

Writing Across the Curriculum: A Theoretical Background

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By this time the phrase **Writing Across the Curriculum** is firmly rooted in the profession's consciousness. Even as the participants at the 1979 Conference on College Composition and Communication were considering "Writing: A Cross-Disciplinary Enterprise," many faculties already were seeking or had secured support for large-scale cross-disciplinary writing programs on their campuses. At **Michigan Technological University**, supported by a grant from General Motors, we are engaged in a four-year study of the effects of this approach on student writing.

In this short bibliographic essay, we will sketch the major theoretical assumptions of our program and trace their origins in those books and articles which figured in the conception and execution of our own project. Three main assumptions form the foundation of the program in **Writing Across the Curriculum** at **Michigan Tech**:

1. **There is a universe of discourse, which addresses a broad range of writing functions and audiences.**
2. **Writing promotes learning.**
3. **Writing is a complex developmental process.**

In the first three sections of this essay we address these assumptions. In the fourth and final section we offer additional theoretical premises and pedagogical applications which have either grown out of our program or which share epistemological assumptions with our concept of **Writing Across the Curriculum**.

I. The Universe of Discourse

For the most part, faculty in other disciplines (and often in English as well) own a rather narrow view of writing, limiting its use in their classes almost exclusively to the critical essay and the factual report. To counter this narrowness, we have turned to James Britton who, having coined the phrase **Writing Across the Curriculum**, is the seminal theoretician of our project. Britton's Language and Learning, his first book, is a rich source of background materials; but his second work, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), is the indispensable theoretical anchor of our entire project. In this book Britton offers a theory of language which expands the function of writing and a classification of discourse into the three types--**expressive, poetic, and transactional**--which he first defined in Language and Learning. His research leads him to believe that in British schools **expressive** writing (writing close to the self and for the self almost exclusively) had been generally ignored in favor of the **transactional** (formal essays, reports, informational writing); and in his view this neglect has had adverse consequences for the development of student writers. He calls the **expressive** mode the "matrix" out of which the other two modes should naturally grow, and he encourages its expanded use at all grade levels in all disciplines. We believe that, having learned Britton's categories and having considered the connection between the **expressive** and **transactional** modes, all faculty should introduce **expressive** writing into their classes.

Two other books have shaped our thinking

about the range of writing functions. The first is James Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Moffett classifies writing into four modes. Each mode provides writers with different perspectives on their subjects: 1) What is happening (**drama**); 2) What happened (**narration**); 3) What happens (**exposition**); 4) What should happen (**argumentation**). Moffett argues that there is a logical sequence here and that developing writers should start close to the self in the present tense (**drama**) and move gradually outward toward more impersonal kinds of discourse (**exposition** and **argumentation**). As the writer moves outward, the rhetorical conventions change; and the writer must adapt to these changes in convention as well as to changes in relationship to audience. The good writer, as Moffett observes, must be able to write for a variety of audiences.

The other book which enforces our concern for a broader view of writing is James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse. Using the communications triangle as a starting point, Kinneavy finds implicit in it four kinds of discourse: **expressive**, **referential**, **literary**, and **persuasive**. There are obvious parallels here to Britton and Moffett. All three writers demonstrate the variety of functions and audiences which writing serves, and they encourage development of assignments which require students to write in different modes and for different audiences.

II. Writing and Learning

The second major assumption of Michigan Tech's program in Writing Across the Curriculum derives from the following: James Britton's Development of Writing Abilities; Britton's article "Learning to Write and Writing to Learn"; Janet Emig's article "Writing as a Mode of Learning"; and related theoretical discussion in Lev Vygotsky's Thought and Language. Each of these authors imply that writing is itself a way of learning and developing knowledge, not simply a way of recording or communicating information. Britton's and Emig's investigations convince them that writing performs an especially useful function in the process of learning. Indeed, Emig asserts that writing "represents a unique mode of learning--not

merely valuable, not merely special, but unique" (p. 122). She proposes that writing combines three ways of learning posited by Bruner and other theorists in cognitive psychology: **enactive** (doing), **iconic** (creating an image), and **symbolic** or **representational** (naming). Emig writes that what

is striking about writing as a process is that by its very nature, all three ways of dealing with actuality are simultaneously or almost simultaneously deployed. That is, the symbolic transformation of expression through the specific symbol system of verbal images is shaped by the enactive word (p. 124).

That is to say, writing assists in creating, synthesizing, recording, and communicating meaning, and it does so in a way which fosters cognitive development on all levels.

In The Development of Writing Abilities, Britton delineates a model of the writing process which emphasizes that writing facilitates learning in all disciplines. Britton's definitions of the **expressive**, **transactional**, and **poetic** functions are of particular importance. For Britton, **expressive** writing "has the functions of revealing the speaker, verbalizing his consciousness and displaying his close relation with a listener or reader." The **expressive** function teaches us about the world, about ourselves, and about our relation to the world. Most significantly, Britton believes that **expressive** language is what lies at the heart of our ability to conceptualize experience or contextualize a text. He then posits that writers move toward other more public writing functions through the matrix of **expressive** or personal writing (DWA, pp. 14-15). **Expressive** writing assists the writer directly in thinking about his subject ("Learning to Write and Writing to Learn"). Drawing on Emig's and Britton's work, we believe that in the classroom teachers need to encourage writing which connects the student directly to events, experiences, and facts; that is, teachers need to encourage rough drafts, journals, descriptive notes, and narrative. This writing then becomes the foundation for

communicating the knowledge which students have created and developed themselves.

III. Writing as a Complex Developmental Process

We view the writing process from two perspectives. The first focuses on the act of writing itself. Sondra Perl, Linda Flower, and John Hayes are doing sophisticated work in this area; but our primary influence has been Janet Emig's The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. Before Emig's research, the profession was largely product-oriented. One of the first persons to look at the actual composing process, Emig identified at least ten of its components or stages. The most obvious consequence of her work is that many teachers have begun to give equal time to the process in their classes, and they are beginning to develop strategies for the nurturing of it. In our view, this shift in consciousness from product to process is the single most significant change in composition pedagogy in the last decade.

Britton's work is also important here, for he stresses the relationship between the **expressive** and **transactional** modes, his premise being that success with the latter grows out of experience with the former. Flower and Hayes' concept of writer-based and reader-based prose is also useful here.

Our second perspective on the process of writing is developmental. The long-term acquisition of writing ability depends, to a great extent, on cognitive growth. This is an especially important point for elementary and secondary teachers, but college teachers should also have some respect for the developmental process by which a writer acquires fluency in a language from childhood to early adulthood. Simply stated, the key questions are these: Through what intellectual stages does a person pass on the way to adulthood and what kinds of writing best match those particular stages? Both Moffett and Britton ask these questions; and both are influenced by the writings of Jean Piaget, whose hypothesis it is that all humans pass through a series of discrete intellectual stages on their way to cognitive maturity. We believe teachers should be familiar with Piaget's

theory of cognitive development. They should be particularly sensitive to the difficult transition students must attempt to make from such concrete operations as identification to such formal ones as synthesis. One may choose to tackle Piaget directly, but his writings are many and difficult. John Flavell's The Developmental Psychology of Jean Piaget is a good introduction to his ideas. In addition, two articles by Lee Odell may be useful. In "Piaget, Problem-solving, and Composition," Odell wrote about the value of Piaget's theory to the composition teacher; and in a recent article, "The Process of Writing and the Process of Learning," he has extended his concern to faculty in other disciplines, urging them to examine carefully the intellectual demands any given writing assignment might make on students. Faculty sensitivity to the way in which student minds may grow can lead to more carefully designed writing assignments in all classes.

IV. Additional Theory and Applications

A number of books not specifically mentioned before have proven useful, either as texts or as resources in theoretical background, to the development of MTU's program in **Writing Across the Curriculum**. Ken Macrorie's Telling Writing, and Writing to Be Read are both useful for their attention to the role and power of personal writing in academic papers. Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers contains important discussions of the processes of writing and of free writing. Elbow's organic conception of writing is reminiscent of Britton's, and Elbow's description of writing groups provides valuable resources for students and teachers hesitant about the criticism and revision of students' papers. Journal writing is central to our program. A number of techniques for using journals in all disciplines appears in Toby Fulwiler's article "Journal-Writing Across the Curriculum."

Working from the psychological and linguistic theories of George Kelly, Edward Sapir, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and others, Britton sees important interconnections among all aspects of language--speech, writing, reading, and learning.

(cont. on p. 90)

Events

March 26-28. **Conference on College Composition and Communication**, Dallas, Texas.

April 2-5. **Secondary School English Conference**, Nashville, Tennessee.

April 10-12. **Language Arts in the Elementary School**, Portland, Oregon.

April 24-25. **MCTE Spring Conference**, Sheraton Southfield, Detroit, Michigan.

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And Britton argues for an interpersonal basis of learning rooted in talking, listening, writing, and discussing with one's peers. Therefore, we urge small-group work in all classes. Thom Hawkins' Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing outlines theories and methods for using groups in the composition class while also engaging students in the writing process.

Louise Rosenblatt and David Bleich, in particular, have developed models of the reading process which share theoretical assumptions with Britton's concept of the writing process. Their most accessible works are Rosenblatt's re-issued Literature as Exploration and Bleich's Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism. Both authors have expanded their theoretical considerations in, respectively, The Reader, The Text, the Poem and Subjective Criticism. These books imply significant precepts for both literary criticism and for learning in other disciplines.

Two books, in particular, offer epistemological arguments for using writing and personal, spoken language to develop knowledge in the science classroom. In The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn claims that all scientific perception depends on a paradigm. Kuhn

argues that a paradigm is defined tautologically. That is, members of a scientific community share a paradigm on the one hand; on the other, they also define themselves as members of a scientific community because they share the paradigm (see Postscript, p. 176). This idea of the social structure of knowledge also informs Michael Polanyi's treatise Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. A readable introduction to and discussion of the implications of Kuhn's and others' work in this area is Carolyn R. Miller's "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing."

In this brief essay we have introduced the works which we considered essential in shaping our concept of **writing across the curriculum** at **Michigan Technological University**. On page 68 is a list, with publication data, of all the works cited in this essay, (2) a bibliography whose selections provide a more complete list of background sources which have informed our program, and (3) the publication data for other works cited elsewhere in this issue of **forum**.

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Cogswell (cont. from p. 85)

There will always be a need for us to continue our efforts to improve our writing programs and our competencies as teachers of composition. The **ECB** presentations were consistently thought-provoking and representative of extensive thinking and research into the teaching of composition: They have been of great value to our Livonia program.

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