

What Else Do We Need to Know About Writing?

What we need to remind ourselves about teaching writing is that we must continue reshaping the paradigms within which we teach.

by Karen Pressley

While writing educators (including aspiring graduate students as teaching assistants) have been busy teaching English composition, testing and critiquing our field's teaching methods, textbooks and theories, and scrutinizing products turned out by student writers, we've been scripting the answer to Patricia Bizzell's question "What do we need to know about writing?" that she posed in her essay, "Cognition, Convention and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing" (479).

The asking of this question is significant to writing educators, Bizzell says, because the asking has created composition studies. The studies continue to evolve according to the changing circumstances in the classroom where we put our answers to the test. The classroom environment changed markedly when collaborative learning emerged as part of a wider response to political pressures from below to extend literacy and access to higher education to minorities and working class people who had formerly been excluded (Trimbur 736). Thus, the role of writing educators has become not only to convey information (i.e. "just teach"), but we must also respond to the need for developing or transforming students' world view, which Bizzell expresses as, "We must also teach them how to think, too!" (479).

As if in response to Bizzell's assertion here, James Berlin points out that thinking cannot be done without some connection to ethical, political, cultural ideas and the like,

which is approached through some form of ideology (668). In composition studies, he says, each method used in the classroom occupies a distinct position in its relation to an ideology.

While Bizzell was posing her question in 1982, various writing methods (beyond the traditional method) were emerging including the expressivist and social constructionist method, preceded by the cognitivist method to which Bizzell addressed her essay. Throughout *Norton's Book of Composition Studies*, we've seen each of these models describe a *form* of the composing process. Bizzell argues that the cognitivist model by Flower and Hayes cannot be viewed as an absolute answer to the need for a teaching method, and urges us to consider that no particular process can go on without the primary emphasis placed on *content*, which is the knowledge of discourse communities, with conventions that shape the goals that drive the writing process (491). But according to Berlin, in looking at the methods that comprise composition studies, we are also looking at the ideologies present in our classrooms. His argument, then, shows that methods inherently bring ideologies into the discourse communities of the classroom. He believes that the cognitivist ideology claims the transcendent neutrality of science, but nevertheless encourages discursive practices that are compatible with dominant economic, social, and political formations (668). Can pedagogy exist neutral of ideology? Berlin says no. If we find that to be true, then any method chosen brings an ideology into the classroom. What we apply in a classroom, then, becomes an act of hegemony for the methods we have chosen to exclude (Clifford 867).

When a writing educator chooses a method, he/she is inherently aligning with that method's accompanying ideology. The educator, then, is developing hegemony in the classroom where students are subject to the instructor's views. Does our challenge, then, become to expect students to exist oblivious to our hegemony, or does it become to teach students how to respond to the classroom hegemony? Or, more productively, can we capitalize on this classroom ideology/hegemony issue and transform this into teachable moments, using discourse about ideas as opportunities for students to discover their opinions and learn to shape a response through writing exercises?

I'm seeing how essential it is that we not lock any classroom or university into just one methodical form under a locally or nationally agreed-upon pedagogical movement. Subsequently, this paper introduces the main ideas of a larger discussion in an upcoming essay that synthesizes concepts of discourse and interpretive communities from Bizzell, Kenneth Bruffee and Stanley Fish; Habermas' collaborative learning concepts; and Berlin on hegemony in the composition class. In concert with Bizzell's "What do we need to know about writing?" question, to which she answers, "We need a humanistic synthesis" (497), I argue that a synthesis of composition methods would best reside together forming an interdisciplinary method that would be highly responsive to the needs of the ever-changing classroom environment.

Through her humanist synthesis, she wants to see philosophy, psychology and other fields synthesized so as to compile strengths from across fields that address human interests and values, and shape a method that responds to the students as developing individuals. This synthesization would be a better answer to teaching writing than

subscribing to one particular popular teaching method. Bizzell shows us, in her criticism of Flower and Hayes' cognitive process, that when one pedagogy is held in esteem as *the* model to follow, we empower that model with a type of sovereignty that *no* model warrants, as it then denies the credibility of the rest or excludes others from being applied in classroom environments where other models are more fitting (Bizzell 494). Her criticism shows us what kind of thinking (as demonstrated by Flower and Hayes) *doesn't* work: "It is the hierarchical and recursive structure...that makes it superior to other theorists' work and able to control and reconcile other theorists' work" (Bizzell 485).

It's essential that we hold every other composition or rhetorical model to the standard that none are sovereign to another but instead, support or complement each other through the students' need for the synthesis of them all. Berlin supports this idea in his discussion of Althusser's view that "no position can lay claim to absolute, timeless truth, because finally all formulations are historically specific, arising out of the material conditions of a particular time and place (668).

Stanley Fish's discussion of interpretive communities and Richard Rorty's view of educators becoming "mediators" versus "arbiters" of disciplines (Bizzell 496) both point to discourse communities as being the essential framework for the composition classroom. What better choice do composition teachers have but to offer students ethically- and politically-conscious education, with multifarious ways to understand issues and "problems in their lives like the problems of a traveler to an unfamiliar country, a country in which it is possible to learn the language and the manners and even 'go native' while still remembering the land from which one has come" (Bizzell 496).

This, of course, would require composition textbooks that are connected to life and give context to culture so the student is made to think, analyze, and argue (Welch 763).

Composition teachers need to shape a humanistic synthesis of rhetorical theory to sufficiently respond to the time and place within which students enter our classrooms.

Without a synthesis, we'd be as likely to vigorously engage millennial students as a preacher who is out of touch with the issues of the times yet has a chapel flooding with people who've come in for inspiration or direction, or as a farmer unequipped on a field whose crop is overflowing and demands harvest before the crops go to waste.

If students had been engaged in classrooms that were synthesized discourse communities where they developed the critical thinking skills we are talking about, would “institutional underlife” have developed to the extent that Robert Brooke describes? (722). Brooke's discussion about institutional underlife raises our awareness of students' roles as actors in an institution who develop behaviors which assert an identity different from the one assigned to them in a traditionally hegemonic classroom (723). Is it any wonder that student behavior has evolved to this? I'd prefer to meet students where they're at by engaging them in explorations of controversial ideas and teach them how to write dissent, instead of letting my classroom be dominated by students asserting their individualism in ways that throw my classroom out of control.

What we need then, as Bizzell argues, is a humanistic synthesis where we agree that discourse communities are all we have to rely upon in our quest for truth as knowledge—not in pursuit of an absolute, but in pursuit of knowledge that addresses answers to questions raised as our culture changes—and where composition studies focus

upon practice within interpretive communities, or exactly how conventions work in the world and how they are transmitted (497). Discourse analysis is where world views would become more clearly a matter of conscious commitment, instead of unconscious conformity.

Writing only makes sense when organized by the interpretive conventions of a discourse community. We see through experience that real world writers never complain that they have nothing to say because they have learned how to write for discourse communities where they know their work can matter. Students in classrooms unconnected to real discourse communities see little purpose for their attempts other than getting a grade (Bizzell 492). The material, the social, and the subjective are at once the producers and the products of ideology, and ideology must continually be challenged so as to reveal its economic and political consequences for individuals (Berlin 679). Through synthesized composition classrooms, we stand a better chance to turn out students who can think and write and add value to their place of future employment, instead of turning out students who learn little more than how to satisfy instructor requirements.

In view of such a synthesis, a pedagogy proclaiming that composition studies should be just cognitive/scientific, or just expressivist, or just social constructionist, or just current-traditional, would look and be obsolete. In Flower and Hayes's study on the cognitive process, they said "there is still much we could learn about *how* people define their rhetorical problems as they write and *why* they make some of the choices they do (477). Indeed there is. A definition of the *how* and an understanding of the *why* is not a

destination point, but an ever-changing journey that composition teachers must ride like a wave. We can't try to define students' rhetorical problems and then think we've arrived at a finite point, an end-all, be-all answer. The way writers make choices will fluctuate depending on what is influencing their thoughts and life at the time, just as language-using in social contexts is connected not only to the immediate situation but to the larger society, too, in the form of conventions for construing reality.

One thing we do need to constantly remind ourselves about writing is that writers' lives are in an ever-changing state of flux shaped by the political, economic, cultural and social hegemonies of their times. The academy cannot remain aloof of this fact and teach students according to any out-grown paradigm and then wonder why we turn out students who can't write a basic memo for an office much less exercise critical thinking or support an argument or write an original thought drawn from their imagination.

We don't need to strive for heterogeneous classrooms without hierarchies, as John Trimbur questions (746) to accommodate our students. On the contrary. Hierarchies and hegemony can serve as the topic of rich discussion in classrooms where educators desire to not only teach writing as form, but to use writing as a means of teaching the arts of argument and critical thinking about content.

What we need to remind ourselves about writing is that we must continue reshaping the paradigms within which we teach. We need to be sensitive to and alert for need of change as a result of ever-changing economic, political, social, and cultural issues that touch every life in our classrooms, including the teacher's. In concurrence with the concept of paradigm expressed in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*

and in the spirit of Maxine Hairston's *Winds of Change* (439), we need to keep asking the question, "What *else* do we need to know about writing?"

References