

# Chapter 7. A Harmony of Variables

Robert Root

CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY AND ASHLAND UNIVERSITY

Early in *Research in Written Composition*, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer discuss variables that affect the rating of compositions. They begin with the Writer Variable:

One of the fundamental measures in research into the teaching of composition is, of course, the general evaluation of actual writing. Often referred to as measures of writing ability, composition examinations are always measures of writing performance; that is, when one evaluates an example of a student's writing, he cannot be sure that the student is fully using his ability, is writing as well as he can. Something may be causing the student to write below his capacity: a case of the sniffles, a gasoline lawnmower outside the examination room, or some distracting personal concern. If a student's writing performance is consistently low, one may say that he has demonstrated poor ability, but often one cannot say positively that he has poor ability; perhaps the student has latent writing powers which can be evoked by the right instruction, the appropriate topic, or a genuine need for effective writing in the student's own life. (6)

They argue that although "the writer variable cannot be controlled, certainly allowances must be made for it," and recommend evaluating a student's writing more than once to determine the student's ability on the basis of the better of two or more compositions.

The second variable the authors explore is the Assignment Variable, to which they allot four aspects: "the topic, the mode of discourse, the time afforded for writing, and the examination situation." In regard to pre- and post-tests, they write, "In planning composition examinations for students from a wide range of backgrounds, it seems especially necessary to consider the student's variations in intellectual maturity, knowledge, and socioeconomic background." They note that "investigators should be mindful of a possible motivational factor in the topic assigned," and argue, "Surely there must be some stimulating factor in a topic and, if possible, in the writing situations too, if the writing they trigger is to have any significance for research" (8). Referring to modes of discourse ("narration, description, exposition, argument, or criticism"), they suggest that "variations in modes of discourse may have more effect than variations in topic on the quality of writing" (8).

The other two aspects in the Assignment Variable (time allotted for writing and examination situation) and two further variables, the Rater Variable and the Colleague Variable, specifically address the complications of determining student writing ability through set composition examinations, and essentially the rest of the book considers the ways in which research in written composition is conducted, both in general and through close examination of extensive reports on such research. The bibliography runs over 500 entries long and covers a panoply of published and unpublished research projects. It's definitely a landmark study of composition practices.

The questions that Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer raise in *Research in Written Composition* about the evaluation of student writing performance in testing situations undergird any number of subsequent studies of student writing and guides to composing, works that cover a wider range of writing assignments and occasions than essay examinations. Such texts as *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* by James Moffett (1968), *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition* by Donald Murray (1968), *Telling Writing* by Ken Macrorie (1970), *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* by Janet Emig (1971), *Writing Without Teachers* by Peter Elbow (1973), *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* by James Britton et al. (1975), and *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* by Mina Shaughnessy (1977) expanded and solidified ideas broached in *Research in Written Composition*. Cumulatively they precipitated what we termed at the time “a paradigm shift” in the teaching of composition; they moved the field away from the “current-traditional” product-centered approach, which focused on quality of end-products, to a process-centered approach, which focused on ways student texts come into being and strategies that would make those texts more accomplished. Essentially, attention in composition/rhetoric/discourse theory turned toward stages of the composing process—pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and proofing. A host of ideas and strategies surfaced that offered students more motivational ways into the topic and discourse modes of the assignment variable and more promising ways to use the inevitable vagaries of the composing process to enhance and culminate expression. It was an exciting time to be thinking and writing about composition.

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Reading *Research in Written Composition* now, more than half a century after it was first published and more than forty years after I first was exposed to it, I found its relevance still to be current in regard to “the general evaluation of actual writing” in its broadest applications. For example, as I read, both old arguments with faculty colleagues and recent conversations with fellow creative nonfiction teachers started reverberating in my brain; all confirmed Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's sense of “the tendency of a rater to vary in his own standards of evaluation” and “the tendency of several raters to vary from each other in their

evaluations” (10–11). But I prefer to dwell on the ideas inherent in their first two variables, the Writer Variable and the Assignment Variable (especially the topic and mode aspects), since they seem to me to get to the center of learning and teaching both composition and creative nonfiction. They also make me aware of how much they apply to the challenges of my writing this very article.

Take, for instance, the aspects of the Assignment Variable, particularly the “possible motivational factor in the topic assigned.” Proposing to edit a collection of essays on nonfiction and pedagogy in honor of Richard (Jix) Lloyd-Jones which would “explore conceptual and practical matters in teaching nonfiction as opposed to teaching composition, rhetoric, argument, academic discourse, technical communication, or other foci for writing,” Laura Julier and Doug Hesse asked a number of writing teachers, “What would you like to see addressed in such a collection? What are the questions that carry some immediacy or urgency or persistence when you think about yourselves as teachers of nonfiction? What would *you* like to write about in regards to any of the above?” Note the possibilities in the Assignment Variable, those three questions that each of the writers queried might respond to in a different way; note as well that the motivational factor inevitably depends on the Writer Variable—specifically, who the writer is affects what topic the writer is drawn to. In my case, the name “Jix” and the phrase “conceptual and practical matters in teaching nonfiction as opposed to teaching composition [or] rhetoric” together set synapses firing all over my brain. Suddenly I’m flashing across time, surfacing almost simultaneously in a profusion of classrooms where I am here a student, here a teacher, here my students are undergraduates, here M.A. candidates, or I am in a welter of library carrels and departmental offices and private studies laboring at manuscripts of students as well as on manuscripts of my own.

I even flash back to a colleague’s comment at a CCCCs (Conference on College Composition and Communication) commending my flexibility for, as he put it, “shifting from composition to creative nonfiction.” It was supposed to be a compliment, but I remember my surprise at the remark and later realized that I didn’t feel as if I’d “shifted” all that much—I was simply doing what I learned at Iowa, from teachers like Carl Klaus, Paul Diehl, David Hamilton, and Jix.

My own career in composition and creative nonfiction was something I more or less backed into. I was a grad student at the University of Iowa in the first half of the 1970s, a former high school English teacher and a Writers Workshop dropout in fiction. After completing a pretty standard M.A., I continued into the doctoral program, happily teaching core literature courses as a teaching assistant, eventually completing a dissertation on Restoration comedy, and belatedly developing an interest in composition theory. When my new doctorate got me none of the three jobs in 18<sup>th</sup> century British literature available that hiring season, Jix and Carl Klaus both recommended my staying on for a post-doctoral year in composition and discourse theory, in courses that would eventually evolve into Iowa’s graduate degree program in nonfiction. The exciting thing about those courses, taught principally by Jix, Klaus, Diehl, and Hamilton, was how expansive they were, simultaneously

theoretical, pedagogical, and adamantly literary. Montaigne, Addison and Steele, Lamb and Hazlitt, long-time staple figures in rhetoric readers, and Orwell, Woolf, and E. B. White, popular authors in contemporary composition anthologies, all turned out to be composition practitioners whose work confirmed the wisdom of the writing teachers who had launched the process-centered writing curriculum. Their heirs seemed to be the current practitioners of the New Journalism and the literary essay: Joan Didion, Tom Wolff, Annie Dillard, John McPhee and others. When creative nonfiction later became established as an actual literary genre, it was evident that its most prominent authors had been practicing it as an anonymous form for some time and that composition teachers had been teaching it as models for the composing process approach to writing.

Eventually, as the genre became more established and more popular, it found adherents and practitioners in three distinct groups: in creative writing, especially fiction (most prominently in the “nonfiction novel” of writers like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer), in journalism (particularly as “literary journalism” or “new journalism”), and in composition/rhetoric (most simply as “personal essay” or “familiar essay” or “memoir,” though nevermore as “belles lettres”). The variety in those access points suggests something about the nature of the Rater Variables that often surface in both pedagogy and literary criticism. It also helps explain the need for studies in nonfiction to find a distinct and separate role within English departments rather than to be a reluctant adjunct to a creative writing or rhetorical studies program. At national conferences, nonfiction panels at CCCC were listed under “creative writing” sessions and at AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) under “pedagogy,” in both cases separate from the “mainstream” sessions in the field. When graduate courses in nonfiction were approved at the university where I eventually taught, they were included in a new Master of Arts in composition and communication, the program title an indication of its origins.

By that time, I had been director of composition and was still a long-standing member of the Composition Committee; now I was also the principal professor of creative nonfiction. An alteration in focus, perhaps, but not essentially a shift, especially when I could see my nonfiction students struggling with the same elements of the composing process, the same variables in composing, that my composition students struggled with—the same ones I struggled with in my various writing projects. The Writer Variable, the Assignment Variable—they applied to the writing in the composition course and the writing in the nonfiction course in the same way, which meant that as a teacher I had to be attentive to their effects on my student writers in either course and find ways to mitigate their impact on the composing processes the students went through.

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When I was an undergraduate, my student teaching mentor advised me to remember that after you meticulously generate a perfect set of lesson plans, you

inevitably discover that the wrong set of students have filled the classroom. It was his way of reminding me to learn *who* my students were and design my lessons to teach *them*. It was a valuable reminder.

Required college composition courses serve the broadest range of students, relatively few of whom have come to college to be writers and all of whom vary, as Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer remind us, “in intellectual maturity, knowledge, and socioeconomic background.” Their motivation in taking the course is largely external, to meet a requirement imposed by the university. One of the most persistent challenges they face is identifying “a possible motivational factor,” “some stimulating factor,” that will prompt their writing. The composing process approach to teaching writing essentially individualizes the experience of writing and encourages a deeper commitment to it. It takes advantage of the Writer Variable and the Assignment Variable; it acknowledges that the writing has to come out of the writer.

Creative nonfiction courses have a somewhat narrower range of students, usually English majors, and may be elective rather than required courses, but the same variables affect the writing performances of the students. Some students may be principally creative writers in other genres, some mainly literary academics, and, depending on the course or the program, non-English majors may also enroll. Student backgrounds and motivations will vary widely, and the kinds of writing projects that arise will be determined by the interests and intentions of the students. Some of the students will even be pursuing topics that opened up for them in their freshman composition courses years before; certainly those composition classes are likely to have been the only venues in which they may have written anything resembling creative nonfiction—personal essays, memoirs, narratives of place or period, personal cultural criticism. Creative nonfiction students are likely to have had more experience as writers than composition students have had, but they face the same kind of challenges of discovering what to write about and how to write about it, the challenges that only the composing process can help them meet and overcome.

Trying to fit ideas or content into a prefabricated mold is more difficult and less often true to the material than trying to find a shape that accommodates the material. As with any composing, student writing can be derailed by lack of topic knowledge, lack of genre knowledge, lack of perspective or critical distance or rhetorical awareness. It can also be stalled by a failure to trust the process: composition students often hope the first draft will simultaneously be the final draft; creative nonfiction writers, with more confidence in their own prose, may be less inclined to fully explore the hints and confusions of early drafts. In either case the reluctance to commit to the process impacts the performance.

What seems consistent here is the need to be aware of the Writer Variable—what the student brings to the writing, what she needs to get from the writing—and the Assignment Variable—what topic the student needs to confront, what mode would most effectively serve that confrontation. Braddock, Lloyd-Jones,

and Schoer tell us, “perhaps the student has latent writing powers which can be evoked by the right instruction, the appropriate topic, or a genuine need for effective writing in the student’s own life.” What is likely to bring creative nonfiction students to the creative nonfiction course is the hope of being able to find the appropriate topic and to meet the genuine need for effective writing in their own lives.

After all, creative nonfiction, unlike other literary genres, is not exclusively made up of texts by former English majors. The range of literary nonfiction is broad and mutable, from lyric essays that flirt with prose poems to personal cultural criticism that wobbles on the border with academic and journalistic texts. As a consequence, those who write creative nonfiction are likely to stretch the boundaries of the Writer Variable more broadly than those who write in other genres do; they are likely to be as varied in their interests and careers as the student population in a typical freshman composition course. And if you expand the Writer Variable to such a degree, the Assignment Variable automatically becomes more expansive to match the appropriate topics and needs for effective writing of those writers.

James Britton and the London Schools Project described the “functions of discourse” as “expressive, transactional, and poetic,” essentially suggesting a Motive Variable or Function Variable. The functions of discourse model—other writers have presented similar sets of aims or motives—has the advantage of suggesting why a writer might initiate a composition and also recognizes that, unlike the Assignment Variable per se, the impulse for writing comes out of the needs and intentions of the writer. It also acknowledges the motives underlying all writing composed in courses in composition and nonfiction alike.

If we consider what Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer term the Assignment Variable in light of writing courses rather than composition examinations, we recognize at once what any writing teacher knows—that those variables arise from the purpose and subject of the course and within the course are met by the variables in the students and their responses to the assignments. Teachers’ design of course work and assignments and their expectations for student writing depend upon the level of the course, its potential position in a chain of courses or its programmatic situation—the Instructional Variable, if you will—all the elements that generate the context for the composing the students do. The courses may be variable—various from one another, as the courses that Jix and his colleagues taught in my post-doctoral discourse theory program were—but all teaching of expressive, transactional, and poetic writing, and all mastery of those functions, depends on a harmony of variables, within the performance of the student writer and within the awareness of the writing teacher. For writing students, the transition from composition to nonfiction isn’t so much a shift as it is a necessary progression, a more intense and more motivated application of the strategies inherent in the composing process, in those variables that Jix and his colleagues got us all thinking about decades ago.

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