DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 565 CS 216 049

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TITLE Re-Thinking the Writing Process: Creativity and Composing Styles in the Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Style; Creativity; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Student Needs; Visual Arts; *Writing Processes; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Berthoff (Ann E); Composition Theory

ABSTRACT

In order to explore new ways of talking to and with composition students, an instructor might ask whether visual artists can teach college writing instructors about the composing process and, whether, by stepping outside the discipline, insights can be gained for more effective teaching of first-year writing students. For one instructor, interviewing artists allowed several relevant themes to emerge: visualizing the creative process, tapping the unconscious, and accommodating learning styles. The instructor realized that his unconscious goal was to help students personalize their own concepts of composing, to internalize some form of what Ann Berthoff calls "allatonceness." The discussions with the artists helped identify two fundamental notions of allatonceness: a holistic sense of the "what," a vision of a desirable end product worthy of expending time and effort; and a sense of the "how," an "inspired" glimpse of the process that will lead to that desired product. To take students beyond surface-level composing, strategies are needed for conveying and activating the deeper composing processes. Most curricula and textbooks are invariably promoting a conscious-based, short-term product instead of the opposite. Until students experience composing for themselves, no stage model or theory will convey the model-defying complexity of their individual composing processes. To accommodate the 20-plus learning styles in any first-year classroom, an instructor would be wise to develop a distrust of any pedagogy that does not engage students in as many ways as possible. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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Re-Thinking the Writing Process:

Creativity and Composing Styles in the Writing Classroom

INTRODUCTION

By the time most freshmen begin their *required* first-year classes, they've already "written without teachers" and been led, or prodded, through some form of prewriting, writing, and rewriting. They already have some notion of "process," which is often a wrong notion that is lock-step, linear, and lifeless. According to Lad Tobin, "[I]n some cases writing process pedagogy has simply replaced one mechanistic process with another: 'First you brainstorm, then freewrite, then draft, revise, edit'" (8). At times, I wonder whether or not student writing in the 1990's isn't just the next step in the evolution of "Engfish": Ken Macrorie's term (actually one of his students') for the safe, shallow, and voice-less prose only written for English teachers.

For the past several years, I've been exploring new ways of talking to and with my students about the *art* of composing—especially its playful, intuitive, and imaginative aspects. More specifically, to prepare for this presentation, I've been seeking to answer two related questions I asked myself a year ago: First, *what can visual artists teach us, as college writing instructors, about the composing process? And second, by stepping outside our own discipline, can we gain new insights into how we might become more effective in teaching first-year writing students?*

In my efforts to find what has already been written on the composing process—and creative thinking in general—I've read a variety of works in our own field as well as Fine Arts. For the purpose of this presentation, however, I admittedly stand on the

shoulders of two compositionists, who've mirrored, if not focused, my current perspective: Ann E. Berthoff and Janet Emig. A passage in one of Berthoff's books, *Reclaiming the Imagination*, first prompted me to go beyond just reading about non-writing notions of composing and, rather, to step outside our field to see (or at least talk about) them first-hand. She writes,

> Artists at work have a lot to teach us about the composing process. I think there is probably more to be learned by teachers of writing from time spent backstage and in practice rooms and studios than from time spent at conferences or in the study of rhetorical theory. . . . (261)

For me, "stepping outside" has meant interviewing four fine artists (who are also professors) about their thoughts on composing and teaching composing: two of them are oil painters; a third is a graphic artist; and a fourth is both an oil painter and computer artist. The interviews were only meant to start a dialogue between them and me. However, even as preliminary interviews, I've found that several themes emerged that are relevant to writing instruction: *visualizing the creative process, tapping the unconscious, and accommodating learning styles.*

VISUALIZING THE PROCESS

Not surprisingly, all of the artists prefer visual representations of the composing process over verbal and/or graphically illustrated ones. For them, *seeing* and, more importantly, *feeling* (i.e., kinesthetically) are the primary means of "knowing" in complex creative activities. Until novice artists can see and feel what they are wanting to do, they cannot engage in sustained exploration or achieve any depth of treatment in their creative efforts.

To illustrate the simultaneous act of seeing and feeling (i.e., thinking visually and kinesthetically), Berthoff quotes a British sculptor who writes, "My left hand is my

thinking hand. The right is only a motor hand. This holds the hammer. The left hand, the thinking hand, must be relaxed, sensitive. The rhythms of thought pass through the fingers and grip of this hand into the stone ("Intelligent Eye" 110). I feel confident that this sculptor could equate her creative process with some pre-sculpting, sculpting, and re-sculpting model; however, such a model would not do justice to her complex creative process.

I've come to realize that an unconscious goal of mine, for the last several years, has been to help my students personalize their own concepts of composing, to internalize some form of what Berthoff calls "allatonceness." To illustrate this concept, she tells an anecdote of a time when she was failing miserably to learn cross-country skiing from a friend—that is, until she observed another skier skiing effortlessly in the distance. She writes,

> And as I watched I suddenly saw the whole shape of the act of skiing; I saw the Gestalt; I got the rhythm, the allatonceness of the action. What I needed was not a *model* which could show me how the various gestures and stances and operations fitted together, but an *image* of how cross-country skiing *looks*, and kinesthetically, how it *feels*. The image of the skier gave me the whole process; it represented the allatonceness of cross-country skiing. (*Sense* 89; original emphasis)

In this anecdote, Berthoff distinguishes between a simplistic modeling of an "art form" (i.e., cross-country skiing) and a visual-kinesthetic experience by means of a sense-awakening image. Granted, her teacher *was* visually demonstrating the skiing process but was unable, by focusing on linear "stages," to meet her student's need of holistically seeing and feeling a complex process: she was unable to fully engage her student's imagination.

In reflecting on my discussions with the four artists, I've identified two fundamental notions of "allatonceness": first, there is a holistic sense of the *what*, a

vision of a desirable end product that is worthy of expending time and effort; and second, there is a sense of the *how*, an "inspired" glimpse of the process that will lead to that desired product. These complementary visions are necessary for students to engage in sustained exploration and to move beyond the "Engfish" level of many first-year writing students.

TAPPING THE UNCONSCIOUS

For an artist, a glimpse of what he or she might do and how it might be done is generally the beginning of the composing process. Each project moves from a sort of "vision quest" to an attainment of the vision to an act of entering into a creative "flow": that is, a creative space where the artist experiences something like a "runner's high" and can maintain a creative momentum for extended periods of time. However, the transition from a glimpse of the *what* and *how* to entering *the flow*—not to mention remaining there and/or returning later—requires a disciplined "letting go" of something in the conscious before the unconscious can be fully engaged in the act of composing.

One of the oil painters shared with me that she frequents thrift shops for inspiration, exploring old clothing on the racks, feeling textures and smelling smells, and reflecting on who might have worn them and when. She has learned that smells and textures trigger something in her creative process; by allowing the imagination and senses to play together, she is able, with some consistency and predictability, to tap into her unconscious. As a professional artist, she has come to know her own creative rhythms and idiosyncrasies; she recognizes when she has entered into "the flow" and is doing her best work. Yet the *act of play* is perhaps her most important work in moving from thrift shop visions to a studio canvass—as well as in the daily ebb and flow of composing.

Another artist, an oil painter and computer artist, explains that his creative vision and activities stem from tapping into memories and exploring how the "extraordinary" can be found in the "ordinary." Unlike the previous artist whose objective is primarily self-expressive and perhaps conceived as "still shots" to capture a moment or feeling, this artist produces narrative paintings that tell "stories" derived from personal experiences he recalls and reconceptualizes in some way. He envisions a theme of some kind, such as "The Four Seasons," and then taps into memories to capture something of each season. For instance, in his "Summer" painting, he depicts a Fourth of July setting with food set out on a picnic table and people engaged in activities while fireworks are seen in the distance. From the beginning to end of his projects, he has a gestalt sense of what he wants to achieve, and to fulfill that vision he continually plays with perspective, lighting, tone, etc. in much the same way that a short story writer or novelist might craft a verbal narrative for an audience. In contrast, one of the previous artist's paintings is of a person (perhaps a man or woman or even a child) enveloped in a sheet on a bed; her purpose is not to tell a story but, rather, to *express* something about humanity through her rendering of a mood by colors, textures, and the natural folds of the sheet.

Composing for these fine artists is a disciplined process not unlike the process of a long-distance runner whose training and conditioning make a "runner's high" a consistent and predictable part of his or her "art." For both the artist and runner, the experience of *entering the flow* or *experiencing a high* is what keeps them coming back for more. They both own and are owned by that creative moment. Unfortunately, the creative moment and a disciplined means of appropriating it are hard to capture in any process model we can draw on a black board.

To take our students beyond surface-level composing, we need strategies for conveying and activating the deeper composing processes. We need more effective

ways of helping students not only to see and feel (and, perhaps, smell) the process but also to tap into their unconscious as a source of creative energy. As I suggested earlier, I think that many of us are still encouraging "Engfish" in our classes. This is probably because we and/or our curricula and textbooks are invariably promoting a conscious-based, short-term product instead of an unconscious-based, long-term process.

In "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing," published in 1964, Jane Emig writes about the lack of depth in first-year "student themes." I believe that her argument is still valid in 1997. She writes,

> We are all devastatingly familiar with the conscious student theme. . . . By *conscious* I do not mean self-conscious in the sense of a style over-aware of itself; among high school and Freshman English students, this form of consciousness is not common. I mean *conscious* in the sense that the theme seems to have been written from one layer of the self—the ectoderm only, with student involvement in his own thought and language moving down an unhappy scale from sporadic engagement to abject diffidence.
>
> Why do we receive such surface scrapings? Quite often and quite simply, we have asked for them—if not explicitly by our statements, implicitly by acts and attitudes that suggest we ourselves believe writing to be wholly, or predominantly, a conscious action; or, to state the matter inversely, by acts and attitudes that suggest there is no unconscious self importantly engaged in the composing process. (46)

Emig puts the responsibility squarely on our shoulders if our students are producing safe, shallow, and voice-less writing. Our students readily know our individual, process-product value systems, and they produce whatever our teaching and evaluative methods suggest that we really want. If we don't encourage and reward them for risk-taking and experimentation, they won't give us more than "surface scrapings."

ACCOMMODATING LEARNING STYLES

We don't have to look far to find a variety of process models that have emerged over the last three decades. My favorite (because it seems closest to the Fine Arts) is Young, Becker, and Pike's (or, rather, Graham Wallas') four-part model in which the first three phases emphasize "prewriting" (i.e., preparation, incubation, and illumination) while the last one addresses "writing" and "rewriting" (i.e., verification). I find their approach more conducive to a notion of the *unconscious* in composing. And several other scholars have better informed my understanding of what I mean when I talk to students about composing: for example, Rudolf Arnheim explores visual and kinesthetic intuition and the notion of a creative "center"; Margaret Boden discusses the idea of "conceptual spaces" to be found and explored; and David Perkins describes "klondike spaces," a similar notion to Boden's "conceptual spaces" that further suggests a process of mining for ideas.

However, until my students *experience* composing for themselves (i.e., engaging the imagination through their senses, seeing and feeling it), no stage model or theory I provide will convey the model-defying complexity of their individual composing processes. Those processes differ from individual to individual, from the more "right-brained" to the more "left-brained" thinkers, from the extremely verbal and abstract to the extremely visual and concrete. To accommodate the 20+ learning styles in any first-year writing classroom, we are probably wise to develop a healthy distrust of any pedagogy that doesn't engage students—and all five senses—in as many ways as possible. My goal is for *all* my students, at least once during the semester, to *experience* the creative "vision" and the "flow," to know they've seen (and been impressed by) their own creative potential and have felt, however briefly, something of the energy that moved a Mozart or a Beethoven.

In fact, one scholar has actually used Mozart and Beethoven metaphorically to describe two extreme types of composers. In "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing," which I've quoted already, Janet Emig paraphrases a passage from "The Making of a Poem" in which the author, Stephen Spender,

> divides artists . . . into Mozartians and Beethovians. . . . The Mozartian can "plunge the greatest depths of his own experiences by the tremendous effort of a moment" and surface every time with a finished pearl . . . . The Beethovian, on the other hand, is the agonizer, the evolutionizer. . . . The creative self in a Beethovian is not a plummeting diver, but a plodding miner who seems at times to scoop south with his bare hands. (52)

I find this a useful analogy in thinking about my students and myself—I'm certainly not a Mozartian—as novice writer-artists. I want to see a potential Beethovian in each of them as I seek to help them discover and realize their creative potential. For most of us, the image of the plodding miner is a much more apt description of what we experience when we write than effortless pearl harvesting.

The question, then, is how can we help to unlock the potential of these Beethovian freshmen? I actually have a two-part answer: first, we can more effectively and *creatively* present the notion of a composing process, and second, we can try out new ways to accommodate students' varied learning and composing styles. Berthoff argues that,

> [I]f allatonceness is the chief characteristic of the kind of process composing is, then we will need ways of representing that idea to ourselves and our students. . . . [T]he best way to keep theory lively and practice responsive is to have *in mind* models and metaphors to *remind* us and our students of what is involved in learning and teaching the composing process. (*Sense* 88-89; original emphasis)

My basic premise now, as a "process" writing teacher, is that there are no models that can be expected to capture the complexity of any person's creative process. Therefore, I try to find as many ways to as possible to supplement or complement whatever models emerge in discussions about writing. Recently, I've begun crafting and storing up "process" analogies for sharing with my students. As I look through student profiles (taken up the second week of classes), I'll begin thinking about how I can relate their respective interests and "art" experiences to their writing process. I'll try to help as many as possible to see some interest of theirs as an art form that can help them better understand what happens in their individual composing processes, especially as they relate to the old adage of creativity as 90% perspiration and only 10% inspiration. For example, I might ask a snowboarder to describe how to carve the perfect turn, or a nature photographer how to frame the perfect scene. Each of these "compositions" results from some kind of internalized process and a sense of the desirable product each "artist" hopes to achieve.

However, customizing student process metaphors is only a beginning with students who probably don't aspire to master the art of writing (i.e., they're taking required writing courses). As writing teachers, we don't have the advantage of our Fine Arts colleagues of teaching in a "studio" setting and being more visibly "practicing" artists who are teaching their craft. Most of us are seen by students as "first-year writing teachers," not as practicing writers who are imparting their craft to future writers. Like many of you, I do share my own work, at times, and seek to establish myself as a writer teaching other writers to write—as a mentor to novices. But realistically, I only see marginal success and, therefore, want to find alternative (or, rather, more innovative) ways to reach as many different students in as many different ways as possible.

This desire has led me to explore how Fine Artists think about composing and creativity. I believe we and they have much to offer each other. The best way to challenge our own perspectives on composing and to push ourselves to see beyond the familiar is to step outside the confines of our own "world" and visit others. Through this experience, I've been challenged to think about my own teaching methods and my successes and failures in leading students further in the composing process. Seeing through the eyes of four fine artists, however briefly, has helped me to see more clearly through my own.

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Publication Date: March 12-15, 1997

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