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Beyond Pedagogy: Theorizing Without Teachers

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Amy D. Williams

Abstract: Composition theory and pedagogy have variously understood writing as a noun or as a verb, a product or a process. This paper proposes a shift to theorizing writing as a gerund (writing *g.*) and argues that this approach opens a space for more productive composition theory. A gerund orientation focuses attention on the virtual and affective qualities of the writing experience—what writing does to and with a writer. The study of writing *g.,* or what this paper calls *composition experience scholarship*, frees composition scholarship from a pedagogic imperative while at the same time producing theory that has practical application.

Binaries seem unavoidable in composition: philosophy/rhetoric, theory/practice, and product/process, to name a few. Composition inherited the first two dualisms from its rhetorical roots, as vividly captured in the agonistic debates between the philosopher Socrates (roughly representing theory) and what we might call the applied rhetoricians, the Sophists (representing practice). Two millennia later, participants in the Dartmouth Conference articulated the process/product dualism, updating the theory/practice split for a fledgling—and in many ways "applied"—academic field. Today these two binaries remain highly relevant (and I argue related) ventures, as the privileging of either term in each pair has consequences for composition's disciplinary identity. Traditional composition scholarship tends to reduce the theory/practice binary to a distinction between theory and teaching and makes it largely a question of precedent—which term should inform the other? The process/product split also concerns teaching—how we teach and how we justify composition as discipline. In other words, both binaries imply teaching, ensuring that pedagogy remains central to the field's very identity.

Nevertheless, some contemporary composition scholarship appears less interested in establishing a disciplinary pecking order and more interested in liberating composition theory from pedagogy altogether. As early as 1998, Sharon Crowley argued for composition as a discipline in its own right, distinct from the pedagogical interests and demands of first-year composition courses (*Composition* 1-18). Likewise, separating theory and pedagogy animates Sidney I. Dobrin's imperative to composition scholars: "Stop talking about teaching" (190). Amy E. Robillard agrees with Dobrin and Crowley that theory is too bound to practices, but she optimistically asserts that the much-needed sea change is already underway. She notes a "shifting disciplinary focus from writing as verb—as illustrated most clearly through the pedagogical imperative—to writing as noun—and object of study in its own right" (254). Here Robillard suggests that past composition scholarship has monolithically invested in theorizing writing as verb, that the verb perspective is linked to pedagogy, and that the perceived move to a writing-as-noun orientation will fundamentally change how we theorize writing, potentially decoupling it from pedagogy. Her taxonomy further implies that composition theory exhibits coherent and easily traced patterns.

But history stubbornly refuses Robillard's tidy classifications: even a cursory review of composition theory reveals that scholars have quite haphazardly and sometimes simultaneously used writing-as-verb and writing-as-noun approaches. It is perhaps more accurate to assert that these seemingly oppositional approaches have alternated in scholarly prominence and have been applied in an imbricating rather than discrete fashion. And neither has proven entirely satisfactory. For example, Jody Shipka approvingly notes the "fading interest in [verb-oriented] composing process studies" but at the same time chides the field for its "tendency to 'freeze' writing, to treat it as a noun rather than a verb" (13). In short, the field seems to have exhausted the usefulness of the noun/verb dichotomy. The question is not which should be privileged, but why we must rely on either.

Nevertheless, Robillard's parts-of-speech approach provides a valuable heuristic for rethinking composition theory. Inspired by Robillard, my purpose in this essay is to propose an additional part-of-speech differentiation that I

believe offers ethical potential for composition theory and scholarship: writing as gerund. In a provocative essay, Victor J. Vitanza suggests that productive theorizing would begin by asking, "What is it that writing wants?" His gerundive use of the word "writing" shifts theory away from the writer's writing (noun or verb) and toward the experience of writing. The gerundive stance approaches writing ethologically; it explores what the act of writing *does,* how it functions affectively in relationship with a writer, and how it operates in spaces outside of classrooms and with subjects beyond students. I call theorizing in this vein *composition experience scholarship.*{1}

After introducing writing *g.* as a theoretical construct, I test Robillard's and John Trimbur's ideas by tracing the use of writing as noun (writing *n.*) and writing as verb (writing *v.*) through theories of composition (current traditional, expressivist, cognitive, social-epistemic) to demonstrate both the tenacity of the noun-verb orientation and its inability to move radically beyond a focus on teaching. Finally, I posit writing *g.* and composition experience scholarship as ways to resist (if desired) the immediate pull to pedagogy. I draw on ideas of virtuality and flow from scholars such as Brian Massumi, Byron Hawk, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to understand the affective experience of writing—what writing wants from and does with a writer. The questions I address in the essay's final section circle around this re-vision of writing: What opening does composition experience scholarship provide for thinking beyond the pedagogic imperative? What can composition experience scholars contribute to composition theory?

Composing and Composition: writing parts of speech

If history challenges Robillard's assumptions of an evolution in composition scholarship, it is no less friendly to her linkage of writing-as-verb theories with a pedagogical imperative. The proposition that verb-based theories (those that ask questions about how writing is accomplished) are strictly pedagogical while noun-based theories (those that ask questions about what writing is) are less so is questionable. While composition theories have variously employed writing both as a noun and as a verb, those kinds of distinctions have not made substantive differences in whether or not theories are taken up pedagogically (in either case they almost always are). Thus, composition theories seem to elude the kind of easy pedagogical binaries Robillard assumes while casting doubt on her assumptions about a coherent theoretical trajectory.

We might note that Robillard is not the first to consider the consequences of asking part-of-speech questions about composition theories. In arguing for an advanced writing curriculum, Trimbur urges a similar move from participle —"writing as an unfolding activity of composing" (18)—to noun—"the material manifestations and consequences of writing as it circulates in the world" (18). Like Robillard, Trimbur concludes that the verb form has dominated pedagogy, resulting in what he sees as an "overriding desire [on the part of both students and teachers] to convert writing theory into classroom practice" (21). Both Robillard and Trimbur believe a noun approach offers an escape from the pedagogical bind.

The noun/verb distinction seems to align with the product/process rupture that has pervaded the field since the Dartmouth Conference, during which British and American participants disagreed over the fundamental question of what English was all about—with the British advocating less emphasis on content (product or noun) and more on "activities" (process or verb) (Parker 36). Joseph Harris argues that Dartmouth's demarcation of product and process and concomitant rearrangement of priorities "has symbolized a kind of Copernican shift from a view of English as something you *learn about* to a sense of it as something you *do*" (1). Note, however, that the product (noun) did not disappear from composition studies; it simply became the student's own writings rather than the literary canon.

Moving to the Gerund: an ethology

The gerundive approach I am advocating extends the shift begun at Dartmouth: from writing as subject matter to writing as activity to writing as actor. My proposal follows Paul Cook's suggestion that composition studies solve its identity crisis by asking ethological questions of its pedagogy: "What *can* a pedagogy do?" (771) or, in Deleuze's words, what are its "capacities for affecting and being affected" (qtd. in Cook 771)? In the turn from writing *n.* to writing *g.*, I attempt a similar methodology, although I do it as a way of disrupting composition's pedagogic imperative altogether. To be clear, this is not to propose the elimination of a subject. There is still a writer in writing *g.*, but focusing on the writer/writing relationship allows us to bypass the usual theoretical/pedagogical constraints: the subject is no longer restricted to students, writing is not restricted to freshman composition, and agency is not restricted to the writer-subject. Because the ethological approach focuses on writing's "capacities for affecting and being affected," writing itself assumes agency.

The part-of-speech distinctions I am trying to make may be easier to imagine by first using a more easily visualized verb, such as *to run.* Equating running with writing would have seemed unremarkable for ancient Greeks whose

gymnasiums “situate[ed] rhetorical training temporally and spatially in the midst of athletic training” (Hawhee 128). While we no longer instinctively pair athletics and intellectual pursuits (despite sporadic attempts to address the physicality of writing), Debra Hawhee notes that the “body’s centrality in learning and performing [rhetoric] is something the ancients knew so well as to almost take for granted” (195). In the context of classical rhetoric this running-writing analogy would not require explanation.

The suitability of substituting “to run” for “to write” also lies in running’s traditional associations with communication. Although modern day marathons do not serve as a means of communication, the reenactment of legendary events reinforces the pairing of running and the delivery of vital messages and in the process elevates the race above a pointless display of physical prowess. Ancient Greeks quite literally embodied running’s connection to messaging in the figure of Hermes, who served not only as the messenger of the gods but also as tutelary deity for both orators and athletes. Speech, writing, and traffic all fall under his guardianship. Artistic representations frequently depict Hermes with winged shoes or helmet, emphasizing the physical movement of messages from the composer to her intended audience. We retain this sense of message delivery and reception in our contemporary use of the word *hermeneutic*. Thus running is not just a convenient verb for our present purposes but one that offers rich connotations and nuances in the context of writing.

As we think of running as a verb, our discussions will naturally include how one learns to run or how a runner improves her running—doing it faster, longer, more efficiently, without injury, etc. To think of writing as a verb invites similar kinds of speculation and questions: how does a writer write well/efficiently/persuasively/coherently/aesthetically/skillfully/unskillfully/etc.?

In the switch from verb to noun, running becomes *a run*, a count noun that can be examined empirically. Because it occupies physical and temporal space, a run can be measured, mapped, timed, charted, and graphed. Runs can be evaluated objectively—by marking the distance or assessing the elevation—and subjectively—by considering a runner’s opinion of a particular run. Writing, as a noun, retains the same inflection as its verb form, but written texts also allow for both objective/positivist parsings and subjective/interpretive evaluations.

Because it is relevant to pedagogical application, I note one difference between running and writing here. The actor of running *v.* and running *n.* can be, and almost always will be, the same runner-subject. But in the shift from writing *v.* to writing *n.*, the subjects increase. The writer-subject who seeks to improve her writing may be the same writer-subject who examines and interprets texts, but she is unlikely to also be the writer who created those texts. If writing-as-verb constructs its subject as a basic writer, as Crowley (*Composition*) and Linda Brodkey critically argue, then writing-as-noun constructs two subjects: the presumably skilled author of the text worth emulating and the presumably less-skilled reader/interpreter (student) of the text, who may be, but is not required to be, also a writer. While student-produced texts are common in composition scholarship, they are almost always presented as exemplary of a particular pedagogy and/or teacher rather than exemplary of writing *per se*. Student-writers are further denied authorial status through the pejorative citation styles (pseudonyms or first names only) used to reference their work (Robillard 254). In short, the augmentation of subjects in writing *n.* does nothing to interrupt the problematic universal student subjectivity criticized by Crowley (*Composition*). Dobrin extends this criticism further in his accusation that composition studies is neither the study of writing *n.* nor of writing *v.*; it is the study of the “(student) subject” (4). Little wonder, then, that the pedagogic imperative persists.

For clarity, I return to my first example: to study running as a gerund is not to consider how running is done or what a run is. Running *g.* is interested in the responses running provokes in a runner—exhaustion, exhilaration, elevated heart rate, torn muscles, improved cardiovascular function, etc. A gerundive approach to understanding running does not try to definitively predict or control what running will do in any given circumstance but rather suggests what it is capable of doing to and with a runner. Only when running becomes an artifact (run-as-a-count-noun) are those affects apparent and quantifiable. And then, of course, the study is no longer ethological, but empirical.

In the same way, we can conceive of writing *g.* by asking ethological questions. We are not here concerned with how a writer performs writing *v.* or what writing *n.* (texts) mean or how a writer uses writings (noun) in writing (verb) new texts (noun) or any of the other pedagogic traps that noun/verb orientations lure us into. Rather, writing *g.* seeks to understand what writing does to a writer. In this theoretical model, writing stimulates and writer responds—automatically, involuntarily, and only sometimes consciously. Writing *g.*’s attention to the spontaneous exchange between writer and writing resembles Janet Atwill’s conception of productive *techne*. Like writing *g.*, Atwill’s *techne* complicates the theory/practice binary by noting the aspects of rhetoric that the dualism simply cannot account for: namely, the contingent and dynamic context of rhetorical production. However, Atwill highlights the situational indeterminacy in order to note the rhetor’s extemporaneous, but nevertheless conscious and purposeful, response—her seizing the opportune moment in a state of nearly overwhelming flux. In contrast, writing *g.*, or composition experience scholarship, dismisses the purposeful response and seeks instead to understand the affectively overwhelming state of a writer writing.

Because it is no longer interested in the intentional writing process or the written product, the gerundive theory obviates the need for assessment of both. This destruction of the possibility and requirement of assessment is the first move away from a pedagogical imperative. A further distancing from pedagogy is accomplished because the writer is no longer limited to a student. The subject position expands to include all writers and is complicated by writing's agency. Writing claims a role in the affective writer/writing relationship; the two are interdependent agents, but agents nonetheless.

Beyond getting rid of a solitary student-subject and an insistence on assessment, writing *g.* differentiates itself further from noun and verb based theories by repudiating the similar teleological impulse underlying them. Both current-traditional theories of composition (which emphasize the study and imitation of exemplary texts) and cognitive/expressivist/social-epistemic theories of composition (which emphasize the ways writers compose and their motivations for doing so) are embedded with the idea of previous and future texts. Process theories claim to disrupt this "product" orientation, but even the most desultory process aims for an eventual textual end. In the more linear process methods, progress toward a text is explicit, rendering suspicious the denial of product. In contrast, writing *g.* offers the theoretical possibility of acknowledging affects as generative and at the same time as disassociated with a productive end. As we shall see, writing *g.* allows for wallowing in affect, the sort of "ongoing process of becoming" (Hawk 125) that characterizes entelechy.

Again, the analogy of running provides some clarity. The verb *to run* and the noun *run* both contain the idea of a product. Running is action directed toward the more or less successful production of a run. Conceiving of running as a verb is to consider all the ways that the act can (and should) materialize in the form of a (hopefully successful) run. The action is appraised primarily quantitatively in terms of its correlation to a desired outcome, which is also quantitatively appraised. In our culture, education is so entangled with assessment that it is hard to conceive of one without the other. Thus the potential for assessment demands pedagogic application: we *should* teach what we are able to assess. There is no parallel exigency to teach something for which the only valid assessment of experience (whether of running or writing) can only ever be individually and subjectively qualitative.

Being beyond the reach of external assessment mechanisms, writing *g.* quite clearly lacks a necessary link between theory and classroom practice. But there is an additional anti-pedagogic consideration in theorizing the affects writing has on a writer. Affects are not always discernible, nor are they within the control, or even the full consciousness, of the writer. The affective outcomes of writing *g.* are diffuse and unpredictable; they are specific to individuals and also to contexts. The writer does not deliberately direct, control, or order her affective response to writing any more than the runner wills her heart rate to elevate or her muscle to tear. There is little impetus to teach that which cannot be wittingly accomplished. Still, theorizing writing's affects is not completely divorced from pedagogical theories. Affects are never fully prized away from the verb forms of writing (in which they are experienced) or the noun form of writing (which may or may not result therefrom). Gerundive affects are immanent to writing as verb and noun, but their connection to practice is not compulsory. This is not to suggest that pedagogy is unable to attend to writing's affects or that teachers cannot create conditions conducive to experiential learning. Yet this kind of indirect, environmental tinkering may fail to meet established standards for pedagogy.

This does not mean that theorizing writing *g.* is merely ivory tower navel gazing. I believe that writing *g.* theories contribute to understanding the experience of composition. If a runner develops habits of running in part to feel affect —euphoria, exhaustion, accomplishment, despair—then the same may be true for a writer. If the end of writing *v.* theory and practice is the skilled writer (however constituted), and the end of writing *n.* is the artful text (however constituted), the end of writing *g.* may be the creation of a writer who enjoys the process of entelechy. It is possible that the relationship between writer and writing "produce(s) desire, which generates movement and production" (Hawk 159). For example, the affective response of a body (and individual parts of that body) to running—the ecstasy (both pleasurable and painful) of the experience— is what has motivated humans to continue to run long past the time when running fulfilled life-saving purposes such as avoiding predators, coordinating battles, or sending messages. If writing *g.* has any pedagogical connection, it may lie in this realm, an issue I will take up later in this paper. Theorizing writing *g.* does not compel a pedagogical application; nevertheless, it invites pedagogical invention.

Writing as Noun: a textual history

Robillard's perception of a recent disciplinary shift toward textual orientation seems to ignore composition history. For example, the much maligned current-traditional (CT) approach to first-year composition courses is writing as noun through and through. As Crowley (*Memory*) explains, CT pedagogies built on traditional pedagogies (essentially value-laden cognitive calisthenics) and simply "transferred […] concern with minds to concern with the shape of

texts. The hope was that a well-formed text would reflect a well-oiled mind at work" (13). Thus, current-traditional nods to writing as a verb (adherence to mechanical conventions), but its accomplishment is as a noun.

Writing as noun did not disappear with the demise of current-traditional rhetoric. Despite Trimbur's protests that students "[cannot] imagine writing in its noun form" (20), writing as noun is everywhere in post-current-traditional classrooms—in process pedagogies, expressivist pedagogies, cultural studies-based writing pedagogies, and social-epistemic pedagogies. Though process pedagogies shift the focus to the activity of writing (as described below), the successful process always culminates in a material manifestation of writing—the text. The process/product split was never a complete rupture.

Likewise, expressivism remains fixated on writing *n.* even as it represents both a new style of writing and a radical shift in assessment—from text as correct to text as authentic. Writing as noun is also evident in cultural studies approaches to writing, which substitute close reading of popular cultural artifacts for the close reading of great books that writing had inherited from its English department, literary studies ancestry. And writing as noun is no less prominent in social-epistemic rhetoric in which the idea of literacy (and thus texts) is central to both constructing and resisting unjust social realities. While social-epistemic rhetoric questions the traditional (Western) textual canon, it does not shy away from reading as a fundamental part of writing instruction.

While these theories focus on writing as a noun, the verb form is implicit. Writing *n.*merely serves writing *v.*: the text is important either because it is the result of writing *v.* or because it leads to writing *v.* (and thus the creation of another text). For example, David Bartholomae's landmark essay, "Inventing the University," describes how students demonstrate, through writing (verb), their potential to produce the kind of knowledges validated by the academy. Potential is accomplished through writing *v.* and manifest in the student's written texts (writing *n.*). Futhermore, Bartholomae emphasizes that the student's text is made possible by the historical texts with which the student engages. For Bartholomae, then, writing *v.* is a conversation and mediation between various writings *n.* Importantly, Bartholomae also hints at the possibility of writing as gerund when he suggests that the assessment of student texts should include consideration of the ways "language made or unmade the writer" (147) in the composing process. In acknowledging writing's relationship with a student-writer, Bartholomae adumbrates the kind of ethological approach I am advocating. While Bartholomae does not explore the gerundive idea—the experience of writing rather than the act of writing— it is nevertheless noteworthy that he presents it as a possibility.

Writing as Verb: an active history

Trimbur and Robillard argue that verb-based theories preceded noun-based theories and that the move from verb to noun was a move away from strict demands for pedagogy. But, as demonstrated, it is perhaps as easy to argue that writing as noun is antecedent and that both forms compel to pedagogy equally. Having established that noun-based theories cannot be completely devoid of writing *v.*, we must accept that the converse is true as well. The 1970s saw theorists like Sondra Perl, Nancy Sommers, and Donald Murray seeking to describe writing as a series of identifiable stages through which an author systematically proceeds to the creation of a text. These process theorists sometimes compared skilled and unskilled writers (as determined by textual evaluation) in an attempt to highlight the productive practices of the former and eliminate the wasteful habits of the latter. In his imperatively titled "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product," Murray (2011) identifies several "implications" of his anti-product pedagogy: "Implication No. 1: The text of the writing course is the student's own writing" (5). It is not clear if he is being ironic.

Even as cognitive theorists like Linda Flower and John R. Hayes changed the focus of process theory from observable writing stages (pre-writing, revising, etc.) to the study of the writing brain at work, the inevitable connection of writing *v.* and writing *n.* remained. Flower and Hayes boast, "As a research tool, a protocol [transcript of writer thinking out loud] is extraordinarily rich in data and, *together with the writer's notes and manuscript*, it gives us a very detailed picture of the writer's composing process" [emphasis added] (368). Like process theorists, the cognitivist linked the act of writing to textual results.

Because writing as verb can hardly be separated from writing as noun, no faithful chronology of composition studies can neatly place one before the other as Trimbur and Robillard seek to do. Nevertheless, their contention that the verb form must be pedagogical does appear to hold (even if the same can be said of writing *n.*). Writing *v.*—an efficient, skillful means to a coherent, pleasing text— is something that fairly begs to be taught. Writing *v.* is sometimes reduced to a series of necessary steps, stages, skills, habits, and technologies—all with an eye to the speedy production of an acceptable text. By emphasizing efficiency, some writing *v.* pedagogies imply that the experience of writing is fairly miserable, as if writing is the penance one must pay to get her knowledge into the world. It is toward a more optimistic consideration of the writing experience that I next turn.

Writing as Gerund: traces of affect

Having established that writing theory has never been exclusively noun or verb (nor indeed does it seem possible to consider writing in a way that substantively divides the two), having therefore proved false the claim that a significant trend toward noun-based theorizing exists (or even could exist), and, finally, having demonstrated that writing-as-noun theories are no less inherently pedagogical than writing-as-verb theories, I now return to my earlier proposal that writing as a gerund may lead us out of the pedagogical loop. Writing as a gerund is not an idea that is absent from extant theory; it is simply an idea that is not fully developed. Accordingly, I first approach the idea of writing as a gerund through the existing literature and then suggest some ways that writing *g.* theory and composition experience scholarship could be profitably extended.

Looking at what writing does with and to a writer (its affects) is a fundamental move away from pedagogy for at least three reasons. First, because the writing's affects exceed the writing-subject's conscious control, many pedagogical considerations are rendered moot. Just as it is senseless to think we can or should teach the runner (beginning or advanced) how to experience running, it is hard to conceive of an appropriate pedagogy to teach the experience of writing. Second, because writing's affects are at once individual and universal, it is impossible to think of the writing *g.* writer as any particular kind of subject. An unstable subject defies a necessary pedagogy. Finally, a writer's experience of writing is not wholly dependent on skill.

Returning to the metaphor of running, we can easily see that running-induced affects are at once patterned and unique: a beginning runner and a world-class marathoner both feel running's full ecstatic potential—increased heart rate, fatigue, pain, endorphin-induced euphoria—regardless of the differences in their running *v.* or their run *n.* Additionally, the broader circumstances and conditions in which running is constituted—weather, running surface, topography, the presence or absence of other runners—play a part in shaping a runner's experience. Running in a race, for example, is a different affective reality than running (even the same route) in training. As Marilyn M. Cooper has argued, writing entails similar interaction between a writer and her environment, a relationship she describes as the "ongoing process of stimulus and response" (20). I elaborate this point in more detail below; here I simply note that in both writing and running context influences affect.

While writing, like running, affects skilled and unskilled writers impartially, skill determines the degree to which practitioners perceive those affects as pleasurable. Therefore, the qualitative difference between skilled and unskilled subjects is primarily temporal; a subject's ability will determine the length of time she can persist, or perhaps more importantly chooses to persist, in the running or writing experience. If a pedagogical imperative survives in writing *g.* theories, perhaps it is primarily in terms of encouraging writers to persist in writing.

We find hints of writing as a gerund throughout composition theory and pedagogy. For example, Perl approaches the idea of affect as she discusses the experience of writing as "felt sense," a term she borrows from philosopher Eugene Gendlin. Perl applies felt sense to writing in this way: "The move is not to any words on the page nor to the topic but to feelings, non-verbalized perceptions that *surround* the words, or to what the words already present *evoke* in the writer. The move draws on sense experience … The move occurs inside the writer, to what is physically felt" (365). Her "move" is aware of the writer's experience, but it is tied to the text's affects, the feelings and subjective experiences that accompany writing *n.* She tries to expand this into writing *v.* but immediately reduces felt sense to what she calls a "basic step in the process of composing that skilled writers rely on … and that less skilled writers can be taught" (366). Hers is a brief foray, grounded in noun and verb, into the realm of affect, whereupon she quickly redirects her theorizing to the familiar terrain of an unskilled student-subject and a controllable process.

Likewise, Ann E. Berthoff approaches the experiential affects of writings in her book *The Making of Meaning*. She suggests that writing is a process of making meaning that involves "chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, … the mysterious and unformed" (70). Surely she is articulating something of the same experience Perl calls felt sense—the interior experience of ideas and feelings organizing and revealing themselves to the writer. Yet Berthoff is more interested in teaching students to use chaos than in theorizing the experience of chaos. Like Perl's, her work rests on the *terra firma* of students and classrooms and writing instructors.

Composition-as-Happening, as promoted by scholars such as Charles Deemer and Geoffrey M. Sirc, seems perfectly suited to a writing-as-gerund orientation; after all, Deemer unequivocally states, "I see education as an *experience* …, an experience unrealized in the present fragmentation of the classroom unexperience" (122). Sirc wants English composition to become less academic and more avant-garde, less workmanlike and more poetic celebration. But the Happening's disruptive, anything-goes attitude toward writing instruction and written texts is ultimately more about creating a particular experience in which to write than it is about experiencing the affect of writing.

Like the ethology of writing *g.*, Cooper acknowledges writing in terms of relationship, but her focus is not on the

interaction between writing and writer that I am advocating. Instead, Cooper is interested in the ecological relationship between writers and their environments. Cooper helpfully offers a way out of writing as merely "autonomous intended action on the world" (16), but her substitution of writing as "monitoring, nudging, adapting, adjusting—in short, responding to the world" (16) doesn't move us that far along. Still, her emphasis on writing as "responses that involve both body and mind and are only partly and sometimes intentional" (17) indexes where I am heading. Cooper de-privileges the writer-subject in her description of "writing as arising from responses to others and to social and physical environments" (17); the writer-agent is still discernible, but it is the "responses" that are foregrounded. The displacement of a singular subject is evident also when she says, "Tools seem to have arisen out of physical and kinetic coordinations between agents and their environment—they result from actions of shaping" (22). However, Cooper effaces the primacy of the subject in order to emphasize the writer-environment relationship, whereas I do so as a way of recognizing writing as an agent in the writer-writing relationship.

Here I follow Jenny Edbauer Rice's and Thomas Rickert's important arguments extending agency beyond just the biological human body and human will. For example, Rickert's "ambient" perspective recognizes agency in the "muddle" of objects, spaces, information, and things ("Kairos" 915), while Rice sees agency in the network of relationship—including affective relationships—between human and non-human bodies (see Edbauer and Rice). Both allow for agency to be distributed throughout the environment. This expanded understanding of agency enables my locating agency in writing *g.*{2}

Composition experience scholarship, as I am conceiving it, appreciates that writing does things to writers; it induces affects for, with, and on writers. As I have noted, some composition theorists periodically and obliquely reference writing as a gerund, yet each lacks a sustained engagement with the idea.

Composition Experience Scholarship: virtuality and flow

It is not until Vitanza's essay (noted earlier) that we find a substantive transition to the kind of theory I am advocating. Vitanza explains further:

> There is something about 'writing' that not only 'we' hide from ourselves but also that writing itself hides from us. Though hidden, 'it' cannot be found. If supposedly found, 'it' is easily lost again. Actually and Virtually, 'it' is not hidden! Nor is it ever found. […] **What writing or composition wants is a writer! To invite someone to become a writer! What rhetoric wants is a body that comes to expressing itselphs** [*sic*]**. A writer. A body filled with tics that cannot but (not) write!** Twitchings.

With writing *g.* firmly established as an agent, Vitanza is able to abandon both texts and the writer writing (neither of which meet his standard of hiddenness). In so doing, he leads us firmly away from pedagogy. Vitanza's writing *g.* is an elusive, wild, insatiable desiring that invites, wants, hails a writer; the writer's role is reduced (or enlarged) to tics and twitchings. It is hard to imagine a classroom application for Vitanza's ideas. Accordingly, he indexes a productive, non-pedagogical engagement with writing.

Having hailed the writer, writing *g.* engulfs her in a sea of affect, and here Vitanza's allusion to the virtual becomes essential to an understanding of writing *g.* In making this claim, I acknowledge that the move to the virtual is perhaps predictable for theorists looking for new approaches to writing and composition (see Hilst, Hawk, and Kameen). Nevertheless, I suggest that the virtual is an appropriate way to conceive of writing's affective relationship with a writer, characterized, as it is, by possibilities that lie just beyond the writer's conscious control. In the discussion that follows, I continue to use *affect* to reference the involuntary mental, emotional, and physical responses that writing stimulates in a writer; I use writing *g.* to reference the condition of being thus stimulated.

In his rethinking of composition theory, Paul Kameen asserts the value of meditative thinking. Borrowing a metaphor from Heidegger, Kameen suggests that meditative thinking is "approaching" (10). While Kameen's meditative thinking is conscious, purposeful, and intentional, the idea of approaching is what I mean when I call writing's affects *virtual.* In this sense, the experience of writing is a series of mental and emotional approaches (and retreats) that are involuntarily set in motion when a writer engages in writing but that exceed her conscious control. When a writer deliberately initiates the act (verb) of writing, the affect (gerund) can be thought of as the ideas, words, connections, and knowledges that unwittingly wash over her and that she may only partially apprehend. She may choose to actualize a possibility at any given time by creating a text, but her writing (verb and noun) represent only one instantiation of a multiplicity of possibilities—Massumi's "crowd of pretenders to actualization" (30)— that writing (gerund) offers. It is in this sense of always approaching infinitely expanding potential(s) that the affect of writing is virtual. Consider Tamsin Lorraine's articulation of the virtual as an expression of writing's affect: "At the edges of my perception are sensations not quite experienced that intimate the virtual potential this moment holds for other ways of perceiving. At the edges of my thinking are the other paths my thoughts could have unfolded but did not" (113).

Unlike the stable text or the stable external processes and technologies, writing *g.* never needs “become” anything. Rather, it introduces the writer to a state of always being, always approaching.

Related to the idea of a multiplicity of possibilities, and equally important to the idea of the virtual in writing *g.*, is the notion of lack of control. Writing’s affect may resist a writer’s governance by simply overwhelming consciousness. Hawk suggests that the body bathes in multiple relations but does “not consciously account for every molecule of water” (190). Massumi argues that the body is unable to account for the wealth of relations because they are both prodigal and fleeting. Drawing on experiments demonstrating the body’s insensibility to stimulation shorter than half a second, he suggests, “The half second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull, in excess of the actually-performed action and of its ascribed meaning. … Something that happens too quickly to have happened, actually, is virtual … the virtual, the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies, is a realm of potential” (29-30). The virtual’s ephemeral abundance resides outside the writer’s conscious control: it is both too much and not enough. Seen from this perspective, even talk aloud protocols such as Flower and Hayes’ prove incapable of capturing what will always transcend apprehension and therefore articulation.

Dobrin addresses this lack of control (and extends Hawk’s water metaphor) by introducing the concepts of “flow” and “saturation” to the writing process. I take up these terms in a different context than he uses them, but for now I build upon his assertion that flow “functions as a noun and verb” (182). Flow is writing as text and writing as act. Flow can be described and dictated, measured and meted, or it can perform these functions. In contrast, Dobrin’s saturation is how I am conceiving of writing *g.*:

> Saturation is more thorough, more active, potentially more violent. Its force opens new tributaries, new dimensions of its saturation, often slowly but at times dangerously *rapidly*. Writing fills; writing overflows. Like a river that carves its path over time while engulfing all within its path, flowing over, in around, and through that which it encounters, reacting to every presence, even retreating and abandoning at times, writing overwhelms. (183-184)

The complex virtual network Massumi, Dobrin, and Hawk describe is the affective experience of writing. Conceived this way, writing would seem of great interest theoretically and of little use pedagogically. Writing *g.* seems to offer a purist theoretical path for those who might wish to follow it. However, as Hawk says, “human bodies are set up to perceive some potentialities that are in excess of the brain’s conscious perception. Even though brains cannot consciously perceive virtual events, bodies can sometimes feel, sense or intuit them” (118).

Another understanding of flow may be employed usefully here. According to Csikszentmihalyi, a University of Chicago psychologist, flow is the condition of “optimal experience”—what people feel in the best moments of their lives. Surprisingly, Csikszentmihalyi found that flow is never experienced passively; it occurs “when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (3).{3} Several characteristics of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow correspond to what I have identified as writing *g.*—the virtual, affective experience of writing. First, while flow occurs in the context of activity, flow is not the *act* of doing something but the *experience* of an actor while doing something. Second, flow is autotelic; that is, the experience of flow provides meaning, pleasure, and motivation independent of any end outside of the activity itself. Third, flow is a relationship of affect between two agents: the actor and the experience. As Csikszentmihalyi says,

> When a person invests all her psychic energy into an interaction . . . she in effect becomes part of a system of action greater than what the individual self had been before. This system takes its form from the rules of the activity; its energy comes from the person’s attention. But it is a real system—subjectively as real as being part of a family, a corporation, or a team—and the self that is part of it expands its boundaries and becomes more complex than what it had been. (65)

This expansion of boundaries and attendant complexity manifests the virtual. As explained above, a subject experiences flow when she invests the limits of her concentration in an activity that pushes her toward the limits of her physical and mental capacity. Yet because these limits contain the possibility of expansion, they are only ever approachable. They are, in essence, virtual. As in Massumi’s idea of the virtual, flow experiences offer the subject an over-abundance of stimulation. Unlike Massumi, who argues that this richness leads to unconsciousness, and Hawk, who argues that perception of the virtual is limited to intuition, Csikszentmihalyi asserts that individuals who report flow most frequently display what he calls “flexible attention” or “the ability to screen out stimulation and to focus only on what they decide is relevant for the moment” (87). The capacity to willfully attend to affective experience differentiates Csikszentmihalyi’s flow from Massumi’s and Hawk’s experiences of the virtual. Csikszentmihalyi claims that the ability to “restructure consciousness so as to make flow possible” (83) can be learned—a boon for sales of his book and an opening for pedagogical invention (should we want it).

Conclusion

Composition experience scholarship attends to the virtual, flow experience of writing. Noun and verb based theories of writing (obsessed with stages of writing and written texts) inevitably divert a writer's attention away from the kind of focus on stimulation that constitutes flow. This is not to say that writing as verb and noun should not be taught, especially since skill enhances a writer's ability to fully invest in the experience of writing. Yet when students envision writing as either a facile march to a certain text or an arduous slog to an amorphous end, they are unlikely to make the kind of psychic investment that flow requires. Writers on both paths are sure to be dissuaded by writing's inevitable frustrations. It is only in embracing the awful potentiality of the virtual writing experience that a writer experiences flow.

But a question nags me: What do we make of virtuality's pedagogical relevance? Rather than disavowing pedagogy or advocating its exclusion as Dobrin might, could we teach writers to honor the experience of writing, its virtual and actual unfolding? Of course, having argued that writing *g.* is, or at least can be, inherently exclusive of pedagogy, I hesitate now to suggest a compulsory (re)turn to teaching; rather, I offer the following modest defense of pedagogy's possibility. First, while writers involuntarily experience writing's affects, they do not do so without voluntarily and intentionally engaging in the difficult process of writing. Second, writing's affects are always at some level linguistic and thus distinct from the virtual affect of meditating (and even composing) in other contexts. Furthermore, writing's affects are distinct even from other discursive activities, as evidenced by the frequent complaint, "I can say what I mean; I just can't write it." To the extent, then, that writing's affects are singularly connected to the act of writing, to the extent that writing's affects can be at least felt or sensed in some way, to the extent that the writer can come to perceive them as pleasurable, and to the extent that the virtual experience can impel a writer to write and to persist in writing, writing *g.* may deserve a place in pedagogy after all.

Perhaps, then, it is fitting that Diane Sautter—a composition teacher rather than a theorist—crafted this spare, elegant description of the virtual, becoming space of writing *g.* Regarding the compositions she receives in "a typical semester" she confesses:

> As always I am baffled
> at grading time
> wondering what to do
> about those most artful stories
> the inadvertent
> baleful and wonderful tales told
> somewhere between my people and their
> lettered pages. (238)

Somewhere between the writer and her lettered page is the space of the virtual, a place that invites but does not insist on pedagogy.

Notes

1. I acknowledge the work of scholars who have moved and are moving toward the study of writing's experiential value. For example, Yagelski's argument for understanding writing as "a way of being" and a "vehicle" for reflection, inquiry, and self-awareness (161) locates the power of writing not just in the finished text but more fundamentally in the experience of producing (or, I would argue, not producing) it. Nevertheless, Yagelski's experiential reorientation remains tethered to pedagogy. As his subtitle, *Writing Instruction*, suggests, his work is through and through a call for pedagogy, albeit one that "focuses as much on the writer writing as on the writer's writing" (139). (Return to text.)
2. Edbauer Rice's exploration of the affect of writing, specifically graffiti, on the body is perhaps closest to how I am conceiving agency and affect (see Edbauer). But here Edbauer Rice engages writing primarily as a noun; I elaborate her conception by establishing the locus of agency and affect in writing as a gerund. (Return to text.)
3. Csikszentmihalyi identified writing as a potential flow experience, and composition scholars not surprisingly took up his ideas (Briefs-Elgin, Smagorinsky). More recently, Anderson has used Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow in advocating the introduction of new media technologies into the writing classroom. By introducing an element of challenge into the writing curriculum, these technologies prime the student to experience "a state of consciousness associated with creativity and characterized by a sense of intrinsic motivation and pleasure" (44). Ultimately, like much digital composition scholarship, Anderson's work remains caught in the pedagogic

imperative that this essay seeks to overcome. (Return to text.)

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Return to *Composition Forum* 30 table of contents.

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