DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 391 CS 213 858

AUTHOR Wenner, Barbara Britton
TITLE Personal Histories of Four Composition Teachers: How Much Have We Changed?
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; Teaching Experience; *Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Research; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; Personal Experiences

ABSTRACT

Four composition teachers (two adjunct and two full-time faculty members at a large midwestern urban university) with a combined 80 years teaching experience were interviewed concerning how they perceive and use theory in the classroom. Questions focused on three areas: what theories guided them in teaching composition; what they felt the trends were in the use of theory during their teaching career; and where they would place themselves on a "theory continuum." Illustrative excerpts from the interviews show that, despite many differences in their perceptions of theory, all the teachers were engaged in juxtaposing "a plan as to how something might be done" with their own practice, and the teachers seemed stimulated rather than strangulated by their regard for theory. Excerpts also suggest that thoughtful proliferation and evolution of theory in the classroom was the trend. Perhaps it is the tension between old and new theories and contextual awareness of what "fits" the given situation of both teacher and students that will continue to exist into the next century. (RS)

PERSONAL HISTORIES OF FOUR COMPOSITION TEACHERS:

HOW MUCH HAVE WE CHANGED?

by

Barbara Britton Wenner

University of Cincinnati

Presented at the 1993 CCCC

Lynn Quitman Troyka, in a workshop following last year's C's, examined what we don't know about teaching composition. In her initial statement, she said, "What is exciting about teaching is knowing that you don't know," and "Nothing is as important in teaching as a good solid theory." Sharon Crowley in *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction* writes: "I think that reading and writing pedagogies are inevitably grounded in theory, whether these theories are consciously subscribed to or not"(28).

With all the research emerging in the field of composition studies in the last decade, how much and what kind of theory has actually remained useful to the practitioners in the field? Have they gleaned most of their knowledge of teaching from personal experience and, as Stephen North has called it, the "House of Lore"? Are the ten-year veterans still using the theory they were taught in graduate composition pedagogy classes (if these classes were available to them at all) or modeling their teaching on the way their own professors taught them? Do they read about new composition theories in journals and books and implement the ideas in their classrooms? Or have thousands of essays and hundreds of classes of students numbed them into avoiding reflection on theory in composition altogether?

Personal histories help us to learn how composition instructors got to be the teachers they are today, and how teachers adapt and change theory reveals much about the profession. An important issue of the coming century should be theory in action--how theory "trickles down" to the classrooms. In order to find out how it does, I have interviewed four "old-timers,"

teachers (two adjunct and two full-time faculty members at a large midwestern urban university) who have a combination of eighty years composition teaching experience. These teachers will obviously not be representative of all teachers, but they do provide a way for all of us to reflect on our own relationship to theory.

But first of all, when we talk about bringing theory into the classroom, what exactly do we mean? My dictionary defines theory as "a mental viewing; contemplation; a speculative idea or plan as to how something might be done; a systematic statement of principles involved or a mere conjecture, a guess." For the teachers interviewed here, theory may well be a speculative plan, the formulation of apparent relationships, and yes, even a "guess." I have used the same set of open-ended questions to encourage these teachers to reflect on their own histories of using theory, and I want to focus upon the teachers' perception of what composition theory means to them, how they were trained, what theories "worked," and why they moved away from certain practices.

As I see how our use of theory has evolved over the last decade (at least with four practitioners), we might speculate on ways in which theory might most effectively be used by the teachers of the next century. What is the best way for theorists to ensure that their theories will really be used? How much of what we first use in the composition classroom do we continue to use over the years? How do we perceive theory and use it in the classroom? How much have we really changed?

I interviewed each teacher for about 30 minutes and asked 10 basic questions, but in order stay within the time-constraints I have here, I will focus on three questions which I think suggest the direction each teacher is headed. The questions I focus upon are:

1. What theories (composition, literary, or other) guided you consciously (or upon looking back, unconsciously) in your teaching of composition?
2. What do you feel the trend in your/our use of theory has been in the years you have been

teaching?

3. Where would you place yourself on the following "Theory Continuum"?

All the way from: teaching the way I was taught to making it up as I go along.

I will give you all a transcript of the parts of the interview I have taped for you to listen to here, along with some segments you won't hear on tape. Then we might consider how theory--systematic statement of principles or guess--works its way into the classroom and some speculation about how it might trickle down into the classroom in the years to come.

[the transcript]

PERSONAL HISTORIES OF FOUR COMPOSITION TEACHERS: HOW MUCH HAVE WE CHANGED?

A brief history of each teacher:

Mary: a professor, specializing in technical writing, who has taught composition frequently during her 20-year academic career.

Bill: a part-time instructor with a master's degree who regularly teaches 3-4 sections of composition and supplements his income by restoring antiques. He had previously taught high school english for 14 years and has taught at U.C. for another 12.

Judy: a part-time instructor with a master's degree who regularly teaches 3-4 sections of composition and facilitates the placement program for the department. She has taught composition at U.C. since 1978.

Ed: a professor with a literary specialty, who came to U.C. 20 years ago and, with no particular background in composition studies, was immediately installed in a Freshman English class. He has since formulated his own way of dealing with composition theory, although he now teaches composition less frequently than he once did.

The first question was asked to get them to think about how theory (very broadly considered) may have been on their minds as they first taught. We'll begin with Mary, who started teching 20 years ago in a community college.

Question: What theories (composition, literary, or other) guided you consciously (or upon looking back upon it, unconsciously) in your teaching of composition?

Mary: I have to say that I've moved through a number of theoretical orientations. It's a problem. What I am right now is a mish-mash. When I started out with developmental theories--the notion that the process stuff was there, the notion that the classroom was the place for students to develop particular kinds of skills and abilities and things like that. I used a book--a kind of Aristotelian based text, which, I didn't know it at the time, when I used that, it very useful and got me interested in persuasion and argument. Anyway, my primary concerns at that point were developmental and a fair amount of practice, and I'm not sure there was much of a theoretical orientation. I used a lot of Progof's work. A lot of the power of language kind of thing, and now and looking back on it, I can see it was much more expressionist with a little developmental thrown in, but I'm not sure I knew those things. And then school, when you're a graduate student, it's whatever theory you're studying that quarter. Now I think the most powerful one for me is the Aristotelian theory, modified a great deal. I still think the notion of developmental aspects of writing are very important to consider when working with students and some of the current political theories, the sense of responsibility that a student might have and you might have to a student in a broader society.

But I also temper that with a real pragmatics. you gotta get a decent grade. You can do better in your other courses because you can write and you can have power and understand what's going on in your career. So the other theories like discourse community, genre theory, convention theory, composing process theory, those are not only theories that I think about and inform my teaching, but they're also theories I'll teach my students because I think the students should be sharing that too.

Now let's listen to Judy, a part-time teacher who began teaching in the mid-70's when her early teaching experience paralleled a course called "Teaching

College Writing."

Judy: In that mid-seventies period and that was the first time you teach, anything stays with you. We used David Squires' *Writing with a Thesis* and Jacqueline Burke's *Twenty Questions for the Writer.* My rhetoric--I took a class in rhetoric also from Patrick [Hartwell]. I was most influenced by Edward P. J. Corbett and the Neo-Aristotelians. So our work was in formal argument. We had a course at that time called "Contemporary Persuasion." I don't know if you have this background, by the way. We would look at essays primarily reading some things. We'd start by reading some things and getting a little bit better at reading, picking out what kind of exordium do we have here, what kind of emotion is the writer playing to in this piece, what kind of topics they're using, going through all the logical fallacies. The emphasis was shifting towards thesis.

Next is Ed, trained in a literary specialty, he found himself a new assistant professor, thrust into a freshman comp class with no previous experience.

Ed: I started to read about them [theories] which actually stood me in good stead since no one had forced a theory at me ever, and I was forced to explore them myself. I looked at the books that they were using in the regular freshman classes, but went pretty much with what they were doing at Berkeley, not in the English department but the rhetoric department. I read a book by Brandt called *The Craft of Writing* which was intended for students, but I didn't think our students could use it. This was a thesis-centered approach to writing based on what I thought was the rather obvious fact that writing was a holistic activity that nonetheless we have to teach in a kind of seriatim way. It did become apparent to me that the problem of teaching composition was to be able to introduce students to concepts of writing and practice them that forced them into the holistic process of invention, arrangement, ordering of materials, rewriting--how to do that in a way that, you can talk about those units, but nevertheless, you want them to do it all at once. So this struck me as a way of getting at the process of writing that forced the activity

where it really belonged--in the head. I started to develop that and by and large I've stuck with that because it works for me anyway and seems to work for them and most of the time, I've stuck with thesis-invention.

So, for each, the orientation to theory was somewhat different. All 3 certainly felt heavily influenced by Aristotelian theory, but each had a different perspective concerning the individual student writer, ranging from an attitude of holistic development of the person to learning by example to that lone individual mind formulating a thesis. Several other questions which I asked attempted to solicit their views on different theories which they may have been aware of or actually introduced into their classes. Mary discusses how rhetorical theory affected how she views herself as an authority in the classroom.

Question: What do you feel the trend in the use of theory has been in the years you have been teaching?

Mary: The trend is to become, I can see the progression being somewhat atheoretical and just sort of doing what worked, what I read, to being, as a graduate student I often saw the use of theory differently than in the classroom. Now the two have come together. I'm very much committed to the idea that you have to practice what you preach. And that's the difficult one. It's very difficult to implement rhetorical theory in the classroom once you've explored your role as an authority. For example, it's completely changed my role of evaluating. I'm no longer the teacher; I no longer present myself in terms of the teacher. Primarily my role in the classroom in terms of assessment and evaluation is that I've got to convince the students that I am the best representative of their audience possible. That's what makes me the authority. My comments are completely different--I haven't written an "awkward" in years. What I do now is respond to the text as a reader and engage in longer arguments with them and sometimes they

have nothing to do with the paper in a sense the comment may not improve the paper. I have to convince them I'm a good reader. So that's one big change. I would say theories become more and more important but not a theory. As a test of what I'm doing and a test of the implications and consequences of what I'm doing in the classroom, theory has become more important.

Bill, as a part-time instructor, relies more on the "trickle-down" effect in his use of theory.

Bill: I think it's sort of look at what's going on. I'm not sure I understand deconstruction, but I pick up bits and pieces of it. I think I understand reader response, using it. Maybe we push it a little too hard, but the pendulum always comes back. It's peripheral; it's out there. The job is to work with what you have and not worry about whether it's going to fit some mold or clarity. There's still accuracy; there's still support, still purpose, there's still a truth if not the truth that's going to come out of a piece of writing. "We've" been the same as long as I've been a "we". What we've tried to do is teach composition, and we pick up bits and pieces as it comes down the pike. Thank God, there are people who keep track of these theories and changes and so on. Usually the textbooks push us that way. I think really that's where the theory comes from--out of these texts, and academicians are cranking out these goodies through these prefaces and introductions. The rest of us who don't have time or inclination to read lots of journals, it filters down--the trickle down theory and I think that's fine because it filters out some of the b.s. and eventually gets to the brass tacks and if they work, that's good and if they don't, throw it out and in the meantime we're still trying to do our thing to get students to write.

I think it's interesting to contrast the comments of these 2 teachers--both are aware of real consequences of theory in their classrooms, but Mary is involved directly in reading and interpreting theory--practicing what she preaches, whereas Bill maintains what he views as some perennial truths, possibly enhanced or aided by theory as he finds it reflected by textbooks.

Finally I asked them:

Question: Where would you place yourself on a "theory continuum" which ran from "no change over the years" to "lots of change"?

Bill begins by discussing pedagogical theory and then switches to his perception ot literary theory.

Bill: I have two extremes, I guess. When I first taught freshman English, I was with the chairman of the department, a wild man, now emeritus, who was probably as wild and wooly and free-wheeling as anyone I've ever met, and the other end of that spectrum is Ms. Brown who taught "How to Teach" and that was sort of "Never turn your back on your class". Ms. Brown and I never saw eye to eye although Ms. Brown knew her stuff backward and forward, so I'm somewhere in between. I can turn my back on my class, but I like also for them not to turn their back on me, if at all possible. Theory--I suppose the biggest change is from my New Critical base to what we're doing now which is paying more attention to people's backgrounds and ways of seeing, and that's important as long as you don't get lost and so separate that there's no commonality anymore. I still think there's much to be said for some of the Aristotelian and other approaches if for no other reason than through the past x hundreds of years everyone has done it that way. And if we're going to benefit from that body of knowledge, we have to pass on at least how to deal with it if there's going to be impact; otherwise education has no purpose. You just start from this little world and try to expand. So I think that somewhere in between and gradual change and being hit over the head with it long enough till it sinks in, if it's worth sinking in.

Ed previously told me that he sticks with his theory on thesis-invention, and although he'd tried other things, he always comes back to that because he's become effective using it. He says that if what he does looks old-fashioned, it's because 10 or 20 new theories have been published since then. Judy has

probably changed the most from her early formalist training to reader-response and multi-cultural influences.

Judy: On the reader response--one year I did it one way and the next I did it another. That was an abrupt one. More often it's a gradual change; you incorporate new ideas as they feel comfortable you drop the other ones. I don't know how fortunate or unfortunate it is but I don't cling to things just because I feel comfortable or because I thought that they worked very well. Because as I said you can try to force-feed those older views on somebody, but if it's not comfortable anymore to your students, they're not doing anything but adapting to you and I don't think they're well-served by that.

Composition studies, when contrasted with many literary specialties, is grounded in practice, teaching-centered. Charles Schuster, writes about theory and practice--that he tries to situate any course he teaches on the threshold between what he knows and what he'd like to discover but that "there is a self-reflexiveness among us, [that is] potentially dangerous because it can lead to a strangulating self-consciousness" and that "theory is suspect--and conceivably dangerous--because it often has no direct bearing on our institutional regimen"(34-5). But I think the voices we've heard suggest that Schuster is right when he suggests that "theory and practice thrive in an atmosphere of mutual tension"(42). It's difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from interviews with four people, but with all the differences in their perception of theory, they are all engaged in juxtaposing "a plan as to how something might be done" with their own practice, how it works for them.

I think, theoretically, we've moved from the use of a single theory with very self-reflection to such a proliferation of theories and emendations of them because of individual contexts--based upon both teacher and student needs--that this self-reflexiveness could, as Charles Schuster says, lead to a "strangulating self-consciousness"(34). Yet these reflective practitioners we have heard seem stimulated rather than strangulated by their regard for

theory. Thoughtful proliferation and evolution of theory in the classroom seem to be the trend. We seem to be teaching ourselves what many of us attempt to teach our students--engagement and adaptation in whatever context we find ourselves.

I think these personal histories show a wrestling with these ideas--sometimes a desire to accept them, but a desire as well to move back to the more "classical" approaches. I suggest that it's the tension between old and new theories and contextual awareness of what "fits" the given situation of both teacher and student which will continue to exist into the next century but with the increasing awareness that this kind of tension and flux in theory is o.k. As Charles Schuster has stated, "The opposite of 'theory' is not 'practice,' but rather 'thoughtlessness' and the antonym of 'practice' is not 'theory' but rather laziness"(42). Thoughtlessness and laziness are not the qualities which stand out in these interviews; rather these practitioners exhibit engagement and adaptability in both theory and practice.

Sources

Crowley, Sharon. *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction.* Urbana: NCTE, 1989.

North, Stephen. *The Making of Knowledge in Composition.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987.

Schuster, Charles I. "Theory and Practice." *An Introduction to Composition Studies.* Eds. E. Lindemann and G. Tate. NY: Oxford UP, 1991.