston has argued "... most publishers are now publishing at least one process-oriented, rhetorically-based writing text" (p. 25).

In some respects, I believe Hairston to be correct: The term "process" is a popular word in contemporary writing texts. At least two new 1986 readers, in fact, have been published this year which are labelled as process readers. However, most writing textbooks have not changed. And in most books, when the writing process is discussed, it is considered as a set of linear stages. The model of composing is simplified. Students are told that first one prewrites, then writes, revises and edits. As Sommers pointed out in her article, "Computers and Composing," we have a tendency to believe lecturing once or twice about composing processes is the same as teaching the process. Likewise, teaching the writing process involves much more than having students read a chapter about the writing process.

The lack of change in most composition textbooks suggests we are avoiding the paradigmatic shift. Textbooks do not reflect the emphasis researchers

and theorists place on the composing process. And as Stewart mentioned in 1978, English teachers (the majority of whom are still solely trained as literary critics) buy the textbooks. The publishing industry exists not to fight change, but to serve a discipline. Clearly, the lack of change in these texts does not bode well for the paradigmatic shift. In fact, if we use textbooks as our measure, we are still employing a product paradigm, disguised, but formulaic and prescriptive nonetheless.

There are several explanations for why we are having difficulty shifting from the product paradigm to the process paradigm. First, it is difficult to "teach" students the writing process. In technical writing courses, for example, there are many discourse purposes and forms which students should be exposed to during a semester. For example, it is important that they see models of feasibility reports, investigative studies, proposals, process descriptions, and progress reports. Because of this wide scope, having students perform extensive revision is difficult because of time limitations. Teaching writing as a process is like walking a tightrope: we must try to keep students open to ambiguity while we must also demand completed products within a short time period. As experienced writers and readers, we know that one secret about knowing how to organize is found in knowing when to organize. Moreover, we know student writers tend to gather their thoughts before they're fully developed. We know writing is a dialogue with one's writing, a process of continual revision. However, at the same time, eventually we must demand a finished product from our students.

Teaching that writing is a recursive, dynamic thinking process requires flexibility on the part of the student and instructor. It means students must be given practice at all levels of composing. In turn, lesson plans must be equally flexible. If students' writing is used as the primary course text, then we must be responsive to the students' needs as they develop. When we teach writing as a process we cannot be certain how long each activity will take. We know we cannot force students to provide thesis statements prior to prewriting

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and early drafting stages. We cannot ignore that writing is a process of discovery. And we cannot assume that all students will move through a neat progression of teacher-directed, group pre-writing or revising activities.

Second, people like structure. Structure is a unifying force through which people perceive and define the world. Language itself is, of course, a structure. Composing involves giving form and structure to content. And the product paradigm is more sympathetic to our kinship with structure. When we discuss discourse modes and other tangible, content-like issues, we are comforted by the stability of our statements. By overlooking the chaotic aspects of composing, we can simplify the demands of discourse. Giving voice to chaos and ambiguity can appear life-threatening amid the turmoil of a seventh grade classroom. The product paradigm is easier to teach on Monday morning.

Because we have an innate fondness for structure and because we still have much more to learn about how we compose, I suspect that we must wait a while longer before we shift completely to the process paradigm. However, given recent advances, change is inevitable.

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