

ture, our familiarity with print, our preferred learning style, our gender, our sense of ourselves as writers. Formal explicit instruction will never be able to adequately compensate for these factors if they are missing. All formal explicit instruction can do is provide a context in which students of any age acquire literacy and a critical or analytic framework for thinking about the learning process. We can never teach writing from scratch. Our students “always already” have to know how to do much of what we want them to do or they would never understand our instruction.

If there are many different kinds of literacy and if we become literate through a long intellectual adventure in which our writing gradually approximates the language of the many different discourse communities we wish to join, then in order to improve our ability to promote writing at the college level, we may have to find ways to integrate instruction in writing into as many different settings and communities as possible and to make classroom practice more relevant to writing as it is done outside the academy. We may have to find ways to connect students to the writing they want to do and have to do for whatever goals they have for themselves. Placing students in those social contexts in which they need to write and want to write may be the best way to develop their sense of target genres, the kinds of writing actually done outside the classroom, and it may also be the best way to motivate them to work through their own intermediate genres and school genres so that their writing approximates more quickly writing as it is actually done in the social contexts in which they want to live.

Smit, D. (2004).
The End of Composition. Studies
 Southern Illinois Univ. Press.

3 *How We Compose*

VARIOUS SCHOLARS IN COMPOSITION studies have argued that the one great contribution of the field to our understanding of writing instruction has been the promotion of the “process approach” (see Crowley, *Composition* 187–214 for an overview). After all, the value of the process approach, which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, seems to have been confirmed by the major research on composing and cognitive processes done in the 1980s: as a pedagogy it provides concrete concepts such as invention and revision techniques for instructors to teach; it provides models to guide instructors in providing feedback and advice to their students (working through drafts, concentrating on only a few major concepts at a time, saving editing until the end); and above all, it is based on what we in the field *know* about how writing is done. The process approach “feels right”: it seems to confirm our intuitive sense of how we actually write.

Of course, much of the discussion and application of the “process approach” seems to imply a fairly straightforward linear model of composing—invention, planning, drafting, revising, editing—and we can all cite exceptions to this model in our own experience and in the published accounts of professional writers. There are times when writers do not use invention techniques; they seem to respond “spontaneously” to the demands of a particular piece of writing. There are times when writers do not revise; the first draft seems to be entirely appropriate and need no further tinkering. There are writers who edit as they go and do no major editing when they are at the end of a series of drafts.

And of course, if we become reflective, we must admit that the model implied by the process approach has difficulty accounting for such two widely different composing processes as these:

One evening in the middle of April I had an experience which seems worth describing for those who are interested in the methods of poetic production. It was a sultry spring night. I was feeling dull minded and depressed, for no assignable reason. After sitting lethargically in the ground floor room for about three hours after dinner, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing for it but to take my useless brain to bed. On my way from the arm-chair to the door I stood by the writing table. A few words had floated into my head as though from nowhere. . . . I picked up a pencil and wrote the words on a sheet of notepaper. Without sitting down, I added a second line. It was as if I were remembering rather than thinking. In this mindless, recollecting manner I wrote down my poem in a few minutes. When it was finished I read it through, with no sense of elation, merely wondering how I had come to be writing a poem when feeling so stupid. I then went heavily upstairs and fell asleep without thinking about it again. . . . The poem was *Everyone Sang*, which has since become a stock anthology piece. (Siegfried Sassoon, qtd. in Britton, "Composing" 23)

As he writes, Bill engages in numerous revising tactics. He writes a sentence, stops to examine it by switching it around, going back to add clauses, or combining it with other text on the same page or a different sheet of paper. For the assigned writing task, he began with one sheet of paper, moved to another, tore off some of it and discarded it, and added part back to a previous sheet. At home when writing a longer paper, he will similarly engage in extensive cutting and pasting. (Muriel Harris 183)

What do these two acts of composing have in common? It depends on what we mean. At a very abstract level, we might say that both acts of composing illustrate a person getting an idea for something to write and implementing that idea with appropriate syntax, organization, detail, and a tone relative to his purpose, audience, and context. In another sense, of course, the two acts of composing have very little in common at all. For Siegfried Sassoon, the idea for the poem seemed to come to him out of the blue, and he found the words, the order, the detail, the tone quite fluently, almost as if the poem had been merely dictated by some inner voice (for an example of a person composing academic prose with the same fluency, see MacNealy, Speck, and Simpson).

Sassoon's experience is evidence for what Stephen Witte calls a "pre-text": "the mental construction of 'text' prior to transcription," "a writer's linguistic representation of intended meaning, a 'trial locution' that is produced in the mind, stored in the writer's memory, and sometimes manipulated mentally prior to being transcribed as written text" ("Pre-Text" 397). Pre-texts differ from more traditional planning in that they come close to being the final wording that writers put on the page; planning is more abstract. In his study of pre-texts, Witte found that writers create and use pre-texts in many different ways. Some writers use pre-text hardly at all; others use

it a great deal. Some writers create short pre-texts and use them in combination with more abstract outlines and plans; others seem to use short or more extensive pre-texts in various combinations, depending on the task and the context. Witte concludes that "different writers make different uses of pre-text during composing," and "pre-texts can vary considerably with respect to extensiveness and function during composing" ("Pre-Text" 420).

Bill, on the other hand, uses pre-text hardly at all in writing graduate papers. Earlier in her story about Bill, Muriel Harris reports that Bill resists "any attempt at clarification before writing." He starts with a broad topic, so that he can decide what is most interesting about it. He will actually compose four or five drafts, each two to four pages in length, while he thinks through the implications of his material and finally "knows what he will write about" (181). Then he continues his struggle to shape his material, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, section by section, adding and subtracting material, transposing, combining. Bill claims that he needs to produce "large quantities of text because he needs to see it in order to see if he wants to retain it" and because "the text he generates is also on occasion a heuristic for more text" (183). In other words, Bill needs to see most of his writing physically in front of him in order to compose. Harris calls Bill a multi-draft writer with a preference for open-ended exploring. Although Harris did not study Sassoon's composing process, she would probably call Sassoon a one-draft writer with a preference for limiting his choices in composing fairly quickly.

I doubt if we can account for the differences in these composing processes from the fact that the writers are composing in different genres. Not all poets compose fluently in pre-text; not all graduate students need as many drafts as Bill to decide on what they want to say and to work out the structure and evidence of their research papers. In similar circumstances, people seem to compose the same genre in many different ways with different degrees of satisfaction and varying degrees of success.

The fact that writers compose in such different ways might give us pause when we think about how or in what sense the implied model of the "process approach" accounts for the way writing is actually done. And if we look at the various ways that composition studies has conceptualized the process of composing over the past forty years, we will see that our models of composing have become increasingly sophisticated and complex. In the 1960s and 1970s, a great deal of literature in the field was devoted to promoting what Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn call the *stage model theory* of composing: planning, drafting, and revision in a fairly straightforward linear way (101). Often theorists included invention as an aspect of planning, which was also called prewriting, perhaps because "Prewriting" was the title of an influential research report during the period by Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke. Indeed, the popularity of the stage model theory

seems to have been based on the work of Rohman and Wlecke, even though they did not study the composing process per se; instead they were interested in creativity: how to stimulate students so that they would write expressive personal essays with more enthusiasm, conviction, and authenticity. The methods Rohman and Wlecke decided upon to increase the creativity of their students were journal writing, meditation, and the study of analogies, and they found that students who studied and used these techniques did in fact write better personal essays.

Rohman and Wlecke's major pedagogical influence may have been to stimulate an interest in journal writing in composition classes. However, their main contribution to theory was that they distinguished between thinking and writing: all of their exercises in journal writing, meditation, and using analogies were designed to help students think *before* they started writing. This was a distinction that later theorists would take vigorous exception to.

The other major influence on the stage model theory was Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Emig examined the composing processes of eight high school seniors, using a case study method to elicit information about their writing behavior. In general, Emig found that when composing aloud, as we might expect, the students went back again and again to certain things they had already written or things they identified as problems. Much of their composing was a self-conscious attempt to put teacher directives, such as to "be direct, concise, and specific," into practice. Although all of the students mentioned "revision," "proofreading," and "correcting," none one of them actually did it—at least for Emig's study.

From these observations, Emig concluded that composing is recursive; it "does not occur as left-to-right, solid, uninterrupted activity with an even pace" (84). Rather, people compose according to their own individual rhythms, which start and stop, ebb and flow, according to what comes to mind as they try to juggle what they want to say in relation to what they have already said, their larger goal, and their accumulated experience of how writing should be done in the situation in which they find themselves.

Emig has received considerable criticism for her methodology, much of which she grants: the small, skewed samples of student writing; the use of compose-aloud protocols; the fact that her results were not correlated with any outside measure of writing ability (North 199–203), but perhaps her major contribution to the literature on composing processes is that she drew attention to composing as an activity, a kind of behavior, indeed a kind of process, and that her study prompted composition studies as a field to develop more significant, more carefully controlled methods of studying composing.

Research in composing processes made giant strides after Emig. Competing models flourished. For example, Carl Bereiter ("Development") listed six different systems of skills we seem to rely on when we write: language fluency, idea fluency, conventions, social cognition, literary aesthetics, and

reflective thought. Sondra Perl and Arthur Egendorf conceptualized the ways we discover new things to say in two general categories: retrospective and prospective structuring.

Then in 1980 arrived the most well-known artifact in the history of composition studies: the cognitive model of the composing process by John Hayes and Linda Flower (see fig. 3.1).

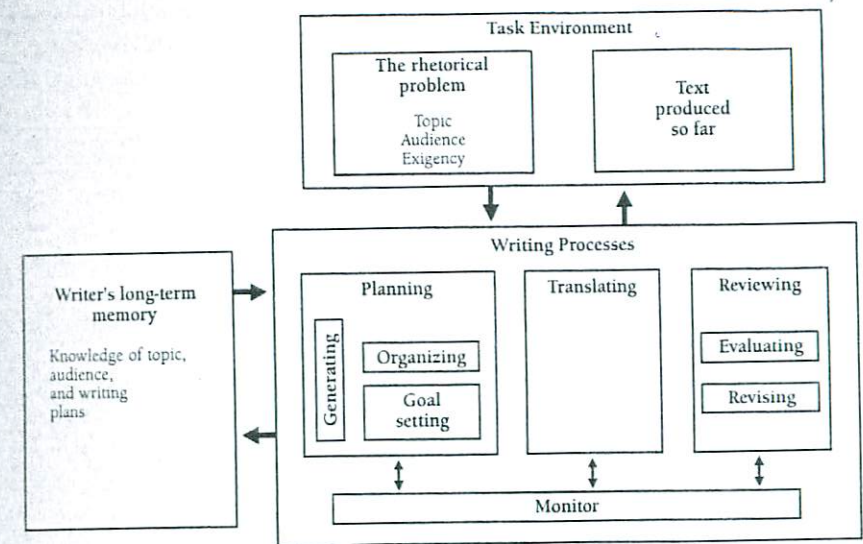


Fig. 3.1. Structure of the Hayes and Flower Writing Model (Hayes and Flower 11)

For the rest of the decade, this model inspired an intense discussion in the field about the nature of the composing process and the significance of empirical research. Much of the discussion was critical. Many scholars pointed out oversimplifications in the model; others questioned the validity of the way Flower and Hayes arrived at their model—through the analysis of "thinking aloud" protocols (Witte, "Revising"). Interestingly, most of the responses to Flower and Hayes were analytical and critical. Few researchers attempted to duplicate or refine Flower and Hayes's methods in order to determine whether "thinking aloud" protocols would be interpreted in similar ways by different groups of people; more significantly, no one developed an alternative method for devising a more valid model. Alternative models did spring up here and there, but none of them gained much of a following (Bereiter and Scardamalia, *Psychology*; de Beaugrande). By the end of the 1980s, when composition studies began to consider the social context for writing, even Linda Flower had to admit the limitations of mental models of composing and the need for more context-based models.

As a result, our current models are no longer linear and are so recursive that it seems inappropriate to identify the various elements of composing as *stages*. The latest models of composing processes suggest that all composing blends the various "stages" of writing in ways that cannot be accounted for except in the most general terms, and the latest models all accept the fact that a great deal of the composing process is so dependent on a rhetorical context that generalizations about the relative influence of planning, drafting, reviewing, knowledge of the topic and audience, self-conscious monitoring, and revising and editing—to name just a few of the elements of a possible model—tell us very little about any particular act of composing. Patricia Bizzell puts it this way:

We know that the act of composing through writing is a complex process. Although we are beginning to identify characteristic moments or stages in this process, we cannot say exactly what are the relationships of these stages one to another. We can say that we know such relationships exist, that is, the composing process is hierarchical, and also that they are not necessarily ordered serially, that is, the composing process is recursive. We cannot say that there is one composing process invariably successful for all writers, for all purposes. Rather, we know that composing processes vary both as the same writer attempts different kinds of discourses and as different writers attempt the same kinds of discourse, and that such variations may be necessary to success in composing. The current state of our knowledge of composing permits the limited generalizations that successful composing results more often from attention to the thinking required by a piece of writing than to its adherence to standard conventions of grammar, spelling, and so on; and that successful composing results more often from a process that allows for rereading, rethinking, and re-writing than from one in which time limitations or other pressures force a rush to closure. I believe that we can also conclude—although this is perhaps more debatable—that "successful" composing results in writing that participates actively in the language-using practices of a particular community, without slavishly imitating them. ("Composing" 66)

Once again, we seem to be facing a conceptual difficulty in teaching writing: if most mature writers do not write in a linear way and do not proceed through recognizable stages; if, as Bizzell says, "composing processes vary both as the same writer attempts different kinds of discourses and as different writers attempt the same kinds of discourse, and that such variations may be necessary to success in composing"; and if successful writers participate "actively in the language-using practices of a particular community, without slavishly imitating them," what then do we mean when we refer to the composing process? And even more to the point, what do we in composition studies mean when we claim to teach the composing process? Why should we teach the writing process in any particular way?

Perhaps we can justify the practice of teaching an explicit writing process by arguing that only mature writers with a certain amount of experi-

ence compose so recursively, that novice writers need the structure of an explicit process so that they can more self-consciously develop their own particular ways of composing. Perhaps. But before we deal with this issue, let us look in more detail at two models of composing and see why they may have reached the limits of what such models can tell us.

Models of Composing

Models of composing have all of the conceptual difficulties of models of learning, which I dealt with in chapter 2. Models of composing are necessarily based on what we can infer about mental life from observations of our physical behavior when we write, the written products of that behavior, and introspection into our own mental processes when we write. We have no direct knowledge of what goes on in our minds while we compose. As with learning in general, scholars and researchers of composing mostly construct taxonomies of the things we do mentally when we compose, and then they arrange these lists of possible mental operations into a model that represents a possible relationship between the various concepts suggested by the taxonomy.

The Flower and Hayes Model of Composing as a Cognitive Process

It is easy to get caught up in the early work of Flower and Hayes. They seemed to be onto something. In the unveiling of their cognitive model, they argued strenuously for the reality of the various elements in the model: that the model "identifies not only subprocesses of the composing process, but also the organization of those processes," and that the model could be fine-tuned to "describe individual differences in composing styles" (Hayes and Flower 10). That is, they argued that the model is something more than just a list of the things that the mind knows, such as what the writer may want to write about, the writers' knowledge of the audience, the task environment, and the writer's previous experience writing various kinds of discourse; and what the mind can do, such as generate ideas, set goals, plan, and organize. They argued that their model illustrates how those processes are organized and related to each other: that the writer's long-term memory is a mental function clearly distinct from the writing process *per se*, and that the writer's long-term memory can be distinguished from the writer's conception of the task environment. In short, they strongly implied that their model bore a powerful resemblance to mental reality, to the way our minds actually work when we compose. If we look at how Flower and Hayes reached this conclusion, we will see the difficulties and limitations of trying to construct any model of composing.

To argue that their model has some kind of reality, Flower and Hayes analyze "thinking aloud" protocols, in which "subjects are asked to say aloud everything they think and everything that occurs to them while performing the [writing] task, no matter how trivial it may seem" (Hayes and Flower 4). In analyzing these protocols, Flower and Hayes concentrate on three aspects

of their model: the generating process, whose function is “to retrieve information relevant to the writing task from long-term memory” (Hayes and Flower 12); the organizing process, whose function is “to select the most useful of the materials retrieved by the GENERATING process and to organize them into a writing plan” (14); and the translating process, whose function is “to take material from memory under the guidance of the writing plan and to transform it into acceptable written English sentences” (15). Flower and Hayes’s primary evidence of the reality of their categories is the close analysis of one fourteen-page protocol in particular, a protocol they claim “can be divided quite cleanly into three sections,” the first of which is dominated by statements indicating that the writer is generating ideas, the second of which is dominated by statements indicating that the writer is organizing, and the third of which is dominated by statements indicating that the writer is translating (21).

Flower and Hayes devised an elaborate scheme to assure that the way they recognized and categorized the textual evidence for each aspect of the composing process was reliable, and they concluded that while many of the items—words, phrases, or sentences identifiable “as being written during a single segment or several contiguous segments”—in section 1 were “complete” or “grammatical,” most were not. Items in section 2 typically were part of a systematically indented, alphabetized, or numbered structure. And two-thirds of the items in section 3 were well-formed, and many of them contained interrogatives. Interrogatives did not appear anywhere else in the protocol but in section 3. What is interesting about these results is that from 10 to 15 percent of the content statements in all three sections seem to be devoted to editing.

What to make of all this? Flower and Hayes assert that they have found significant support for the notion that their model goes beyond an intuition that composing involves a number of subprocesses such as planning, organizing, and editing. They argue that their model “specifies the organization of these processes” and that it can “account for individual differences” (Hayes and Flower 29). This seems to be a claim that the model actually describes something the mind does in discrete processes, which are hierarchically arranged: for example, that we can clearly distinguish generating ideas from organizing, which are both subprocesses of planning, and that editing is a subprocess of reviewing, which can clearly be distinguished from planning.

The difficulty with this bold assertion is that Flower and Hayes go on to caution that their model does not suggest that writing proceeds in stages. Writing may generally proceed through a series of stages, but not always: “The model is recursive and allows for a complex intermixing of stages” (Hayes and Flower 29). In particular, editing seems to be intermixed in all of the other aspects of composing. In fact, it is possible to look at the data and conclude that “the whole writing process . . . is a part of an EDITING subprocess. Because EDITING can interrupt any other process, these pro-

cesses can appear within any other process” (29). This is an extraordinary admission and calls into question the degree to which the model represents the “actual” hierarchical organization of composing processes generally. All Flower and Hayes may have done is document that generating, organizing, and translating tend to occur in order but that they do not do so necessarily. If this is so, all we really have evidence for is a list of things we do while we compose.

Further analysis confirmed that the conceptual categories of the Flower and Hayes model are so blurred that it is difficult to use them to describe in any detail how we compose. In fact, the categories are so blurred that they are difficult to use reliably in analyzing protocols (see Stotsky, “On Planning”).

With a new emphasis in the late 1980s and early 1990s on the social and cultural context of communication, Flower herself came to see the problem of creating a model of the cognitive processes involved in writing differently than she had before. To Flower, the problem was that we do not know “how cognition and context do in fact interact, in specific but significant situations”; Flower grants that the model she developed with Hayes “did little more than specify that the ‘task environment’ was an important element in the process; it failed to account for *how* the situation in which the writer operates might shape composing” (“Cognition” 282–83). Flower notes that early criticism of her work suggested that she and Hayes had not adequately accounted for “people as a social/political aggregate or as members of a discourse community,” but Flower argues that such a view does not account for individual differences among members of a social group. The primary difficulty of developing a theory of composing is then, according to Flower, to articulate useful generalizations about composing that are “grounded in specific knowledge about real people writing in significant personal, social, or political situations” (“Cognition” 283).

What Flower assumes of course is that such useful generalizations are possible. But are they? It may depend on what we mean by “useful.” Flower offers three broad principles about how context may affect composing. “Principle One: Context Cues Cognition”—that is, our immediate circumstances may give us a reason to write, and our past knowledge and experience may influence how we interpret our circumstances and provide us with criteria for monitoring and evaluating our composing. “Principle Two: Cognition Mediates Context”—that is, writers do not respond to their environment without creating their own internal representation of their task and what they want to accomplish. And finally “Principle Three: A Bounded Purpose Is a Meaningful Rhetorical Act”—that is, writers are in some sense “in control” of what they mean, but that agency is never totally free; it is always constrained by “the assumptions of one’s culture, the material realities of the publishing industry, the demands of one’s job, or the terms of an assignment” (“Cognition” 292). Flower takes these three broad principles as a way to begin developing a more specific and better articulated theory

of how “a big ‘C’ theoretical Context” and “a big ‘C’ general theory of Cognition” account for “the small ‘c’ contexts in which writing is going on” and for “strategic cognition in situ” (“Cognition” 295). What she does not give us is any sense of what such a theory—what I have called “useful generalizations”—would look like, above and beyond her three broad principles. What might such “useful generalizations” look like? I don’t know.

Flower constantly implies that in “building” theories of composing we can and ought to do more than all this, that somehow our theories ought to be more “fine grained,” that there are some kinds of generalization to be made about composing that are less broad than principles but more widely applicable than individual behavior. What I am groping for is some sense of what those generalizations might be. Could they be some sort of generalizations about the influence of certain social factors, such as race, gender, or class? Some sort of correlation between various kinds of composing behavior and various psychological profiles? Some sort of generalizations about the relevance of common experiences, common environments, or even physical attributes? I don’t know, but my natural inclination is to assume that barring evidence to the contrary, composing is determined by such a wide range of factors that no single factor or even small group of factors can help us generalize about how people compose.

Finally, however, Flower admits that all analysis of mental process is hermeneutic, an interpretation, with all of the ambiguity and ambivalence that we associate with the analysis of literary texts:

But because we cannot *finally know* if the patterns we see [in observational research data] are there, the methods of observational research should be read as *attempts* to test and verify one’s claims, as *attempts* to create more precise operational definitions, and/or as *attempts* to rest claims upon multiple, independent observations based on multiple methods. (“Cognition” 303)

Exactly. In the last analysis, all models of composing are just that: models, heuristics for helping us “see” things about composing that we might not have thought of on our own: And perhaps the major contribution of the Flower and Hayes model of the composing process has been to help us “see” the complexity of composing and that there may in fact be a difference between the ways novices and experts compose.

The Nystrand Model

Since the work of Flower and Hayes, a number of theorists have tried to capture the complexity of context in composing. But these models, too, come up against the limit of what we can say, if context is the primary factor in determining how we compose. For example, Martin Nystrand has created a model of composing that takes into account how readers conceptualize their audience and their context, that makes more explicit what Flower and Hayes simply designated as the task environment. Nystrand

wanted to know how writers chose issues to deal with, how they decided on the relevant evidence and patterns of organization, or more broadly, the principles that governed “the production of discourse” (“Social-Interactive” 70). And the answer to almost all of these questions, according to Nystrand, is that writers in some sense have their readers in mind: writers recognize that they have knowledge in common with readers, that they have to provide readers with knowledge the readers may not have, and that they are bound to readers through a sense of “reciprocity,” an intuitive ability to determine “*what* knowledge they shall exchange when they communicate, plus how they choose to present it in discourse” (*Structure* 53):

For example, people distinguished by substantial mutual knowledge, e.g., experts such as optometrists or baseball fans, are not bound by reciprocity until they actually collaborate in some joint activity, such as the physicians’ attending a medical convention or the baseball fans’ attending a game or both mailing a letter. Conversely, individuals who share little or no expert knowledge (e.g., doctors and patients) are nonetheless bound by the terms of reciprocity as soon as they become partners to some particular act (such as doctor-patient consultations). Mutual knowledge alone is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication though appropriate knowledge is inevitably shared as the conversants uphold their respective ends of the reciprocity principle through communication and comprehension. (*Structure* 54)

In order to account for this sense of mutual knowledge and reciprocity, this sense of what writers and readers share, Nystrand created a model he calls “Social-Interactive.” It is based on the idea that writers create a “mutual frame of reference” with readers, what Ragnar Rommetveit calls a “*temporarily shared social reality*,” or TSSR for short. Writers introduce the topic of a piece of discourse by satisfying the expectations of readers “vis-à-vis the topic and genre of the text”; in other words, by establishing a clear topic, an appropriate tone, and the other textual elements that serve as a common point of reference with readers, a TSSR. With this common frame of reference, “the discourse is largely structured by the conversants in terms of each other’s evolving perspective on the topic and the discourse itself” (“Social-Interactive” 73). Considering the mutual frame of reference they have established with their audience, writers must continuously keep the perspective of their readers in mind in two ways. First, writers need to sustain the discourse by providing readers with additional information that either expands or modifies the original TSSR, always considering what readers may need in order to understand. Secondly, writers need to elaborate on this new information with sufficient definitions, examples, clarifications, and qualifications (for an empirical study that supports Nystrand’s model, see Brandt, *Literacy*).

One clear implication of Nystrand’s model is that actual words on a page, while not having an “objective” meaning, do have a “semantic potential,” which constrains in some ways how readers may interpret them, and that

text meaning is determined by a “reciprocity between writers and their readers that binds the writer’s intention, the reader’s cognition, and properties of text together in the enterprise of text meaning” (“Social-Interactive” 78). Nystrand quotes Bakhtin and Mędvedev: “[Message] X is not transmitted from [the writer] to the [reader], but is constructed between them as a kind of ideological bridge is built in the process of their interaction” (152; qtd. in Nystrand, “Social-Interactive” 78).

Clearly, Nystrand makes a strong case that the act of composing is contextually determined in that expert writers compose their texts, in any genre or situation, with an intersubjective sense of how hypothetical readers might construe the words on the page, that the words on the page create a shared context for making meaning. Notice, however, how limited Nystrand’s model is in conveying the full implications of writing as a shared reality. The concepts of a mutual frame of reference and reciprocity may give us the tools to talk about how writers and readers interact, but in any given context, the relationships between a certain writer and any two readers may be so different that it would be very difficult to say with any specificity what they share beyond the words on the page. Take one of Nystrand’s examples: a doctor-patient relationship. The doctor and patient bring very different backgrounds and experience to the terms the doctor uses in explaining a diagnosis. If the doctor is a good communicator, he or she may use “plain,” “simple” language and perhaps a down-home metaphor or two to explain the nature of the patient’s disease and how it should be treated. But to a certain extent, as Nystrand admits, these sallies are in a sense projections, best guesses, of how the patient may actually take the words, how the patient will respond, based on very limited, perhaps even stereotypical information. Beyond a certain point, all communication is hermeneutic, interpretive.

Each of the terms of Nystrand’s model has its own “grammar,” which may vary from genre to genre, discourse community to discourse community, and even from writer to writer. How writers conceptualize readers, how writers determine what readers need to know, what constitutes sufficient support for an assertion, what characterizes an appropriate conclusion, to say nothing of how to apply all of the genre conventions of any particular form of discourse—all of this is beyond the power of a model to convey. And to be fair to Nystrand, it is a problem he recognizes: he notes that “we commit a fallacy . . . if we seek to constitute actual individual cases from structuralist abstractions” (“Social-Interactive” 72).

I cannot imagine how we might go about characterizing composing processes more usefully than Nystrand—or Linda Flower and John Hayes—already have. We might be able to show that two executives writing informative memos to employees on a similar subject engage in similar processes, but the question is whether these similarities are due to similar composing processes or similar constraints. The similarities might very well be due just to the fact that the executives are writing about similar subjects to similar

audiences for similar purposes. What we call composing processes may be so determined by contextual factors, such as purpose, audience, and disciplinary knowledge, that we can make no further useful generalizations about composing processes than we already have.

Currently, there is not a great deal of research being published on composing processes, and the reason may very well be that researchers do not know where to go from here. I suspect that future work in composing will be limited to case studies in context, attempts to refine our current models to more accurately portray how various social factors and learning styles may affect the composing process in certain contexts (Chin, Prior). Or researchers in the future may want to explore how a given writer composes differently using different genres in different contexts.

Our models of composing then seem to confirm that composing is so complex and various and dependent on context that we must learn to do it in a very ad hoc way in response to very different circumstances. In addition, people seem to compose in different ways dependent upon their personality and circumstances. This seems to call into question the degree to which writing teachers ought to insist on a certain standard of composing for all of their students. It even seems to call into question the need to help novice writers learn any particular composing strategy or any set of general principles for writing. It suggests that teaching generalizations and principles and processes of writing in the abstract, unrelated to particular tasks, to large groups of young writers is arbitrary, and the success of such enterprises will depend entirely on whether such generalizations, principles, and processes are what any particular young writer needs at that moment. It invites the question, what in the world would be helpful to novice writers above and beyond what they will have to learn for themselves? Perhaps some “tricks of the trade”: If you have trouble getting ideas for this project, you might consider this invention strategy. If you are unhappy with a particular draft for a particular reason, you might revise that draft with this in mind.

Such advice is particularly relevant since we cannot claim that a certain kind of composing will necessarily produce better results. For example, learning to revise will not necessarily produce better writing. A number of studies of revision have indicated that the *amount* of revision, at least, bears little relationship to the quality of final drafts (Bridwell; Witte “Revising”; Flower et al., “Detection”). What does make a difference in revision? Flower and her colleagues have a sound answer: the ability of writers to recognize when the words on the page, everything from the spelling of individual words to the overall structure of the writing, do not match their mental goals. Flower and her colleagues demonstrate convincingly the conceptual difficulties novice writers face in detecting when their writing is inadequate and diagnosing what is wrong with it. In doing so, novices must develop a notion of a target text, a sense of what their writing ought to be, so that

they have a way to recognize the discrepancy between what they have done and what they could do. But such target texts are complex and cannot be imposed by arbitrary rules about what such texts in general ought to be like. The question is always, in this context, for this draft, what should I be aiming toward? How do writers develop a sense of how everything ought to be on a page, everything from how to spell “receive” to the way a particular structure might work? They seem to acquire such an ability over time—with guided practice and feedback.

The only way to insure that novice writers develop a broad-based ability to compose, then, may be to provide them with a wide range of writing experiences in a wide range of genres and contexts, preferably those social contexts in which they want to participate, and to provide them with a number of composing and revising strategies as they need them. With this kind of experience, they can devise and develop their own composing strategies in context. In other words, explicitly teaching the stages of the writing process as a formula for success may be liberating for students who have been held to rigid standards for school genres such as the five-paragraph theme and who have not been helped to produce those genres. However, students with some experience in writing may find explicit instruction in the composing process, however it is conceptualized, to be beside the point. The composing process may be valuable in teaching writing only as a heuristic for teachers to use when they need it, as a set of strategies to convey to novice writers when they need help in particular situations.

4 *Writing as a Social Practice*

IN THE LAST TEN OR FIFTEEN YEARS, it has become something of a commonplace in composition studies to argue that writing is in some sense “social.” Various composition theorists have called writing “a social activity” or “a social practice”; they have argued that writing is “socially constructed” or “social-epistemic,” to name a few varieties of the term. However, none of these conceptions of writing is very well developed.

I have argued thus far that we seem to learn to write primarily by immersion in a variety of literate social contexts, that much of what we know about writing is tacit, an internalization of our interaction with our environment. It seems reasonable, then, that understanding the nature of our interaction with the “social” would help us a great deal in developing our understanding of the nature of writing and how we learn to write. Unfortunately, the very terms that we use to talk about the “social”—context, socialization, discourse communities—are also fraught with difficulty. In this chapter, I would like to briefly survey the way theorists who study writing, or literacy more generally, talk about writing as being social, and then I would like to explore the difficulties of conceptualizing what we mean by the terms “social” and “discourse community.”

The Concept of the “Social” in Composition Studies

Of course, writing is obviously social in the sense that we share a language with others, and we share a common set of conventions with which we write certain kinds of discourse. In addition, for most discourse we often write to or for others: writing is social in the sense that it is addressed to audiences. And writing is social in the sense that as children we develop our

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