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ABSTRACT

The cognitive/developmental theories of Jean Piaget and John Dewey assert that people learn by doing and that they grow intellectually by tackling demanding problems. It is this active, problem-solving orientation that is central to a cognitive/developmental approach to composition teaching. Six core principles can serve as guides for composition teachers who want to apply the approach to their classrooms. The key is to provide holistic writing tasks with genuine aims and audiences in mind. The second principle is to emphasize writing as a process without making the process sound too easy or simplistic. Third, composition classes should facilitate social interaction, reflecting the real purpose of writing--correspondence, collaboration, and communication. The fourth principle for teachers to follow is to recognize the importance of student attitudes; and the goals of this principle are to eliminate apprehension about writing and to get students to willingly invest their energies in composing. Fifth, teachers should extend student language facility, using such teaching techniques as free writing and sentence combining. Finally, teachers need to deal forthrightly with student writing errors, helping students learn from their mistakes. (RL)

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A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to the Teaching of Composition

Of the many theoretical perspectives from which to approach the subject of written composition, the one that has come to interest me most is the developmental perspective, with its emphasis on human intellectual growth. Specifically, the "cognitive-developmental" approach, based on the psychology of Jean Piaget and the educational philosophy of John Dewey, provides a particularly appropriate basis for thinking about composing. In his theory of development, Piaget maintains that growth is always a function of the interaction of external environmental forces and internal intellectual structures. In the act of knowing the world, people both transform the environment to fit their cognitive structures and in the process have their cognitive structures elaborated and transformed. Thus, intellectual growth takes place through a person's interaction with his environment. Such a theory differs both from "nurture" theories of development, which view the environment as the source of growth, and from "nature" theories of development, which view the person as the source of growth.[1]

This Piagetian view of development has certain implications for research and teaching. In a recent essay, Loren Barritt and I tried to sketch four of the implications

for composition research: (1) that speaking and writing may entail somewhat different intellectual processes, (2) that errors can provide insight into students' composing strategies, (3) that an egocentric orientation--in which the writer has difficulty viewing the world from multiple perspectives--affects the writer's audience awareness, and (4) that social-emotional development may be facilitated through expressive writing. We suggested that a "developmental rhetoric," modeled on developmental psychology, might emerge as a new research focus in composition.[2]

But the cognitive-developmental perspective also has implications for teaching, because development is seen as an educational aim. In brief, the specific educational theory, outlined in the work of John Dewey, maintains that the basic conditions for educational development are fulfilled when students become actively and cooperatively engaged in a prolonged, meaningful activity which involves solving some sort of problem through thinking.[3] Like Piaget, Dewey saw learning as the dynamic interaction of internal and external forces, thus implying that teaching involves a balance between freedom and constraint, and that learning involves a balance between the concerns of the self and the demands of society. If we apply the insights of Piaget and Dewey in a cognitive-developmental approach to college composition, I believe that we discover six core principles which can serve as guides for instruction.

1. Provide Writing Problems. Perhaps the key claim of the cognitive-developmental approach to composition is

that students need to engage in holistic writing tasks--tasks with a genuine aim and audience. These tasks should be "problems" in that they require students to work to extend their skills, to stretch their intellectual muscles, to actively discover both what they think and how to best present this knowledge in writing. Providing such tasks demands sensitivity, because the teacher needs to set problems that challenge the students without discouraging them.

There have been a number of suggestions for composition classes based on a "problem-solving" model; but the approach I like best is the "team learning" approach devised over ten years ago by Leonard Greenbaum and Rudolf Schmerl, and piloted both at the University of Michigan and at Tuskegee Institute of Technology.[4] This course presented students with a topic area for the semester's work (e.g., the impact of the Viet Nam war in Ann Arbor; a Congressional election campaign). Working in groups, the students then broke this area into manageable units, gathered information from many sources, and wrote three papers collaboratively during the semester. Funds were available to have these papers printed in a monograph which was distributed to university and community groups. Three features of this course bear emphasizing. (1) The students worked intensively for an extended period of time on a challenging writing problem. (2) The written products had a purpose and a broad, interested audience. (3) The teachers, while providing guidance, allowed students to

make independent decisions and did not intervene to prevent "mistakes." Such a course seems to embody the most important of Dewey's conditions for education.

2. Emphasize Writing as a Process. An emphasis on the process of writing is a natural outcome of a cognitive-developmental approach because students are working from the beginning of a course on holistic writing tasks--producing discourse. This necessitates a period of pre-writing (discovering ways to approach the task), a period of gathering information, sorting out one's ideas, and writing drafts, and a period of reviewing and assessing what one has written. However, the trouble with many discussions of the writing "process" is that they make everything sound neater than it is: three quick and easy steps to good compositions--prewriting, writing, rewriting. Anyone who has reflected on his or her own writing experiences knows that this linear sequence of steps is only a very rough approximation of the process, ignoring recursive activity and the interaction among stages. Thinking and writing are usually so wrapped up together that the influence of each is difficult to separate out. Students need to know that writing is manageable, that there are ways of getting ideas when one runs dry, but they also need a realistic understanding of the complexities of the writing process so that they don't adopt a simplistic model that doesn't work for them--and perhaps doesn't work for anybody.

3. Facilitate Social Interaction. The interactive composition class--a class that involves students in writing

for one another, reading and responding to each other's papers, and writing some papers collaboratively--has been getting increased attention, and rightly so.[5] Cooperation and collaboration are valuable social organizations for learning. There are at least three specific benefits of an interactive composition classroom. First, social interaction in the form of talk about paper topics is beneficial in the "prewriting" stage, when students are exploring subjects they may write about later. Talk is vital at this stage. Who knows that better than a college teacher? When I get an idea for a project or article, the first thing I do is corner a colleague and talk about it. As I talk, I discover things: I need to justify a certain point, there are weak spots in my argument, the problem is more interesting than I anticipated at first. My colleague asks questions, suggests objections or alternative approaches, or maybe looks so puzzled that I know I have major work to do. Students should have similar experiences, but often don't--sometimes because we don't value group talk in the classroom, and sometimes because we haven't shown them <u>how</u> to conduct profitable small-group work. I hear this complaint frequently from secondary-school English teachers: "I tried that social interaction business. What a chaotic disaster! One day was all that I could stand." Of course. We cannot expect students conditioned by years of exposure to the typical school classroom to make the transition easily or quickly. It takes patient teaching to make an interactive class work; but the results

are worth it.

Second, social interaction in the form of peer teaching, when successful, has distinct advantages over the professional-teacher/thirty-students model: both tutor and tutored learn a great deal in such an encounter, and there is an opportunity for effective individualization. Third, social interaction in the form of group readings of student papers provides an audience for writing and can help teach students the importance of viewing their writing from the reader's perspective. By alternately taking the roles of reader and writer, students begin to see the complementarity of these roles: a piece of "writing" is really a piece of "reading"--that is, we write "reading." Hopefully, through this kind of experience students will internalize the perspective of the reader and bring it to bear when writing.

4. Recognize the Importance of Attitudes. The cognitive-developmentalist takes a "learning" rather than a "teaching" perspective on education. That is, the general goal for a composition course is that students learn to write better--more willingly, more fluently, more correctly. The teacher can set problems, arrange experiences, and give advice--and all of these are important--but the students, ultimately, must become engaged in writing, actively applying and extending what they know and discovering what skills they lack. Thus, it is crucial that students willingly invest energy in writing, that they value the process and products of composing. Therefore,

the attitudes that students have about writing are really quite central to the composition class, and the teacher needs to deal effectively with apprehensive or discouraged writers. Diederich characterizes his remedial students this way: "They hate and fear writing more than anything else they have had to do in school. If they see a blank sheet of paper on which they are expected to write something, they look as though they want to scream."[6] Such attitudes interfere with learning to write. While there is no panacea for curing negative attitudes, the most fruitful approach seems to be to work simultaneously both on helping students master some of the basic skills that impede their writing fluency (and are often sources of embarrassment) and also on valuing their language competencies and acknowledging their successes.

5. Extend Language Facility. When cognitive developmentalists claim that development is the aim of education, they mean that students should be encouraged to extend their composing competencies, moving to more developmentally mature levels of language and communication skills. Thus, one goal of a writing course would be to enhance students' writing fluency, helping them to produce discourse more efficiently. This means a lot of writing practice, particularly use of free writing techniques such as those advocated by Peter Elbow in Writing Without Teachers. Another goal would be to extend students' syntactic and rhetorical skills by making use of such techniques as sentence combining or Christensen rhetoric.[8] While these

techniques can be misused (as rote drill or as the sole answer to all writing problems), they are, used judiciously, extremely effective means for extending students' language facility.

6. Deal Forthrightly With Errors. Perhaps the wisest statement on the importance of students' errors comes from Mina Shaughnessy: "Errors count but not as much as most English teachers think."[9] The point is that errors do interfere with many students' abilities to express themselves fluently and to communicate effectively. But granting that point, how is one to deal with errors? Not simply by marking every violation of standard written conventions, leaving it to the student to interpret the meaning of the red ink. Rather, the cognitive-developmentalist views error as a valuable analytical tool, a way to understand the stragegies that a student is using in his or her writing, a way to show the student the logic of an error, and, of course, a way to demonstrate a thinking process which leads to the correct form. The approach is one of "error analysis": identifying and systematically categorizing mistakes, dealing with each student's most salient and consistent writing errors, and refusing either to overwhelm the students by pointing out every deviation from written conventions or to discourage the student by dwelling solely on the negative aspects of a composition.[10]

In sum, a composition course based on cognitive-developmental theory entails the presentation of challenging--but realistic and interesting--writing tasks which require students to extend their skills of thought and language. To the greatest extent possible, we should create situations in which students produce writing that will mean something to a group of readers--writing that will be read, at least by peers and hopefully by even a broader audience. In the process of fulfilling such composing tasks, students will probably make mistakes, but these should be greeted as promising signs of development, as opportunities to explore the composing strategies the students are trying out. And since the development of competent, self-reliant writers is our aim, we should show students how to extend their language facility and help them to systematically reduce their troublesome writing errors.

Such an approach to composition teaching is founded on the cognitive-developmental theories of Piaget and Dewey. Both men assert that we learn by doing, that we grow intellectually by tackling demanding problems. It is this active, problem-solving orientation that is central to a cognitive-developmental approach to composition teaching.

Footnotes

[1] Two excellent texts elaborate the points made briefly in this paragraph: Jonas Langer, Theories of Development (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) and Richard M. Lerner, Concepts and Theories of Human Development (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1976).

[2] Loren S. Barritt and Barry M. Kroll, "Some Implications of Cognitive-Developmental Psychology for Research on Composing," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), pp. 49-57.

[3] John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916). See also William K. Frankena, Three Historical Philosophies of Education (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1968), pp. 133-191.

[4] Leonard A. Greenbaum and Rudolf B. Schmerl, "A Team Learning Approach to Freshman English," College English, 29 (1967), 135-152; Rudolf B. Schmerl, "Team Learning in the Engineering English Class," Southern Intercom, October-November 1976, pp. 5-11.

[5] As examples see Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," College English, 34 (1973), 634-643; and Thom Hawkins, Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC and NCTE, 1976).

[6] Paul B. Diederich, Measuring Growth in English (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1974), p. 21.

[illegible] (Champaign: September, 1977). Francis Christensen and Bonnijean Christensen. A New Rhetoric (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

[9] Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 120.

[10] Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, "Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," College Composition and Communication, 29 (1978), 242-248.