Speaking Truth to Power

The Persistent Relevance of a Writing Process Orientation

Anne Elrod Whitney
Pennsylvania State University
awhitney@psu.edu

Lindy L. Johnson
William and Mary University
lindyljohnson@gmail.com

As researchers and teacher educators whose work engages the notion of "writing process," we notice that we are somewhat out of fashion. Writer's workshop. Multiple drafts. Writer's craft. Voice and choice. Aren't these old ideas? We're not afraid of being thought dated, expressivist, or even naive. But we also think a writing process orientation is actually more relevant—and political—than ever. In this column, we want to situate writing process orientation in today's context and make some claims for its importance now.

Ask any third grader, ninth grader, twelfth grader, or English teacher, in almost any US classroom setting, "What is the writing process?" and they'll likely rattle off the steps listed on writing process posters: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. But we characterize a writing process orientation as something more than just five steps. Specifically, we see a writing process orientation as one that places students and their writing experiences at the center of our teaching. Placing students at the center means acknowledging the agency of young people, assuming that young people have interests and are able and willing to pursue those interests through inquiry.

That teachers, and students, have a language to talk about writing as a process at all is primarily due to a revolution in writing research. Early writing process research conducted by scholars such as Janet Emig, James Britton, and Donald H. Graves was radical in that kids, not texts, were the data source. These researchers' observations about composing processes of living writers (as opposed to characteristics of texts and assumptions about how those texts must have been composed) were quickly developed with the spread of writer-teachers such as Donald Murray and the classroom structure known as writer's workshop popularized by teacher-writers such as Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, and Linda Rief. These new ideas were spread further through the National Writing Project. In the years since, research has consistently shown that a writing process approach (which includes teaching explicit writing strategies in a workshop environment, opportunities for extended writing assignments, and writing for authentic audiences) is one of the most effective approaches to writing instruction for adolescents (Graham and Perin 4).

At the same time, there have been critiques that a writing process approach was primarily for white, suburban kids and that students whose home language backgrounds were different from school discourses would be further disadvantaged by a pedagogy that centered on a "natural" view of the student writer (Delpit 411). We take seriously the point that if teaching with attention to writing processes means leaving out attention to discourses of power, it only perpetuates what *is*, rather than offering potential for change in individual lives or in society. However, we see a process orientation to writing instruction as more transformative than that. By centering on students and their writing experiences, a process orientation represents a still-radical view of the student as important and agentic. We are mindful of the story Janet Emig has told about one of her faculty advisers at Harvard, Peter Noumeyer, who said of her now-historic dissertation study that "being interested in how children write is not

unlike being interested in how cripples skate" (qtd. in Nelms 110). While it's unlikely someone would use that phrasing today, it's definitely not uncommon to hear deficit discourses used to characterize students and constrict their opportunities in school. To notice, care about, and teach from the experiences student writers have as they write is to take a strong stance about who matters—in and outside of the classroom—and what writing has to do with it.

Process Orientation

We distinguish between terms such as *writing process* or *process pedagogy*, preferring the specific term *process orientation*. The former terms seem, both in conversation and in the literature, to mean any and all classroom practices in which students make multiple drafts. Sometimes they seem to mean any and all expressive writing, and while students surely do write expressively in a process-oriented classroom, they write in other ways as well. Our term *process orientation* comes from the notion of "orientations" as a set of beliefs with dimensions of goals and purposes of a content area, views of the nature of that content, and views of teaching and learning that content (Friedrichsen, van Driel, and Abell 363). Specifically, we include in our sense of "process orientation" those orientations that were found to be legacies of the National Writing Project (Whitney and Friedrich 12), though we know that NWP is not the only means by which process orientations can and do develop. Process orientation means (1) seeing writing primarily as a tool for learning and for developing ideas—and thus seeing students as people who have important ideas worth developing; (2) using writing processes as an organizing idea by which to scaffold students' writing practices, and (3) linking their teaching of writing to their experiences as writers, whether through direct sharing of experience or through positioning self and student as engaged in shared challenges.

The Writer, Not the Writing: Focusing on Writers and Their Experiences

Among the key innovations of the process shift was its focus on the writer rather than on the written text. Noted Calkins, "[We] are teaching the writer and not the writing" (286). In fact, it's a cliché by now: ask a great teacher how he or she does it, and the reply is "I don't teach [content]; I teach students."

> **To teach with a process orientation is to see one's task as supporting the development of students and their writing abilities, rather than developing pieces of writing.**

This notion has powerful implications. First, students are not simply a part of the classroom system; they are the *point* of the classroom system. To teach with a process orientation is to see one's task as supporting the development of students and their writing abilities, rather than developing pieces of writing. This means that over the course of a year, a teacher is trying to help students get better at particular actions related to the production of texts, rather than simply helping them produce the texts. The outcome of a course in writing is not just a pile of completed papers, but a human being who walks from one room to the next with a set of experiences and skills from which to draw in addressing future tasks.

Second, centering on the student also challenges teachers to think of themselves *in relationship* to the student, and not only in relationship to the work that that student produces. That is, teachers in a process-oriented classroom must focus on their relationships with students to think of themselves as teaching well. We are working in an era in which many factors tend to get in between teachers and students. For example, policies set by persons outside of education often dictate the daily actions of people in classrooms; assessment systems render both students and their teachers "data sources"; accountability structures interfere in exchanges between students and their teachers; and curriculum products offer versions of both teachers' and students' words purportedly scripted in advance. These conditions privilege the commercial product over human interaction. A writing process orientation centers on those decidedly human interactions and ultimately can help nurture relationships that account for students' lives—their experiences and their words—that happen "off the page" as much as on.

Third, to see the young people as not only students but also as writers is a different way of positioning their work and its importance. Whereas a student

completes assignments, a writer composes texts. Where a student fulfills expectations, a writer makes decisions. Where a student writes well or poorly, or gets a good or bad grade, a writer communicates effectively or doesn't, persuades or doesn't, delights readers or doesn't. Writers are different from students in that writers develop and pursue agendas while students work within agendas set by others—as in standards documents or a teacher's lesson plans. Seeing the student as a writer also means conceiving the role of adults differently. For example, a student has a teacher/assigner/evaluator, but a *writer* has readers, collaborators, editors. This opens up new options for the teacher, who is free to help the student writer, rather than serve as the creator of the task and the assessor of its success. Finally, positioning the student as a writer emphasizes classroom writing experiences over the products of those experiences. This means that teachers with a process orientation not only focus on the outcomes of instruction (e.g., What quality of text has my student produced?) but also on the experiences of instruction (e.g., What was it like to be this student doing these things?).

Writing Process Points toward Social Justice

All of these points lead us to this one: Process orientation is about agency. It's about writers attending to, and gaining control over, processes within the context in which they are asked to write. Most students are given little choice about how they learn, what they learn, or how they are assessed, but a process orientation gives us a vision of young people as agentic and powerful even as we teach them to critically examine the conditions within which they write and the audiences they write with, against, to, and for. For example, we can simultaneously prepare students to become better writers and teach them how to pass AP exams and SAT tests while, at the same time, encouraging them to understand the ways in which testing and schools are designed to sort and control pupils. We can also teach them to consider the expectations of audiences while working with them to unpack how histories of biases and inequities can affect those expectations. In this way, writing process points toward social justice.

A student has a teacher/assigner/evaluator, but a *writer* has readers, collaborators, editors. This opens up new options for the teacher.

The orientation we have been describing opens opportunities for students to engage in conversation and writing about broader social issues that matter to them. Engaging in and writing about issues that matter deeply to students—especially those from historically marginalized populations—can help them reimagine their literate identities and become activists in their schools and communities (Johnson, Bass, and Hicks 47). But it's not only the topics students write *about*—it's also the explicit attention to their decisions and experiences *as* they write that make a difference.

Process approaches to writing have often been critiqued for focusing solely on the individual while ignoring the social conditions in which writing occurs. The underlying assumption of these critiques is that a process approach does not do enough to promote equity among marginalized students. But we view a process approach differently. Process orientation and process pedagogy honor students' experiences. Teaching with attention to the writing process engages students in thinking about how people use writing, who benefits, and what's in it for them—not only within but also beyond and/or in resistance to their institutional role as students. We see these things as prerequisites to fostering social justice in the classroom, both in the sense of signaling to individual student writers what they can do with writing *and* in supporting them in developing a repertoire of writing skills that make it possible for them to participate fully in our democratic society.

A process orientation implies that students own their writing experiences. Its emphasis on choice and authenticity signals that students have the *right* to make choices, that they have *real* work to do somewhere, and that they have the right to agendas that may or may not be consistent with the agendas others are setting for them. Engagement with writing process is practice in making decisions. This presumes that students are empowered to make decisions—not only about their lives but their writing lives as well.

Works Cited

Britton, James, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen. *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)*. Macmillan, 1975.

Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing.* Heinemann, 1994.

Delpit, Lisa. "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator." *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 56, no. 4, 1986, pp. 379–86.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders.* NCTE research report #13. NCTE, 1971.

Friedrichsen, Patrica, Jan H. van Driel, and Sandra K. Abell. "Taking a Closer Look at Science Teaching Orientations." *Science Education,* vol. 95, no. 2, 2011, pp. 358–76.

Graham, Steve, and Dolores Perin. "Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools." *A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, New York: Alliance for Excellent Education,* 2007, pp. 1–77.

Graves, Donald H. "An Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven Year Old Children." *Research in the Teaching of English,* vol. 9, no. 3, 1975, pp. 227–41.

Johnson, Lindy L., Toby Bass, and Matt Hicks. "Creating Critical Spaces for Youth Activists." *Teaching Towards Democracy with Postmodern and Popular Culture Texts,* edited by Pat Paugh, Tricia M. Kress, and Robert Lake, Sense, 2014, pp. 37–58.

Murray, Donald. *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition*. Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Nelms, Gerald. "Reassessing Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*: An Historical Perspective." *Rhetoric Review,* vol. 13, no. 1, 1994, pp. 108–30.

Whitney, Anne Elrod, and Linda Friedrich. "Orientations for the Teaching of Writing: A Legacy of the National Writing Project." *Teachers College Record,* vol. 115, no. 7, 2013, pp. 1–37.

Anne Elrod Whitney is an associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University. A former high school teacher and an NCTE member since 1997, Anne can be reached at awhitney@psu.edu. **Lindy L. Johnson** is an assistant professor of English education at The College of William and Mary. She taught high school English in Boston public schools and has been an NCTE member since 2001. Email: lljohnson@wm.edu.

NCTE Research Foundation Accepting Proposals for 2017 Teacher Researcher Grants—Due October 1, 2017

The Trustees of the NCTE Research Foundation support projects related to the teaching and learning of language, literacy, and culture.

They seek proposals that reflect the diverse interests of our NCTE membership, including but not limited to proposals focusing on better educating underrepresented populations, equity pedagogies, curriculum changes, and the effect these changes have on students, school policies, teaching methods, student interaction and learning, community literacy, home-school literacy relationships, after-school programs, student literacy practices in and out of school, and other relevant topics of study.

Applicants should be *full-time classroom teachers at the time of proposal submission and for the length of the grant.* Proposals are invited from teachers of children and youth at any level, birth through grade 12. Teachers in urban, suburban, and rural settings are eligible.

Deadline for submitting the necessary documentation is October 1, 2017. All documents should be sent electronically to researchfoundation@ncte.org. **Applicants must be current members of NCTE.**

More information can be found at http://www.ncte.org/research-foundation/grants.