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ABSTRACT

Literacy studies of young children imply that college teachers need to be able to make a connection between what the students bring to the composition classroom and what they are writing in the university. Teachers need to discover students' writing backgrounds, the anxieties, rules, and attitudes they bring to the classroom. In addition, research must be designed to inform composition teachers about the particular needs of college writers. Studies should be designed to include the context of the classroom itself. Closely related to the problem of research is the issue of designing curriculum. Too often curricula are shaped by the results of major studies, which have included neither the teacher who will use the material nor the students for whom it was designed. At the college level many assumptions about writing development are based on teachers' acceptance of a totally untested theory of cognitive development. The best curriculum models seem to be those that allow students at all levels to try out a variety of forms of writing for a variety of audiences, including opportunity for experimentation and taking risks. Until research in college composition moves more toward context-based findings, teachers would do well not to lock students out of any mode of discourse for fear of limiting them. (HTH)

# CONNECTIONS, CONTEXTS AND CURRICULUM IN COMPOSITION

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Speech presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 29, 1984.

When I submitted the proposal, What Does the Research On Young Writers Tell Us About Teaching Freshmen, I was fresh with enthusiasm from an exciting seminar with Donald Graves on Research In Writing. The class included mostly teachers at the elementary school level. I was greatly impressed, and still am, with the creative teaching of writing which is now taking place in many elementary schools, and I gained a new perspective on my college teaching from reading the recent studies on young writers. Since there is so much fine research, some of which has been mentioned by previous speakers, I want to focus my talk this afternoon on three areas where I see real relevance between research with younger writers and our work at the college level. My speech title is, "Connections, Contexts, and Curriculum in Composition."

To begin, I believe we must make connections at all levels of learning: I think this what our session is about today. I would like to illustrate this need with an example from my daughter, Alisha. At age three and a half, Alisha crawls into my lap while I am scanning one of the many grocery store inserts in my daily paper. I read the prices to myself as she points to foods she recognizes and recites them; "Cookies, chicken, oranges, celery..." She asks, "What are these?" when she comes to an unfamiliar item such as artichokes. After we repeat this several times, I consider our labeling task done and throw the flyer into the discard pile. But she immediately

retrieves it and hands it back to me saying, "Save this. We'll take it to the store and then we'll know what to buy."

We are close observers of our own children and fascinated by what they learn. Much good research has come from parents writing about their own children--Piaget's studies about his children, for example, and Glenda Bissex's book on her son, GYNS AT WRK. But Alisha's response is more than a cute antedote. Like many other preschoolers, Alisha has a real understanding of the function of printed materials. She cannot read, cannot recite the alphabet out of order but she knows what reading and writing are for. One of the consistent findings in literacy studies on children is that they understand a great deal more about every day print than we have credited them. Street signs, letters, recipes, newspapers, comics, directions for games, bills and maps are all distinguishable to them. In general, children enter school with some knowledge of the printed word, but, as Harste and his associates have noted, the school fails to recognize the natural literacy skills the child brings from a home setting and does not build upon them. More often, the elementary school begins with teaching small bits and pieces of information. These have little meaning for children and scant relationship to the child's familiar knowledge about the use of print in his own home and community.

The links between home and school literacy involve much more than the term "readiness" implies because all children are ready in some respects for school, and all children bring some strengths upon which to build. Shirley Brice Heath's rich ethnographic study, WAYS WITH WORDS, helps us see the depth of research which must be undertaken before we can arrive at any real understanding of what different types of children bring to school

both from their family and community settings. In her exploration of the language development of children in three different Carolina communities, she found that parents of mainstream children--those who will succeed in school--differ in the way they talk to their children. The difference is, she says, in the KIND of talk, and not the QUALITY of the talk that contributes to achievement in school. She offers an example of this kind of talk which mainstream parents might engage in." What if we didn't put the birthday candles on the cake," shows the thinking process she found important to preparing preschoolers for the work which school demands. "The child of the mainstream parent" she says, "is not left on his own to see the relations between two occurrences or to explore the ways the integration of the referent in a new context may alter its meaning."

The way to help a child link what he learns in his natural language setting with what he does at school, researchers tell us, is through closer observation of what children already know. A student's sense of "connectedness" is important at all levels of learning. The implications of literacy studies about young children for college teachers is, that we, too, need to create this connectedness in our own teaching. College writing teachers must be able to make a connection in what the student brings to the composition classroom and in what he is writing in the university as a whole. When Freshmen arrive in our classes we have very little information about their abilities, outside of a possible writing sample. We don't know what students have written in high school or what self-sponsored writing they engage in. As we hand out our syllabus on day one, are we providing a bridge for our students to their previous writing successes or basing our course on our own expectations and assumptions about what they know and need to

know? Do these assumptions have any relationship to what is going on in writing across the curriculum?

Some writing instructors at our University have begun to hold initial 15 minute conferences where students do not bring papers in an attempt to find out more about their backgrounds in writing as well as any anxieties they may bring to our classes. It is equally as important to know about our students' successes with writing. I don't want to hear half way through my composition that my student has edited a school newspaper, since that information reflects on what the student already knows and I can build on what students know. I encourage students in this initial conference to share with me the kinds of writing they do outside of the classroom. I want to know if they write letters, song lyrics or poetry, if they have ever kept a journal or diary or have even written a job application. Again, such information gives me a sharper profile of my student writers and a better understanding of how to shape a course to fit their needs.

I also like to know where Freshmen stand as readers of each other's writing. One method is to have the class grade anonymous student papers from a previous semester which fall into a range of good to poor. From these student critiques I am able to understand the rules and attitudes about writing that they have collected over the years. For example, "you never start a sentence or end with a preposition."

If I use peers to form a collaborative writing community, I also want to understand what theories about writing they bring to the workshop before we begin. If I want to challenge my students to learn new thinking, reading and writing skills, I need to know more about what they already know.

It is not enough, however, to work out of what our students tell us about their understanding about writing. Research should be designed to inform composition teachers about the particular needs of college writers. Just as we lack understanding of the writing backgrounds of our students, we need more studies that can provide valuable practical information for the college composition teacher. Both Janet Emig and Elliot Mishler have addressed the limitations of laboratory methods for conducting educational research. They suggest that studies be designed which include the context of the classroom itself. "We tend," writes Elliot Mishler, "to behave as if context were the enemy of understanding, rather than the resource which it is in our everyday lives."

Researchers at the elementary school level have already recognized that many of their studies are context-dependent. Margaret Donaldson, who has worked closely with re-designing Piaget's learning tasks, suggests that research be constructed around the familiar experiences of the child to help him succeed in a task, not test his failure. One nice example of providing a supportive context in order to discover what a child really knows is found in Harste's work. He uses a letter writing activity where preschoolers are given a pencil and paper and asked to write a letter. At first, most children scribbled on the paper, not producing anything in particular. But when given an envelope, the child would write a recognizable letter, sign it, and put it in the envelope.

Research at the college level has not provided a context ripe for these kinds of results to occur. Most writing research, in fact, feels stripped of the real setting of the classroom where students are writing, editing and rewriting. Research that is not relevant or understandable to the classroom

teacher fails to serve the purpose for which it was designed. Donald Graves has suggested that teachers and researchers join in designing and conducting studies which will reflect on actual schoolroom practices and problems in reading and writing. Such a collaborative approach would involve using a real language occasion within a setting like the writing workshop or the conference to allow students to inform the teacher and researchers about their writing products and process.

Recently ethnography has become a key word in composition research. But ethnography, Shirley Brice Heath points out. "Is not so much a set of procedures but an "attitude which represents the researcher's involvement in the process of data gathering." The importance of all context-based research is that it comes from observations from classrooms and other language settings where students are actually writing.

Closely related to the problems of doing research in composition is the issue of designing curriculum. Too often curriculums are shaped by the results of major studies, by studies which have not included either the teacher who will use the material, or the students for whom it has been designed. In the past such studies have shaped the curriculum at the elementary school level and some parts of that research are now being challenged. Tom Newkirk, of UNH, has written an article to be published in April's Language Arts which questions some of the accepted ideas about beginning writers. In particular, he disclaims the theory that the writing of a child of 5 or 6 is usually narrative and not well differentiated. In a review of his daughter Sarah's collection of signs. letters. notes. lists. badges, and stories at this age level. Newkirk found that her writing took on a very differentiated and non-narrative form. She wrote requests. an assertation of rights, an apology. He argues that early persuasion grows

naturally out of the regulative language that children learn at home. Further, he says that students avoid persuasive writing when they enter school, not because they are developmentally unready for it, but because the school curriculum surrounds them with only storytelling activities rather than extending the persuasive skills learned from the home.

The first real written message I have received from Alisha came in the form of a demand. She gave it to me one night after she had not finished her dinner and had disappeared upstairs. I knew from the way she handed the note to me that it was not intended as a drawing, although it was written in crayon. I asked her what it said. She replied: "Please give me some dessert or else I'll throw you in the garbage can." I hung the message on our refrigerator and several days later I asked her again what it said. "You remember and so do I," she replied, reinforcing her stand that this was a written and not an oral communication--the beginnings, in fact, of argumentation.

At the college level so many of our assumptions about writing development are based on our acceptance of the learning models of younger children. Moffet's spiraling curriculum for grades K-13 assumes a specific concept of cognitive development at the lower end of the ladder which is contradicted by current research on preschoolers and elementary school writers. If Tom Newkirk's daughter is capable of writing in the persuasive mode at 5, what are we to do with our college curriculum which places persuasion at the end of the semester when Freshmen are supposedly "developmentally ready for it. We create our curriculums as though college students have never seen persuasive or argumentative writing before. We allow ourselves to work out of a totally untested theory of cognitive development. Who is to say that writing

a "memoir" is really less cognitively demanding than a literary analysis as Moffet's theory suggests.

If we are to re-think curriculum for college writers, we might begin, as the researchers on younger children have, with some close observations of what our college students can and do write in and out of the classroom. We need to know more about what students write for other academic disciplines. I don't want my students to think that all writing begins in the expressive mode any more than I want them to think that all writing begins with an outline.

The best curriculum models seem to be those which allow students at all levels to try out a variety of forms of writing, for a variety of audiences throughout their schooling. Built into our curriculums should be the opportunity for experimentation and taking risks. Most learning, and, in this respect writing is no different, becomes more meaningful when it involves risk-taking in order to test limits of something new.

This year in one of our weekly Freshman staff meetings we were given a student research proposal which had been written for another course. We immediately saw that the writing was stilted and awkward. It began: "I will attempt in my future upcoming sociology paper to find the transition of the Indian tribes from sovereign nations to be dealth with bilaterally..." Yet this student's lack of success with the research proposal is a sign that she is pushing herself toward a new form. And Harste points out that with young writers a surface focus on form often turns out to be a function of the child's concentrated effort to develop a new content. It is expected that when we turn to an unfamiliar writing task that we may fail. But it is through risk-taking that we really learn. In particular, experimentation and risk-taking allow students to learn about the process of revision. A student who repeats again and again the type of writing he is familiar

with will never grow as a writer. Vygotsky reminds us that developmental processes often lag behind learning processes, creating a zone of "proximal development" and revealing the functions that are in the process of maturation. While a student may understand fully the need to write a proposal, she may not develop the ability to write it with success without several failures.

I would like to end my discussion of connections, contexts, and curriculum in composition with a suggestion that the best models for teaching writing seem to be those which allow students at all levels to try out a variety of rhetorical forms, for a variety of audiences throughout their schooling. The major problem with developing curriculum around cognitive models which make no connection to what writers already know is that they may be wrong. Until researchers in college composition push themselves toward more context-based findings, we would do well not to lock our students out of any mode of discourse for fear of limiting them. If there is one key to the research on young writers that can help us all as teachers it is that young children's language experiences are more like those of adults than unlike them and it is on this single theory that we should begin to build our approach to teaching college composition.

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