

# **SEARCHING FOR RELEVANCE**

**Contextual Issues in  
Applied Linguistics in  
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THE PROCESS APPROACH TO WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The process approach to writing emphasises the writing process, rather than the finished product. Writing is seen as a series of stages, and the teacher takes on a more collaborative role, especially during the early stages of the process. Research suggested that both the concept of writing as a process, and strategies for effectively engaging in it, could be communicated to learners in the form of an abstract "user's model". As there was no methodology available which could satisfactorily test out this hypothesis, I experimented with a video reconstruction system, attempting to reconstruct the writing behaviour of volunteer high school pupils before and after exposure to the user's model. The findings of this research suggested that a process approach to the teaching of written composition could give students both insight into the writing process, and suggest effective writing strategies. There were also some interesting possibilities for further research.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In order to offer any insights to the learner writer, the teacher of writing needs to understand the actual process of writing itself, and to be able to make interventions which will assist the learner. The process approach offers practical solutions to both of these problems, as writing is seen as a process that can be taught.

2.0 A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PROCESS APPROACH

The process approach is not in itself a teaching method, but a perspective or orientation. It is not one consolidated approach, but rather a whole series of approaches based on

the perception of writing as a process (Liebman-Kleine 1986:785).

The process approach emphasises the writing process, rather than the finished text, or product. Writing is seen as a series of stages, rather than as a "once-off" activity. During these stages revision takes place until the finished product is considered satisfactory for its audience and purpose, and the writer is made more aware of his purpose and audience. Interaction takes place with the teacher during all stages of the process, and the teacher takes on a consultative, collaborative role, rather than acting as mere editor or critic. In spite of the teacher's interaction at all stages, the writer is encouraged to take responsibility for shaping and editing his writing, and for internalising the teacher responses to form the "inner dialogue" which facilitates the writing process.

## 2.1 CONFERENCING

This teacher/pupil interaction throughout the stages of the writing process takes the form of "conferencing", or informal teacher/pupil discussions, in contrast to the traditional formal evaluative response to the finished piece of writing. By means of conferencing, the learner writer is helped during the process of writing with appropriate feedback from the teacher, depending on the stage of writing in which he is involved. In the earlier stages, the teacher responds to the learner's interpretation of the topic, and to the ideas he generates in response to the topic. In the later stages, the teacher makes the learner-writer aware that he needs to accommodate the reader, who needs introductions and conclusions, bridging passages, concentration of lengthy passages and elaboration of over-terse passages. In the final stages, the teacher helps with proof-reading, and finally, with evaluation of the piece as

a whole. Thus the procedures used in conferencing are a contrast to the traditional teacher responses, which are often vague and unhelpful, and focus on surface errors rather than ideas (Zamel 1985:96).

Conferencing enables the learner writer to engage in the kinds of dialogues he will need to internalise as he engages in an imaginary dialogue with his intended reader. Graves (1981) mentions the role of dialogue in developmental work on first graders, where he observes very young writers actually verbalising this dialogue out loud: "he (the writer) ... supplies the sound for the page, almost making it speak back to him." Inexperienced writers have not learnt or internalized these dialogues. Teacher responses during conferencing make the writing experience "more like the conversational experience" (Daiute 1983:140), and make the writer aware of the fact that he is writing for a potential audience. Teacher responses also demonstrate to the learner the same kinds of dialogues he must learn to hold with himself to become a competent writer.

### 3.0 THESIS ON THE PROCESS APPROACH

In my research on the process approach, I became involved with the two concerns mentioned in the introduction: understanding the actual process of writing itself, and attempting to discover interventions which would assist the learner. My first priority was to find out as much as possible about the actual process of writing itself. A study of the theory of writing as a form of discourse, and of teacher observations of the behaviour of both experienced and inexperienced writers revealed many features of the writing process. My next step was to reduce this mass of data to manageable form.' I was fascinated by Widdowson's concept of a "user's model" i.e. a description of how some

aspect of language works which is understood by the language user, a description based on how the user sees that process as operating, as opposed to a "pure" linguistic description (Widdowson 1984).

I decided that I urgently needed a user's model of the writing process for the following reason: I was about to engage in conferencing sessions with a tutorial group of university students, with the possibility of using the data gathered in these sessions for research into useful teacher interventions. In order to give appropriate feedback to the students at all stages of the writing process, I needed to clarify for myself what the actual stages were. Furthermore, I was influenced by Shaughnessy's statement: "the composition course should be the place where the writer not only writes, but experiences in a conscious, orderly way the stages of the composing process itself" (1977:81). It occurred to me that one way of doing this would be to show the students a copy of the user's model of the writing process. However, I began to realise with some horror that I was not going to find a user's model of the writing process in time (if at all), and that I would have to provide one myself. Five minutes before my first conference, I hastily scribbled a description of the writing process in four stages on the blackboard. It went down so well in the first conference that I adopted it as a working user's model, adding one more stage subsequently. The model clarified my own perception of the writing process, and was useful as a guide to appropriate feedback. Communicated directly to the students, it gave them both insight into the process of writing and suggested strategies with which to engage in the process.

### 3.1 THE USER'S MODEL

The completed model describe the process of writing as an

occurrence and recurrence of five distinct stages: Prewriting, Draft writing, Major editing, Minor editing and Evaluation. Each stage can be seen to perform a necessary function in the actual process of writing, and each stage has a distinct focus, different from that of other stages. The model was explained to the students in the form of the diagram shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Diagram of the user's model

### STAGES OF THE WRITING PROCESS

1	<b>Prewriting</b>	- consider purpose and reader, gather data, let it mull round - <b>DATA GATHERING</b>	
2	<b>Draft writing</b>	- suggest structures or outlines, jot down idea or fragments, write larger pieces. - <b>IDEA GENERATION</b>	R E C
3	<b>Major editing</b>	- reread and structure for reader, order, add, delete (go back to 2 if necessary). - <b>IDEA ORGANISATION/ STRUCTURING</b>	U R S
4	<b>Minor editing and polishing</b>	- check for correctness, <b>check</b> format and minor editing conventions. - <b>EDITING</b>	I V E
5	<b>Evaluation</b>	- assessment (by writer and others) in terms of purpose. - <b>EVALUATING</b>	

(Note: The model as it appears in the diagram is based on the composing behaviour of good writers, working under reasonable time constraints.)

Shortly afterwards I used the model in conferencing sessions with matric high school pupils, and was impressed with the way in which it helped me to identify and offer solutions to the pupils' writing problems. Although initially I had developed the model to clarify my own view of the writing process and to determine appropriate teacher feedback in conferencing situations, I now became interested in a different kind of teacher intervention, the extent to which merely communicating a model based on effective writing behaviour to learners might have in changing their writing behaviour, given reasonable personal motivation. By telling the learner-writer about the model, I could save weeks and months of lesson time, and enable the learner-writer to experience - mentally, at least - the stages of the writing process in a conscious, orderly way. I hoped that providing the learner-writer with an accurate and understandable mental picture of the stages of the writing process and the appropriate strategies for each stage might in itself be enough in itself to promote effective writing habits. I was also influenced by Daiute's account of "metacognition": awareness about the learning processes in themselves, giving the learner more control over his progress (Daiute 1983:138). Communicating the model to the learner would give him more control over the process and his learning of it, and the opportunity to interpret the basic schema according to his own individual preferences, leaving him more freedom and flexibility, a feature of good writers.

I therefore decided to explore the results of communicating the user's model of the writing process directly to the learner, by carrying out a controlled experiment with volunteer high school pupils. My objective was to establish what changes (if any) might occur in the pupils' concept of writing, their writing behaviour, and their written texts after exposure to the user's model. I simplified the user's

model to make it more accessible to younger pupils (their ages ranged from 13 to 17), as shown in the diagram below:

Figure 2: Simplified version of the user's model

### STEPS TO GOOD WRITING

- 1 **COLLECT YOUR THOUGHTS** - WHY are you writing?  
WHO is it for?  
WHAT do you need to know?
- 2 **CREATE** - Make a plan, jot down ideas,  
write larger pieces,  
get it all down.
- 3 **CHOP 'N CHANGE** - Re-read it - does it come across  
to the reader? Explain, add  
bits, cross out (go back to  
stage 2 if necessary).
- 4 **CHECK** - Check for correctness (spelling,  
grammar, style), check layout,  
neatness. Rewrite if necessary.
- 5 **CRITICISE** - Is it okay? Does it do what it  
was supposed to do? (See WHY? &  
WHO? in 1.)

(NOTE: The recursive factor was explained verbally.)

### 3.1 THE THESIS EXPERIMENT

The thesis experiment took the form of a "before and after" sampling of the pupils' concept of writing, writing behaviour and written texts. The experiment was done in seven sessions over a three-week period. After obtaining the first set of samples, I explained the process of writing, using the simplified version of the user's model. I then took samples again, using the same procedures as



before. I examined all the evidence for changes. I found that I had phrased the concept question too vaguely; even so, four out of the six pupils showed some changes in their concept of writing. An examination of the written texts showed what the proponents of the process approach have been insisting all along: that very little can be ascertained about the process of writing by examining the end product. The most interesting evidence came from the comparison of the before and after video reconstructions: five out of six pupils showed changes in their writing behaviour, two markedly so. In each case the change was from behaviour which research identified as ineffectual to behaviour identified as effective. The same two pupils who showed marked changes in their concept of writing, and in fact made detailed reference to it in the second set of questions, showed marked changes in their writing behaviour. This does not prove anything, but it certainly indicates that a more accurate conceptual picture of the writing process could be a factor in improve writing performance, and that the model itself helped to provide this conceptual framework. Both pupils differed greatly in background, academic level and temperament, which indicated that the model was flexible and allowed for idiosyncratic behaviour.

### 3.2 METHODOLOGY

My main problem in conducting the above experiment was finding a methodology for recording, describing and analysing the writing behaviour of my pupil writers. I needed some form of writing profile which would facilitate the before and after comparison. There was the option of using verbal protocol analysis (see Raimes, 1985:234), but I did not have access to my subjects to train them in this procedure, and also thought that the strong verbal element might interfere with or change the composing process. which seems to have a strong visual component. I had read in

Candlin that Pianko and Matahishi had used a video reconstruction method. According to Candlin, they "videotape their subjects while they write, without any requirement that they compose aloud. After each session, they review the tapes with the writers, probing for information concerning what went on in their heads at crucial points" (Candlin 1981:5). Unfortunately I had no detailed record of the procedures used by Pianko and Matahishi, so I had to evolve my own. I thought that if I set the camera to record the emerging text, the playback of this, combined with the pupils' answers to my questions, would provide a detailed picture of their composing behaviour. The playback of the emerging text itself, devoid of other visual cues, proved inadequate in triggering recall of composing behaviour, therefore I set the video camera to focus on the text, head and shoulders of my volunteer writers. The volunteers were set short writing tasks, and their performance was recorded on videotape. Immediately afterwards, I reviewed the whole process, not just the crucial points, with each volunteer, I taped this interview, and then wrote up a minute by minute description of each pupil's composing behaviour. The visual prompt of the emerging text and the cues provided by their own behaviour made a very thorough reconstruction possible, providing me with a writing profile of each pupil. I would recommend, however, that anyone wishing to repeat this procedure should use split screen facilities with two video cameras focused on text and writer respectively.

To facilitate comparison of before and after composing behaviour, I illustrated the writing profile graphically, using as a template the stages of the writing process as shown in the model. In figure 3 below, the graph shows that in her first (recorded) writing session the writer engaged in prewriting (stage 1) activities as expected in the first few minutes, but that as she continued, her generation of



The graphs shown above belonged to one of the pupils whose writing behaviour showed a marked change of focus. She was the weakest pupil academically; her concept of writing had changed markedly to resemble that shown by the model, and her texts also showed signs of revision and redrafting. In the before sample, the graph shows that the preoccupation with corrections causes considerable blocking of the pupil's composing processes. In the video, it can clearly be seen that the pupil stopped composing for nearly a full two minutes while she tried to spell "crawling" correctly. It was this pupil's behaviour that made me realise to what extent a too-early preoccupation with surface features interferes with the creative processes (see Zamel 1985:96). Good writers do in fact correct semi-automatically during the creative stages of composition, but do not focus on these incidental corrections. By focusing on corrections during the creative stage of writing, where the focus should have been idea-generation, the pupil could be seen to be setting up "interference" to her own production of text. After the user's model was explained to this pupil, her writing profile showed no signs of this interference of inappropriate focus. I later decided to call this misapplied focus "contamination", and discovered that the appropriate focus for any one stage could result in a blocking effect if applied to another stage, resulting in the well known phenomenon "writer's block". Because the user's model gives a clear indication of the appropriate focus at each stage, it makes it easier for the writer to identify an inappropriate focus, and to shift focus accordingly. (For a more detailed description of different types of writer's blocks and their causes, see Appendix C of my thesis.)

## 4.0 APPLICATIONS

Although in the above experiment the change in writing behaviour was in some cases dramatic after a very brief exposure to the user's model, it would need more than a brief intervention to produce a marked improvement in the quality of pupils' texts. However, the results of the experiment were so encouraging that I implemented a process approach to the teaching of written composition at the school where I teach, based on initial communication of the model, and on-going conferencing with pupils at all stages of writing. The pupils do not go through all stages of the process with every piece of writing, and often do once-off rough pieces or uncorrected journal writing (see Martin 1981) for practice in fluency. For those who would like details of the process approach implemented at Danville, our policy has been printed in High school ideas for ENGM, July 1988:142-148.

As mentioned above, the user's model worked well with university students. Their response to a systematic yet flexible approach to writing seems to have been heightened by the fact that they were attempting a genre with which most of them were unfamiliar. This seems to suggest that even adult writers can benefit from insights offered by the model, especially when attempting an unfamiliar genre.

The experiment seemed to indicate that communicating the model directly is less effective in changing writing behaviour in pre-adolescents. Even so, a process approach has value for younger pupils, as one can teach the pupils in a more concrete way about the process of writing, by ensuring that they have practice in the various stages as depicted in the model, and by teaching them appropriate strategies for the various stages (see Graves 1981 for a detailed account of a process approach with first-grade writers).

One of the problems of implementing a process approach is that in examinations pupils are prevented from using the good writing habits they have learned in class, and further research is urgently needed in finding an underlying schema which will generate effective strategies for writing under pressure. Another problem is that although here in Natal the English syllabus offers no opposition to the process approach, and in fact encourages teaching along these lines, traditionally schools favour the product method, and anyone stepping out of line runs the risk of being judged on product criteria, i.e. masses of written text, with copious written comments by the teacher.

#### 5.0 RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES.

I mentioned the following possibilities for further research in my thesis:

##### 5.1 TEACHER-BASED RESEARCH

As a teacher I found many advantages in referring to the user's model at all stages of teaching written composition and at all stages of responding to pupils' written work. To determine the usefulness of the model as a pedagogical tool, it would be necessary to test out various teachers' reactions to using the user's model, and to establish whether they found it useful in the teaching of various kinds of written composition.

##### 5.2 LEARNER-BASED RESEARCH

There are a number of issues which could be investigated in terms of the usefulness of the model to the learner:

- To what extent the concept of writing shown in the model is accessible to younger learners (pre-adolescents, and if not, what level conceptual development is needed to ensure comprehension and retention of such a model.
- To what extent the user's model as described in this study corresponds to the schemata of competent adult writers, professional and non-professional.
- The effectiveness of using the model as both a diagnostic tool and means of remediation in the case of specific writing problems.
- Whether different writing profiles (in terms of the stages I the model) emerge according to genre, age, or culture. This could have relevance in determining appropriate teaching strategies, depending on the genre of writing, the age group, or culture group being taught.

### 5.3 SPECIAL MODELS FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

Although I tried to make the user's model relevant to all kinds of written composition, some types of writing may require different schemata. As mentioned above, the user's model is not effective for generating strategies in an examination situation, as the very nature of the situation does not allow the writer sufficient time or resources to follow the stages of the writing process. As our educational system is committed to a process of evaluation where students are invariably writing under strict time pressure, an investigation into the nature of effective examination writing strategies is an urgent research priority: obviously some students have discovered effective strategies for writing under pressure, and procedures such as the video reconstruction method might reveal these strategies, leading to the modification of the present

model, or the formulation of a different model for examination purposes.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

My own research and subsequent application of these findings to teaching practice have led me to believe that an investigation into the process of writing yields insights into the composing process, strategies for engaging in it, and an effective approach to the teaching of written composition. A more complete account of the process approach and the research procedures mentioned above can be found in my thesis.

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