SELF-ASSESSING STRATEGIES OF STUDENT WRITERS

Speakers: Chris Anson, University of Minnesota
Geoffrey Sirc, University of Minnesota
Introducer/Recorder: Mary King, University of Akron, Ohio

Chris Anson opened the discussion by observing that such activities as thinking about, assessing, and making changes in one's writing characterize the more skilled writer and that the more in control a writer feels of his or her writing, the more these skills are activated. The student who feels that the teacher controls his or her writing processes or products engages in fewer such activities and spends less time on them. Anson came to these conclusions after recording and analyzing one hundred discussions of the writing experiences of his students in entry level and advanced undergraduate writing courses. He asked the students to record on tape their thoughts about each rough draft they wrote. The tapes were then transcribed for content analysis.

Anson found that most of the students' comments on their drafts could be identified as either retrospective, analytical, or projective in function and that they referred to the ideational, interpersonal, or textual aspects of the draft. The chart below illustrates Anson's system of analysis. Using the tapes and transcripts of six students, Anson demonstrated how the writers made discoveries about their details and organization in the course of reflecting on their drafts, and also how he identified various functions in writers' comments.

Retrospective	Analytical	Projective
TEXTUAL	D I S C O V E R Y	
How I wrote it; What textual decisions I made; How certain textual features came to be; Judgments: mine & others'.		How I'll change the text; What new things I'd do with its structure, language, etc.; What I will need to think about textually.
IDEATIONAL	D I S C O V E R Y	
What I said, what I was trying to mean; What happened to my thinking about my ideas; What information I used; Judgments: mine & others'.		What else I'll try to say; What I still need to explore in my meaning & ideas; What I might find out; How I might change in my thinking.
INTERPERSONAL	D I S C O V E R Y	
Why I wrote this—who I wrote it for; What I was trying to accomplish through the writing/text; Judgments: mine & others'.		What I hope the text will do; Why I hope to do it; What I could accomplish through the text when it is read.

He found that the more skilled writers were characterized by overlapping functions—that is, their comments were both projective/ideational and projective/interpersonal, for example. Such productive think-

ing apparently leads to revisions in the text. In addition, skilled writers were found to have more to say about their writing even at the beginning of a writing course: five to ten minutes, as compared to as little as fifteen to twenty seconds for less skilled writers. Both groups, however, are able to increase this time with practice.

Less skilled writers, Anson found, tend to get fixated in a single function, often retrospective and usually textual or ideational. They do very little projective talking, their comments rarely overlap functions, and they make few discoveries about their writing. They see the teacher as controlling the text, and they have internalized a learning-poor model of writing behavior: they see writing as an exercise in which they must demonstrate their acquisition of surface-level skills. For less skilled writers, the purpose of writing is correctness, to be attained by guessing and meeting the teacher's expectations (maybe you'll think it's good; I don't know). They are apprehensive and feel uncomfortable or apologetic about their uncertainty. They view the text as an artifact, not as an experience, and therefore, when discussing their work they merely catalogue its features rather than the processes of thought that ought to occur as they write. And finally, they revise very little.

By contrast, the more skilled writers in Anson's study exhibit features of a learning-rich model of how writers behave in the classroom. They write in response to imagined or real rhetorical situations and readers, and they view writing as a way to solve self-posed problems. For them, authority resides in the writer; paradoxically, they renounce control over the text itself as it develops, concentrating instead on controlling the process, and retaining the right to make decisions about what to do (I think mainly what I need to do is . . . I'm also wondering . . . I'll have to think about . . .). These writers welcome uncertainty as they talk about what they still need to do to a draft, learning a great deal as they engage in a dialogue with themselves about their text. Such students find intrinsic purposes in writing and find value in extensive revision.

Anson concluded that a major implication of his study for teachers is that they encourage students to talk about their writing, and especially to think about its functions and features and make projective comments. Such discussion enables teachers to identify the development of student writers' revision strategies, control, and discovery. Anson believes teachers and researchers need also to consider how projective talking, by bringing these metacognitive functions to the surface, improves writing ability.

Geoffrey Sirc continued the discussion by reporting on his study of the self-assessing strategies of two highly skilled writers, graduate students who write professionally as well as academically. For his study, Sirc recorded the exact point in time of each key stroke as his writers composed on word processors, a technique which enabled him to play back the texts in precisely the same time frame as when they were composed. Sirc then interviewed the writers during the replay to recapture their cognitive and emotional reactions during the composing process. His findings were as follows:

1. These experienced writers moved frequently and easily among ideational, textual, and interpersonal features, and among retrospective, analytical, and projective functions as they composed.

"You have a comma here. Is that what you wanted?").

Humphreys stated that networked computers make the writing process public. They encourage students to talk about their writing, to share their work, to ask questions, and to ask for help. Thus, the audience for students' writing becomes real and accessible. Moreover, the use of computers in the writing class makes collaborative writing possible. Humphreys described one writing project that his students work on an entire term: They are all asked to write a journal entry on the same topic. After printing out their entries, students put their journals together and combine efforts to produce one piece of writing. Whether they realize it or not, they learn the art of negotiation, ways to defend their ideas, and how to take criticism. Humphreys concluded that such collaborative work highlights the communicative purpose of writing, for in order to produce an effective piece of writing, students must deal with one another, negotiate differences, and support their beliefs. Moreover, the use of the computer in the writing classroom also allows the teacher to compose in public, that is, actually to demonstrate the stages of the writing process, from brainstorming through editing.

The session concluded with members of the audience experimenting on the computers and software that Humphreys had on display. ■