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Research on Writing: Building a Cognitive and Social Understanding of Composing

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The Best and Worst of Times

For students who must learn to write in American schools, and for the teachers who must instruct them, it is the best of times and the worst of times. It is the best of times because we now know more than we ever have about the acquisition of written language, and we are learning still; because we are standing on the horizon of new technologies for communication that can put more information within the reach of more students and help them organize, synthesize, and interpret it; because we also have a strong and active grass-roots teacher movement with an aim no less modest than empowering those in the classroom. It is indeed the best of times for some students and teachers of writing.

For others, it is the worst of times. Despite our successes, there are young people who leave our schools with literacy skills too poor to gain them admission to regular courses in college, to fill out job applications, to analyze and deploy information, or to read stories to their children. We are warned that the situation will likely worsen as more and more children in American schools come from cultural traditions whose richness we've not yet learned to value and use to advantage in our classrooms.

In this chapter, I describe the kind of writing research that has the potential to make literacy classrooms inhabitable for more teachers and students—research based on an understanding of writing as a complex cognitive process embedded in a social context.

The Evolution of Our Concept of Writing

In the last 20 years, writing research and instruction have been turned on their heads.[1] We have learned to think differently about the nature of writing and the abilities of students and how we can best teach them to write (Figure 6.1). The rallying point of these revolutions has been the concept of writing as an activity, a process with an identifiable set of behaviors and cognitions. To think of writing as an activity, something that one does, is more commonsensical than surprising. But to think of writing as an activity that can be studied, analyzed, and understood, that can, in short, be demystified—this indeed is revolutionary, for it turns writing into something that can be acquired rather than something one either possesses or lacks. Educational practices in 19th century America are a good reminder of how important definitions are. In classrooms then, academic failure was believed to arise from faults of character or disposition. This is reflected in the tags educators used to pin on children who fell behind: "dunce," "shirker," "loafer," "reprobate," "wayward," "sluggish," or "incorrigible." As Cuban and Tyack (1988) point out, particular explanations generated particular solutions: Low achievers were segregated into remedial classes as befitted their presumably inferior intellects.

In like manner, textbooks for composition and grammar for a long time conjoined descriptions of "industrious," "hard-working" students with "good language" or "suitable compositions." The implication was that writing well was a natural consequence of being a good and moral person, and that writing poorly was a sign of depravity or sloth (Heath 1981). It is probably not coincidental, then,

[1]This history is necessarily brief and simplified to illustrate broad trends. For detailed accounts, see Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963); Cooper and Odell (1978); Hillocks (1986); and Freedman and Colleagues (1978).

Figure 6.1
Changing Notions about Teaching and Studying Writing

	Early Research	Recent Work on Process	Recent Work on Context
How Do We Define Writing?	As a finished product	As a complex cognitive process	As a cognitive process embedded in a social context
Who Among Our Students Can Write?	Those who have the "right stuff"	Those who have a robust writing process	Those who have gained entry to a discourse community
What Is Writing Research?	Error counts and quality assessments	Process descriptions	Analyses of the interactions among processes and contexts
What Is Writing Instruction?	Marking and responding to finished products	Providing practice in the process of writing	Creating discourse communities with authentic tasks and social interaction

that teachers and researchers were long concerned only with written products that could be graded, corrected, or analyzed: book reports, letters, themes, and research papers. Teachers marked and graded papers, but they did not help students produce them. Researchers tallied textual features and calculated their frequency but did not concern themselves with how words got to the page. Writing was a skill that one either possessed or did not, a process students experienced through native genius or discovered through trial and error. Perhaps because the final written form of an essay is coherent and structured, it seemed reasonable to assume that writing proceeds that way, too: correct-and-measured sentence by correct-and-measured sentence, one rolling effortlessly after the other. Such an understanding of writing would obviate any attention to process or to students whose written products failed to measure up.

That writing does not always proceed in measured and orderly steps, and that the process is one that can be analyzed and taught, have been the first great discoveries of writing research in this century. Like researchers in other disciplines who also study mental processes, writing specialists found a way to define with clarity and character the invisible mental acts that comprise producing written language. By asking writers to think aloud as they wrote, saying whatever thoughts came to them in the midst of composing, researchers learned that writing consists of several main processes—planning, transcribing text, and reviewing. They also learned that these processes don't occur in a particular order; rather, they take place recursively, with the writer stopping to plan in the midst of transcribing a paragraph or beginning to revise before she even has a word on the page. To "listen" to a writer compose is to appreciate complexity: planning what to say next, choosing the precise word, thinking of a better way to phrase a sentence, remembering another example to include, correcting a misspelled word. These are all operations that can occur in the space of seconds. To appreciate such complexity is to understand how an inexperienced writer can get derailed, for part of learning to compose is learning to balance the many things that writing asks a person to do at once, and learning to put off some concerns until later.

The research on composing has taught us to think of writing as a "problem-solving" process, to view it as a set of conscious cognitive and linguistic behaviors like planning, organizing, structuring, and revising. We've learned as well that experienced and inexperienced writers solve the problems posed by writing quite differently. Researchers like Flower and Hayes (1980) have shown us that better writers develop flexible goals to guide their writing processes. These goals are "rich enough," they say, "to work from and argue about, but cheap enough to throw away" (p. 43). Poorer writers tend to spend little time planning, rushing to commit words to the page, and to hold tight to their initial formulations of a problem. Expert writers also differ from novices in how they approach the task of revision, spending much more time on improving the meaning of their texts. Novices, on the other hand, tend to make cosmetic changes that may improve wording or correctness but do little to reshape a discourse. In fact, a great deal of research has shown that inexperienced writers focus so much attention on trying to correct errors in spelling and grammar that they don't do the rest of writing any justice.

Perl (1979), for example, demonstrated how a premature concern for editing, or correcting errors, can create misery for unskilled writers. One of these writers was a young man named Tony, born and raised in the Bronx. Of Puerto Rican ancestry, he spoke Spanish but considered English his first language. Tony dropped out of high

school in the 11th grade and returned three years later for an equivalency diploma. At the time of Perl's study, Tony was a student at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York. Perl asked Tony to think aloud as he wrote, then analyzed the behaviors that made up his writing process. Here is one of the essays he wrote for Perl on a topic from an introductory social science course on society and culture.

> *All men can't be consider equal in a America base on financial situation. Because their are men born in rich families that will never have to worry about any financial difficulties. And then theyre are another type of Americans that is born to a poor family and alway my have some kind of fina—difficulty. Espeicaly nowadays in New York city With the bugdit Crisis and all. If he is able To get a job. But are now he lose the job just as easy as he got it. So when he loses his job he'll have to try to get some fina—assistance. Then he'll probley have even more fin—difficulty. So right here you can't see that In Ameri, all men are not create equal in the fin—sense.*

Readers unaccustomed to working with student writers are likely to despair at the many errors in syntax, grammar, and spelling in Tony's paper and to question his energy and commitment to schooling. But Perl found that editing—paying attention to error—was actually a big part of students' composing processes. In fact, Tony never wrote more than two sentences before he paused to examine them for errors in spelling, punctuation, or word choice. Of 234 changes that he made in the essays he wrote for Perl, 210 of them had to do with attempted error corrections. Also startling was the fact that Tony read his writing aloud correctly, although he did not notice the discrepancies between his oral version and the words on the page. Tony "read in" missing words and word endings; he pronounced abbreviations and misspellings as if they were correctly written. In short, he read the desired word rather than the one on the page.

Perl believed that editing often intrudes so much that it blocks writing and thinking. Similarly, other researchers (see Rose 1984, for example) have found that inexperienced writers have developed rigid rules and dysfunctional strategies that serve them poorly. "You shouldn't ever have a passive verb," these writers will report, or they will insist, "My first sentence must be perfect before I can go on." It follows that inexperienced writers will likely need some help with ordering and structuring the writing process, in learning, for example, to give full play to generating text, to putting words on the page, and to delaying a concern for error until later. And it is likely that they will need some help in learning how to edit—not the help provided by traditional worksheets on grammar points, but help in developing procedures for seeing mistakes and deciding how to correct them.

The last 15 years of writing research have moved us some distance, then, from thinking of writing just as a product, of students as having or not having the right stuff, of research as the analysis of textual features, and of pedagogy as the marking or correcting of products. We've learned to think of writing as a complex cognitive process; of students as possessing immature, incomplete, or perhaps flawed representations of that process; of research as the description of process; and of pedagogy as providing instruction on the process and occasions to experience it. I can hardly overstate the significance of this work; it has restructured the thinking of teachers and researchers in fundamental ways.

But we've heard just half of the tale. There has been another great revolution in our thinking about writing in recent years, and it has come from learning to view writing as a process that is embedded in a context. Again, it may seem only common sense to acknowledge that writing takes place in a setting. What is being claimed, however, is much more radical than first reflection is likely to reveal. To say that writing is embedded in a context is to acknowledge that what counts as writing, or as any skill or any knowledge, is socially constructed. It depends for its meaning and its practice upon social institutions and conditions. According to this view, writing doesn't stand apart from people and communities: There is no single writing process waiting for discovery and use. Rather, writing as a kind of literacy "is permanently and deeply ideological, and teaching it means inculcating and reproducing a specific set of values and evaluations" (Salvatori and Hull in press). Our new understanding of writing is found outside individuals and individual cognitive acts, situated within a broader context of institution, community, and society. And this new understanding carries with it different notions of how writing is acquired and by whom and, as the following studies demonstrate, different notions of how to carry out research on literacy acquisition.

A piece of scholarship that has contributed greatly to our view of writing as socially embedded took place far from American classrooms. Scribner and Cole (1981a, 1981b) studied literacy acquisition among the Vai, a West African population of about 1,200. Many Vai are illiterate, but some are literate in English or Arabic, and some

also know an indigenous form of writing invented by the Vai almost a century and a half ago. Still in active use, this script is transmitted outside of formal schools. The fact that the Vai acquire literacy without formal schooling—a condition that is not common in our own society—allowed Scribner and Cole a clear avenue to investigate the relationship between literacy and thinking without the confounding effects of schooling. In doing so, they also studied how literacy is acquired and practiced among the Vai.

Scribner and Cole found that the Vai used English as the official script in national political and economic institutions, Arabic in religious practice and training, and the Vai script for personal and local communication and record keeping (letter writing, list making, journal keeping, or brief histories). In terms of the intellectual consequences of being literate, Scribner and Cole demonstrated that literacy is associated with improved performance on certain cognitive tasks, but not with improvement in overall mental abilities. For example, learning the Koran improves certain kinds of memory skills, but not memory in general. Scribner and Cole came to believe, then, that "literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. The nature of these practices . . . will determine the kinds of skills ('consequences') associated with literacy" (1981a, p. 236).

Closer to home, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) studied a plurality of literacies among people in three communities in the Carolina Piedmonts—the inhabitants of Trackton, Roadville, and "the Town." She documented the ways adults in Trackton and Roadville (black and white working-class communities, respectively) differed in language-using practices from the townspeople (mostly middle class whites). Although all three communities were literate—that is, their uses of reading and writing were "functional" within their own communities—there were mismatches between language practices at home and in school for the Trackton and Roadville youth. The language use that these children had acquired in their home communities did not, it turns out, prepare them for the kinds of reading and writing tasks that were the sine qua non of school.

Studies like these, and the theories of literacy acquisition that inform them, have inspired a great deal of revisionist thinking in terms of how we define writing and how we envision practice. For example, we are beginning to think of writing not as a single concept or process but as a plurality. We expect what will be valued as an expert writing process and product to vary, depending on what function that writing will serve, for which people, at which time. We are learning to question, therefore, any model of writing that is monolithic—that, for example, holds up one kind of text or prefers one kind of process as prototypical and ideal. We are beginning, as well, to acknowledge the importance of social interaction in the acquisition of literacy skills. People learn to write, as Langer (1987) explains, "in social settings where reading and writing and talk about language have particular uses for the people involved" and "when learners see models of literate behavior as other people engage in literacy activities, and when they talk and ask questions about what is happening, why, and how" (p. 11). And we are beginning to conceptualize the difficulty of learning to write as enculturation into a community or a discipline. Writing is a complex cognitive skill, to be sure, but the nature of the problem that a writer must solve takes on awesome new dimensions when we view it in its social context. "Every time a student sits down to write for us," explains Bartholomae (1985), speaking of undergraduate education, "he has to invent the university for the occasion." That is, he must "learn to speak our language, . . . to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (p. 134).

One of the problems facing teachers and researchers is learning to recognize and honor a student's attempts to take on the language of a new discourse community. In a study of underpreparation in literacy skills, Hull and Rose (in press) document such an attempt by a 19-year-old woman in a basic reading and writing class. One of the writing tasks that Tanya faced was to summarize a simple case study written by a nurse, "Handling the Difficult Patient." This case study was chosen for its appeal to Tanya, who wanted to become a nurse's aide or a licensed vocational nurse. In the case study, the author gives a first-person account of her experiences with a recalcitrant patient. The summary that Tanya wrote is reprinted below. It seems incoherent until we understand it as an inexperienced writer's attempt to enter a discourse community by taking on a new language.

> The Handling About
> difficult patient
> this something telling about
> a nurse ~~to~~ who won't to
> help a patience.
> She was a special night nurse,
> this man had a stroke and

was ~~paral~~ paralsis on his
left side. She Was really
doing a lot for the patience
She Introduced myself
she asked him How was
he feeling. remark was,
XXX, can't you see 'Im in
pain?" he telling the nurse
he was in so much pain.
he really didn't won't
to answer her. Before
she was ready to give
him his I.V. Are Anything
XXX "you're killing me,
you XXX."
Oh this going to Be a great
Day I said to myself
just thinking alone.
I have pride in What
I Do I am going to get
pad no matter what I am
still ~~am~~ going to collect
my money no matter
what happen I do Believe
and I no that In ~~my~~ mind.
My thoughts were similar
but deep down.
What was the approach?
A Registry nurse
was so descriptive.
impossible for me to
find a replacement.
My second and thirddays
she decided she ~~won~~ wouldn't
Abuse any longer and
~~Aso~~ also left the case
felt Abandoned was an
understatement; even
this doctor In this case
she Really liked what she
was doing But was getting
treated Right Respect.

She had chance of getting
A another job But ~~I~~ Don't
she wanted to But then again
She wanted to.

Hull and Rose account for some of the problems in this summary by explaining Tanya's inaccurate plagiarism rule: "change a few words so as not to copy." Another idiosyncratic rule that seemed to govern her construction of the summary had to do with selection. Tanya reported that she altered sentences from the original not only to avoid plagiarism, but because "the parts about the nurse are something about me . . . you see, 'I have pride,' you see, I can read that for me." Although she chose some details to include in her summary because they were important to the original text, she chose others because they were personally rather than textually relevant. Hull and Rose point out Tanya's repeated assertions that she will be able to learn and succeed ("I know I'm capable of doing anything in this whole world really")—assertions made in the face of great odds. And they argue that such goals and dreams allowed her to identify with the nurse in the case study and also oriented, to a disproportionate extent, how she constructed this particular literacy task. Although Hull and Rose acknowledge the serious flaws in Tanya's essay, they also argue that this piece of writing illustrates the presence of "something profoundly literate": the appropriation of a language to establish membership in a group. Tanya tries on the nurse's written language and, with it, the nurse's self. A productive pedagogy for this student, then, would be one that first encourages such imitation, honoring the important connection between Tanya's text and her goals for herself, and helps her learn the conventions for producing a discourse like the nurse's.

Thus, literacy researchers are learning of late to broaden their notions of writing as a complex cognitive process, of students as possessing immature or incomplete or perhaps flawed representations of that process, of research as the description of process, and of pedagogy as providing instruction on the process as well as occasions to experience it. We are coming to weigh the implications of the social construction of literacy, and to think of writing as a process that is by its nature embedded in a context. We are coming to think of writing instruction as providing opportunities for students to learn culturally valued skills. We are coming to think of students not as deficient in the right stuff, not just as possessing the wrong writing process or an underdeveloped one, but as initiates to new discourse

communities. We are coming to think of research not only as describing and understanding a process, but as describing and understanding the interplay of processes with contexts. These changing notions about teaching and studying writing are summarized in Figure 6.1. They are further illustrated in the next section, which offers a detailed example of writing instruction and a collaborative research effort.

Basic English in the Deep South

The class is 9th grade English in a Deep South high school. There are 18 students: 14 black, 4 white. Fifteen of them are labelled mentally inferior since they scored between 65 and 85 on the Stanford-Binet. Before this school year, all but three of these students had participated in a special education program that focused on remedial work in reading, math, and the mechanics of language use. Only three students had previously read an entire book or written any prose longer than three to five sentences. Their high school offers two academic tracks: "general" for those with prospects of college or technical school and "basic" for those previously in special education or who scored below grade 5 in reading and language skills. This class is basic English.

The teacher is Amanda Branscombe. She starts the year by telling students, "You all have A's. Now let's settle down and learn" (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 5). She has a mandate from the state to have her students work through certain curricular materials involving matching, fill-in-the-blanks, and spelling exercises. But throughout the year, Branscombe will not teach grammar or spelling in the traditional sense of providing direct group instruction on rules or in marking the errors in students' written work. Rather, she will treat all her students as capable readers and writers, provide them many occasions for literacy activities, and talk about cognitive and social processes—such as what students think they are gaining from writing, how they connect it to their lives outside the classroom, and what and why they are writing. She will continually stress that what counts in her class is whether students communicate in writing in ways that make sense to their audiences and whether they show that they have something to say. Instruction on errors will occur in the context of students' particular problems in their own papers.

This year Branscombe has organized what she wants students to learn around the literacy practice of letter writing. In September, she paired members of her 9th grade basic English class with members

of her 11th and 12th grade general English class on the basis of the interests they described in introductory essays. Because the school was large and the two-track system served to segregate students, these letter-writing partners had little chance of meeting. The upperclassmen were supposed to write to the 9th graders once a week with the intent of helping them improve their writing. Branscombe gave the students no specific instructions on how to format their letters, nor did she direct them to rework their writings to improve content or mechanics. But she had great expectations that over the semester the 9th graders would:

1. see the upperclassmen's writings as models of acceptable personal letters;

2. become engaged with a distant audience known only through written communication—and accept that "somebody cared" about their writing other than the teacher;

3. recognize writing as communication: writing in school did not have to simply be a way of completing an assignment; it could also be an occasion for practicing widely used communication skills needed to reach varied and distant audiences;

4. participate willingly—and with a notion of a responsibility to "make sense"—in types of writing that had different functions; and

5. move beyond initial response in writing to engagement with ideas: to be willing to explain and question their own ideas in writing to assist their audiences in understanding their meaning (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 10).

Ninth grader Cassandra was paired with two 11th grade girls, J. and A. Here is the introduction she wrote to them.

> My name is Cassandra. There's not much too say, except that I have a lot of ups and down's. I love to play sports, especially volley ball. I hope who ever reads this letter finds the personal Cassandra. We'll are you going to the game Friday. Well as for me, I'm not sure. My boyfriend want's me to go with him, but with things like they they are now, I'm not sure what my next move is. Oh and did you [know] who my boy friend is. (J O). And if you're not worrying about [it] then excuse me. I would appreciate if you wouldn't inform me about this letter. But it's o.k. because most of this stuff is just in the head. Well so-long kid. And have a nice day.
>
> P.S.—Hope you don't mind me saying kid.

J. and A. responded by pointing out the parts of the letter they did not understand—such as, "I hope whoever reads this letter finds

the personal Cassandra." Cassandra's answer was a letter in which she opened with a salutation and responded to each item raised by J. and A., beginning with a restatement of the point they wanted her to clarify: "We'll [Well] for the up's and down's." She also reminded her pen pals that she had things to ask them, too: "We'll [Well] I'm answering your letter back, and I have question's that I want to explain and maybe ask some."

The letter exchange continued with the older students asking questions and Cassandra dutifully answering them, albeit with some omissions and mysterious interpolations. A turning point of sorts was reached with the fourth letter from J. and a complaint about Cassandra's failure to make sense.

> Hello. I just discovered you haven't written me a letter this week. I guess I'll have to struggle through this without your letter of response or A. shes not here today. Although your letters never were much to begin with. I'm probably better off talking to myself because your always so *damn* confusing. Maybe if you re-read or proof read your letters your might catch some of the strange things youve been saying. I think you probably try to say things with good intentions but it just comes out awkward with no meaning. Getting off the subject and forgetting the point your trying [to] make can happen to anyone every now and then but your constantly doing this. I have to give you credit for your handwritting and spelling, that's not the problem. Next letter try to make all of your sentences clear. Don't *assume* I know what your talking about. *Explain* everything.
>
> I'm not trying to "get down on you" or "get on your case." But, before we become friends I have to know what your saying or asking to respond (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 12).

Here is part of Cassandra's response, a letter with no salutation but with her full signature and her "philosophy of communication."

> But you and I are to different person's you know. And I've tried to explain myself as much as I could, but somehow you just don't get the message. What do you mean about my letters being confusing. I explain the things I write about the best I know how. Maybe they are confusing to you but I understand what I write. I don't think that it's confusing to you. I think that you just felt like getting me told a little. And as for A. I know that she wasn't here, but I would like to know [does] she feel the same as you. We're still friends in my book. and if it's something you want to know I'll try and make myself clear. I hope that this is not so damn confusing. And if it is the Hell with the stuff (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 12).

The letters the girls subsequently wrote were longer and covered more subjects. Cassandra began to anticipate the parts of her letters that would prove troublesome and to ask her correspondents to let her know if they did not understand her. As the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons approached, Cassandra began to write more about the loneliness she would feel without her mother, who had died the first week of school. J. confided that she had lost her own mother through divorce but that she had become a stronger person in the process. Cassandra's last letters of the year told her pen pals that they were the only friends she had had all year.

During the second semester, Branscombe arranged for her 9th graders to have a more distant audience and other purposes for writing. Shirley Brice Heath, an anthropologist living in California, began to correspond with the class on how they might become her "associates" in her work as an ethnographer of communication in different parts of the world. With Heath's direction, provided through her letters, the students began taking field notes on how language functioned in their own communities. The idea was that such activities would make them linguistically aware speakers and writers, give them practice in recording information, and give them a chance to be informed critics of their classmates' reports and interpretations of data. Students not only wrote letters to Heath, they also wrote field notes, field-site descriptions, autobiographical essays, personal essays, and explanatory essays analyzing their field notes.

While their letters to upperclassmen had focused on topics of shared context that required little detailed description (like school sports and dances), they had rarely referred to events in the distant past or to people and activities not directly involved in their lives. Thus, Branscombe saw the correspondence with Heath as an occasion for students to practice different kinds of communication: "(a) detailed explanations and assessments of past events, (b) descriptions of current scenes, actions, and people, and (c) arguments defending their course of action, point of view, or interpretation" (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 20). The correspondence was also a chance for the students to become a "community of ethnographers" (Heath and

Branscombe 1985, p. 7) who would jointly construct and transmit knowledge and who would experience the benefits of this cooperation: being a party to work that others could question, interpret, react to, and develop.

Heath wrote long, word-processed letters to the class as a group, not to individual students. She wrote about being an anthropologist, about the places her work took her, and about the students' letters and tapes of their interviews with people in their community.

> Since you will not be writing letters [to your pals] this semester, I had hoped to ask you to help collect fieldnotes for me. Fieldnotes are the records anthropologists make of what happens in life around them in the place they are living. I have lived and written fieldnotes in many parts of the world. Some of you may want to look at the map and see where these places are, since I had not heard of many of these places until I was much older than you are. I worked first in Guatemala and Mexico, living among Indian groups there and studying their children at home and at school. Then I went to Japan and went to the most northern island—Hokkaido—where I studied the rural people and their ways of coping with modern life—cars, televisions, roads, and tape recorders . . . (Branscombe 1987, p. 213).

Branscombe made copies of Heath's letters for each student, and they read the letters in groups, "negotiating meaning and interpretations as a community" (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 17).

The students wrote personal letters to Heath, like this one from Cassandra.

> Shirley I've gotten to know you more than I thought I did. You're very sweet. I think that you would go out of your way to help us as much as possible, and anyone else. [The following questions are with reference to a tote bag that Shirley sent to Cassandra when she returned from her trip to Brazil.] Shirley I would like to ask you a question or 2. What does Chemin de Fer, means? Does it mean that that the name of the company that manufacted it? [The tote bag] Or it's the name of a building (Branscombe 1987, p. 213).

They also wrote to ask questions about the process of ethnography. For example, "How much detail do I have to give on the layout of the filling station where I'm describing the language the mechanics use?" "What's different about recording information and interpreting it?"

In addition to personal letters, the students expanded their writings to include field notes, interviews, and observations. Here, for example, are excerpts from the observations one student made about the kind of reading he observed.

> Friday After School
>
> My neaighbor was reading the O-A News. (A local newspaper) My aunt look at the mail when she got home and read the HBO book to see what was coming on TV. My uncle looked in the phonebook for a number.
>
> Saturday
>
> I read a record cover and looked at a magazine. I read a candy lable (Sneaker). I also read the names on the T.V. screen when a movie came on. I read a Kodak film box . . . (Branscombe 1987, p. 215).

Branscombe and Heath directed students to write their fieldnotes quickly, putting on paper as much as they could. Revision came later when they were writing essays in which they interpreted their notes. On occasion, Branscombe and Heath pointed out errors in grammar or style in the context of something students were trying to communicate. For example, during a visit Heath made to the school in May, she explained to Cassandra, in a long conversation about her fieldwork, that she would need to use apostrophes correctly and to distinguish the spelling of *to*, *two*, and *too* and *no* and *know*. Heath then explained these errors to Cassandra, noting when and why apostrophes are used to show omission and possession. "'Why hadn't anyone ever told me about apostrophes like this?'" Cassandra wanted to know (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 25). Subsequently, she made no errors on these grammar points in her letters to Heath.

As the semester progressed, Heath began to be less personal in the style of her letters, omitting vocatives and first and second person. She provided long, depersonalized explanations, and did not explain why materials or tasks would be important to the students. Again, the intent was to move students from here-and-now writing to composition tasks for distant audiences on depersonalized topics. This shift was not easy for everyone. Eugene tried to persuade Heath to write individual letters to each student.

> I may be wrong but I don't think so. You see Miss Branscombe is having all of us write to you. But in your last letter you only said that you would only write to some of us and I

think that you should write to all of us. Because all of us are writing to you. If you don't want to write to me than I want [won't] write to you or tak any field notes. I think you will agree with me if you don't then put your self in our shoes and if you still dont then let me know (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 24).

Gradually, students came to understand that Heath expected their written products—their field notes and interpretations of data—to compare favorably to the work of other ethnographers. And gradually they came to understand the lengthiness of the writing process, realizing that a final product was far in the future and that it would be preceded by many discussions and revisions.

After the semester was over, Heath and Branscombe and the students examined the letters written over the year to see if the students had reached the goals their teacher had set. These analyses showed that Cassandra had changed from simply answering queries to initiating topics and sustaining commentary on them. Accompanying these discourse changes were changes in textual features like markers of cohesion. Whereas the students' first letters were characterized by additive and adversative connectives like *and* and *but*, their later ones made use of causal and temporal connectives like *so*, *that*, and *when*. Students wrote longer letters as time went on, and they read more as well: news items, magazines, stories, and novels. They had become, say Heath and Branscombe, communicators adept at using written language for different audiences and purposes.

But there are other ways to measure success. Cassandra had started the school year refusing to sit at a desk, choosing instead to sit on top of a table in the back of the classroom, her back facing the class. She sat cross-legged, often sucking her thumb. When she later moved to a seat at a desk, she was hostile to students who disturbed her with their comments or noise. As the year progressed, she joined the community of the classroom. She wrote more than anyone in class, and she assumed a leadership role, pressing others to work hard. As one of her classmates said, " 'Cassandra is our number one leader in the group because of her knowledge and skill' " (Heath and Branscombe 1985, p. 9). At the end of the school year, she chose to continue the research project with Heath. She eventually transferred to another high school, where she was placed in an honors English class.

Three Maxims for Writing Instruction

Amanda Branscombe's class is one illustration of fine writing practice. It is also an illustration of how times can change in terms of who we believe can write and how we go about studying that process. In the discussion below, I'll use Branscombe's class, along with other classroom accounts, as touchstones for understanding and testing some maxims for writing instruction that I have derived from current literacy theory and research.

1. Learning to write requires tasks that are "authentic."

The revolution in writing instruction started with a simple realization: To learn to write, students must partake of the process. For many years, when we claimed to offer writing instruction and writing practice as a part of English class, we actually offered something else—instruction and practice in grammar, most often, or in diagramming sentences, reading literature, or speaking correctly. For Amanda Branscombe's students, writing had previously meant worksheets on spelling and grammar. Time for the process of composing was not so common. Teachers and researchers have come to realize that there simply must be time in the classroom when students write, not perform some other activity that stands for writing, and that students need to have writing represented as a process. For example, students need to understand that most people don't and can't ordinarily take a one-shot approach to an important writing task; rather, they engage in the task over time, often with the help of several readers who respond to the style, substance, and inventiveness of the composition. Branscombe's students, you will recall, worked over the interpretations they gave their field notes for weeks, negotiating together the meaning of Heath's responses to their letters.

In one sense, then, if a writing task is to be "authentic," it must pay homage to writing as a process. But authenticity, as I am using it here, means something more. We must also find a way to represent writing not as a process that is an end in itself, but as an activity that allows a writer to accomplish some larger, authentic communicative purpose. Branscombe's students used writing to communicate to someone else information they had collected and interpreted, and this task they understood to be "real" or authentic. They were engaged as associate researchers with Heath in a project they learned to value. Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) have recently written about education as enculturation, a process by which learners come to view and to use knowledge from the perspective of members of a

discipline, community, or culture. Children learn to do math, according to this view, by learning what mathematicians view as a problem, what they count as a solution, and what forms of proof they allow, and they do so by engaging in activities that the subculture of mathematics views as "authentic." Brown and colleagues argue that many of children's school activities can in no manner be termed authentic because they "would not make sense [to] or be endorsed by the cultures to which they are attributed" (p. 34). I think something similar has been true of writing instruction. So many of the things children do in the name of writing are school-bound, having no counterpart, or one of a radically different kind, in the world beyond the classroom.

Witte (1988) has shown that writing in particular workplace contexts is different from writing in particular school contexts by being socially and cognitively more complex. For example, he saw writers in the workplace, unlike student writers, using multiple literacies and symbol systems; being a part of more and more various collaborations during the writing process; having to address multiple audiences with single texts; needing to rely upon information that audiences wouldn't be familiar with; dealing with constraints that come from knowing a particular text will have a great deal of influence. I don't mean to suggest that a writing task, if it is to count as authentic, must take place in the outside world of book publishing and research or some other "real" activity or that young and inexperienced writers should be expected to manage on their own the same writing tasks as adults and experienced writers. Writing tasks will be authentic in the sense that I'm after when they give writers reasons for communicating—reasons that a classroom community experiences as legitimate. This can take many forms. And as discussed below, novice writers will certainly need help in carrying out complex writing tasks.

2. Writers can acquire new knowledge and skills through "scaffolding."

In a fundamental way, each time we ask a novice to attempt an authentic writing task, we are asking him to do something he is not ready for and cannot do on his own except in a flawed, incomplete fashion. Amanda Branscombe's students were not letter writers or ethnographers of communication. David Bartholomae's undergraduates could not invent the university. If, as argued above, giving students pseudo-tasks amounts to non-writing, then we must make it possible for students to stretch beyond their current competence to

engage in authentic tasks. This is all the more important for students like Tony and others traditionally placed in remedial programs, for if we don't find a way to help them do what is currently beyond their reach, we will permanently relegate them to activities that are substitutes for genuine literacy tasks.

Cole and Griffin (1986) report how they adopted from Brown, Palincsar, and Armbruster (1982) an instructional technique called "reciprocal questioning" for use with elementary school students who were poor readers. Realizing that these students had impoverished notions of what reading consisted of—something like "read the individual words so that they sound right"—Cole and colleagues set about providing the scaffolding by which students could experience reading as expert adults do, "as a process of interpreting the world beyond the information given at the moment" (p. 126). They developed a "script for reading" with four acts: goal talk, paragraph reading, test, and critique. Goal talk was conversation about purposes: Why do people read? What does it have to do with the world of work? Why do adults ask questions when they read? Paragraph reading was scripted talk about individual paragraphs. Having read a paragraph, students asked themselves and each other questions on cards previously shuffled and distributed, questions like: "ask about words that are hard to say" and "whose meanings are hard to figure out"; "ask about the main idea"; "ask about what is going to happen next" (Cole and Griffin 1986, p. 123). The children carried out these activities in collaboration with an adult or undergraduate; thus, they saw the activities they were asked to engage in modeled by more knowledgeable others, and they gradually internalized this model. "The crucial feature in these activity settings," say Cole and Griffin," "is that the adults, coordinated around the reading script and a shared knowledge of what reading is, create a medium in which individual children can participate at the outer reaches of their ability" (p. 124).

The vehicle of scaffolding in this instance, and in many others as well, is social interaction. There was a time when administrators could presume to judge a teacher's competence and her students' good will by orderliness and quiet in the writing class; that time is no more. Often the classroom is filled with student talk, and often it is decentralized, with students working in pairs or small groups and the teacher sitting among them or walking from one group to another. According to Vygotskian ideas about the social origin of learning, children become literate—they acquire the requisite and valued knowledge and skills—in an interactive social setting. In such a setting they can have help from adult models and their peers as they

gradually internalize the structure and uses of particular literacy activities.

Applebee (1984, pp. 180-181) offers the following questions as guides to analyzing the appropriateness of instructional scaffolding, whether it is conveyed through textbooks and worksheets or classroom talk.

1. Does the task permit students to develop their own meanings rather than simply following the dictates of the teacher or text? Do they have room to take ownership for what they are doing?

2. Is the task sufficiently difficult to permit new learning to occur, but not so difficult as to preclude new learning?

3. Is the instructional support structured in a manner that models appropriate approaches to the task and leads to a natural sequence of thought and language?

4. Is the teacher's role collaborative rather than evaluative?

5. Is the external scaffolding removed as the student internalizes the patterns and approaches needed?

Applebee reports that there is not much evidence, in the classrooms he and his colleagues have observed, of appropriate instructional scaffolding. Classrooms remain teacher-centered, emphasizing the teacher's goals rather than the students' purposes. Tasks are either very structured—like fill-in-the-blanks exercises—or very ill-defined—like answering an essay question. The teacher's role is usually to read and correct students' writing.

On the other hand, Amanda Branscombe's classroom—a classroom for supposedly "basic" students—shows evidence of appropriate instructional scaffolding. Students "owned" the tasks assigned by Branscombe and Heath even to the extent of continuing them after the semester ended. The tasks were challenging, to be sure: be an associate ethnographer, collect field notes, and analyze and interpret them. Yet students were able to carry them out with appropriate structuring: Branscombe had students first write letters about the here and now to their peers and then to Heath, who gradually changed her discourse from personal to impersonal, from narrative to exposition. And Branscombe was a collaborator, not an evaluator: "You all have A's," she announced early on. "Now let's settle down and learn."

3. A writer's performance has a history and a logic.

In a recent study involving college writers, Flower (1987) examined the task of "reading in order to write." Students were asked to read selected passages and then to write a brief paper in which

they interpreted and synthesized those readings. One interesting finding from this study was that students represented the task to themselves in many different ways. One student assumed, for example, that the assignment called for a "gist and list" strategy: read the texts, find the key words, then summarize. Another student saw the assignment as an invitation to talk about what she already knew, using the passages as jumping off places for her own ideas. Others vacillated between these two approaches, summarizing and then commenting on the summary. And there were other approaches as well. This study is a welcome reminder that students represent a wonderful diversity: They come to our classrooms with behaviors and ideas that they acquired elsewhere—in other classrooms, from other teachers, at home, and from family and friends. It is also a cautionary tale about the dangers of a common unspoken assumption—that students share our language, our procedures, our values, and if they don't, they are somehow aberrant or deficient.

Our abilities to appreciate diversity and to understand its impact on learning have improved over the last 15 years, due largely to the efforts of sociolinguists and anthropologists. There has been a burgeoning of studies in these fields that juxtapose the norms in classroom life with the language skills, knowledge, and assumptions about learning that children acquire in their homes and communities. This juxtaposition has often revealed differences that matter a great deal in learning. For example, in a study of Hawaiian children and their reading instruction, Au and Mason (1981) showed how important it is for the conversational patterns in reading groups to be culturally congruent with conversational patterns in the community. Among working class Hawaiians, it is customary to tell and discuss stories in small groups with the members speaking simultaneously. Such overlapping isn't viewed as impolite but is seen as an indication of engagement and interest. However, when children apply the same conversational rules to reading groups, where teachers are accustomed to calling on children and having each speak in turn, teachers who don't know about their custom consider it disruptive and spend a disproportionate amount of time trying to call the class to order. In contrast, Au and Mason found that when teachers allowed reading group talk to be carried out in a manner more culturally congruent for the Hawaiian children, rather than trying to impose the customary pattern of one speaker at a time, the children spoke more coherently and learned more.

It is inestimably important for writing teachers to assume that any learner's performance has a history and a logic; to assume that,

even though a piece of writing is flawed, the student isn't somehow cognitively or linguistically deficient; to assume that the right set of keys will unlock a piece of writing for a reader and make it coherent and understandable. Something like these assumptions allowed Amanda Branscombe to believe her basic English students could be ethnographers and could correspond with a famous researcher and with 11th graders on the "general" track. Such assumptions informed the research of Hull and Rose and their case study of Tanya and her seemingly incoherent composition. They were ground rules for Perl as she examined Tony's truncated, incorrect texts and his complex composing process and came to understand the great store he placed in editing. It is inestimably important to assume a learner's performance has a history and a logic not only because this assumption gives us a way to understand and investigate students' difficulties with writing, but because the logic and history may identify what is appropriate (and inappropriate) instruction. What is effective "scaffolding" for some students—collaborative learning techniques, for example—may be culturally incongruent for others (Langer 1988).

Conclusion

Historically, literacy has been our talisman, variously expected to boost employment, ensure intellectual growth, and promote civility. Scholars today are apt to question the grand benefits traditionally assumed to be certain consequences of being able to read and write (e.g., Graff 1979, Scribner and Cole 1981a, 1981b). They point out, for example, that it will take a lot more than rudimentary reading skills to improve a person's economic lot, or that learning to write might promote specific kinds of thinking skills, but not improve mental abilities in general. Such revisionist thinking has been possible in part because scholars have examined the acquisition of literacy skills in the larger contexts of their nature and functions in community and society. That is, they have looked at reading and writing not by examining a few people in isolation working on contrived tasks, but by examining actual situations of schooling and community-based literacy use.

Something similar has happened to research aimed particularly at the teaching and learning of writing. After some years of examining the texts that writers produce or their individual writing processes, researchers have started to study texts and processes through the lens of context. Central to this shift is the belief that writing is embedded within society and depends for its meaning and its practice

upon social institutions and conditions. Viewing writing in this way throws in bas-relief the actual roles that writing can play in people's lives as well as the conditions under which it is acquired. The result of such investigations has not been a devaluation of writing, but an appreciation of its social basis, in particular, the varied ways social context affects knowledge acquisition and orients cognition. Understanding writing, then, has increasingly come to mean an understanding that is at once cognitive and social. Or to borrow Erickson's (1982) metaphor, we are learning in writing research "how to focus closely on the trees without forgetting that the forest is there too" (p. 153).

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