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Cognition and Practice: Adult Learning Situated in Everyday Activity

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Abstract: Theories and procedures used to teach adults to write often lack an understanding of the central constitutive dimensions of activity, tools, and culture in adult learning. A situated view of teaching writing is introduced.

Tools, activity, and culture are essential to adult learning, but our failure to recognize this important set of relations limits our ability to teach adults. For example, teachers of writing to adults in various contexts such as adult basic education, GED preparation, and community college developmental writing classes traditionally provide students with general guidelines and procedures for writing, sometimes in a flowchart or cookbook fashion. This approach assumes that a general set of writing "principles" applies to any writing context and that adult learners simply need to "apply" these general writing principles and procedures to their writing in order to become "expert" writers.

Bartholomae (1985) argues that writing is difficult for developmental or adult writers because they lack the "privileged language of the academic community" (p. 150). In other words, developmental writers may be "expert writers" in their own communities, but cannot be expert writers in academe because they have not had the social experience of writing in the university. Similarly, adults in adult basic education may not be able to write to the expectations of teachers or for GED exams because they have not had the social experiences that would allow them to understand the academic expectations. "Expert" writing is usually defined in GED classrooms and developmental or community college writing classrooms as a specific style of writing: presenting a thesis, providing supporting evidence for the thesis, then concluding with a restatement of the thesis. Knowledge of academic expectations concerning writing is "privileged knowledge" and gets to the heart of who has the power to shape knowledge.

The norms that shape acceptable academic writing have led to the development of instrumentally prescriptive processes for writing that highlights writing's internal cognitive dimensions but ignores the culture of classroom activity and its relationship to how writing is taught and learned. Typical models of the writing process encourage students to move in a step-wise fashion from one part of the writing process to the next. These stepwise models (e.g., Murray, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981) represent a decontextualized abstraction of the writing process that ignores how activity, social culture, and writing tools, such as computer word processors, allow students to construct their own processes for writing.

Rose (1980), in describing recent GED graduates who enter community college, contends that adults may be "stymied by processing rigid or inappropriate rules or inflexible or confused plans" (p. 393) for the writing process. Essentially traditional pedagogical prescriptions ignore the context of learning, activity, social culture, and the ways students write, interpret, and negotiate the texts. The problem is that the theories or models that are used to frame writing instruction tend to enforce the notion that writing is a process, not a cultural practice, and have not been examined from a situated or cultural perspective. Thus the purpose of this paper is to examine and critique various theories of teaching writing in order to note their limitations for teaching adults to write. Following that critique, we introduce a discussion of writing instruction that takes advantage of the typically ignored but vital dimension of writing as a cultural practice and close with the question of what writing instruction might look like once it is situated in the culture and activity of the writing classroom.

Models of the Writing Process

Expressive and Cognitive Views. The expressive view of the writing process stresses integrity of text, spontaneity, and originality (Faigley, 1986). Elbow (1973) urged students to "think of writing as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the beginning - before you know your meaning at all - and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve" (p. 15). Other models within the expressive view of the writing process involve integrating heuristics, or general probes usually as questions, into the writing process at specific times. Murray (1980) developed a process for writing consisting of five steps: collecting, focusing, ordering, developing, and clarifying. Murray suggests that writers can combine this process with other heuristics, such as freewriting, brainstorming, or mapping, and apply them to any composing problem.

With the publication of Emig's 1971 study of the composing processes of twelfth graders, teachers of writing turned to studying and comparing the actual writing processes of professional and student writers. From this research, cognitive models of writing emerged. Flower and Hayes (1981), by examining and comparing the actual processes in which novice and professional writers engaged, developed a recursive writing model based on cognitive psychology and consisting of three elements: planning, translating, and reviewing. In the first element, the planning stage, writers use their long-term memory to plan their writing. Planning involves several other smaller processes, such as generating ideas, organizing these ideas, and setting goals for writing. During the second element, writers articulate and write down the ideas generated in the planning stage. In the third element writers review and "choose to read what they have written either as a springboard to further translating or with an eye to systematically evaluating and/or revising the text" (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 374).

Although expressive and cognitive models for writing are described as nonlinear, each consists of suggested steps and stages which writers are encouraged to follow. The nonlinear aspects of these models come from the suggestions that the writer can move among these steps in either direction. In addition, both Murray's and Elbow's approaches to writing describe a process for writing that assumes the writer can transfer this process "spontaneously from situation to

situation with relative ease" (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992, p. 285), which suggests that they see writing *process* as separate from writing *context*. Murray's writing process steps seem to mirror the academic essay: developing a thesis, supporting it, and drawing conclusions. Flower and Hayes view planning as an "internal representation" of the ideas that students use to write, and although they discuss "task environment," they clearly do not take into account the culture of the writing classroom in which students write. The strengths of the expressive and cognitive views are that they seem to encourage teachers of writing to provide students with general guidelines and procedures for writing. Such processes are useful because they identify and provide procedures for important dimensions of the writing process, particularly for helping learners understand the norms that mark acceptable academic writing. Yet they are limited in scope because they assume that all students can simply transfer or apply the writing principles from one writing topic and situation to another. What is not addressed by either view is how the culture of the writing classroom or the tools with which students use to write, such as word processors, or the activity of writing itself may affect the writing process.

Social-Epistemic View and Talk-Write. A third perspective on the process of writing, the social-epistemic view, does take into account the social context of the writer as she or he writes. This perspective was developed, in part, when more non-traditional, older and "non-white, non-upper middle class" (Tarvers, 1993, p. 26) students entered university writing programs, forcing teachers of writing to change their expectations about the kinds of writing knowledge students brought with them, such as knowing how to sustain a thesis, support arguments, or how academics in universities think and thus expect students to think and write. Drawing influence from Paulo Freire and other critical theorists, David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Patricia Bizzell advocate a social-epistemic view of teaching writing which encourages teachers to help students understand the constraints of the discourse community by analyzing the contexts which shape their writing and the forces that govern those contexts. Faigley (1986) explains that the social-epistemic view is based on the central assumption "that human language (including writing) can be understood only from the perspective of society rather than a single individual...the focus of a social-epistemic view of writing, therefore, is not how the social situation influences the individual, but on how the individual is a constituent of culture" (p. 157). From this perspective, then, teachers of writing help students "discover the basic strategies by which they can determine and fulfill the requirements of various types of discourse" (Perelman, 1986, p. 476) or writing assignments.

A fourth model of the writing process, talk-write pedagogy (Zoellner, 1969), was first developed in the late 60's but regained attention in the early 1990s. It combines notions from both the social-epistemic and expressive views and challenges the cognitivist position. That challenge arises through their view of social collaboration as the central dimension of writing: writers and readers continually interact and "talk" to make meaning about what they are writing. Zoellner advocates social collaboration among writing students in which writers and readers continuously "talk" and interact to make sense of their writing; he does not recommend a hierarchical model which students should follow for writing. Zoellner proposes, from a behaviorist stand, that teaching writing constitutes behavior modification where teachers give writers immediate responses that enable them to write to meet community expectations. For adult learners, these community situations could be ABE or GED classrooms or developmental writing classes, all places where rigid expectations determine whether students advance within their academic

communities. Zoellner further contends that traditional models of writing have failed students because they demand that students internalize the rules and abstract concepts about what constitutes good writing (Walters, 1992) instead of allowing students opportunities to talk about their writing and to discover their own writing processes. The emphasis in this theory, however, is on dialogue between teacher-student, not on the social interactions among students themselves in the writing classroom and how these interactions may allow students to construct their knowledge about writing.

Although the social-epistemic perspective recognizes that social culture plays a role in shaping how adult learners write, the primary notion in this framework is that writers are shaped by the world, not that the writers in any fashion also shape the world in which they are writing. The talk-write theory recognizes social collaboration in writing as central to the continual transactions between writers and readers to make meaning. While it locates writing as constructed in the writing classroom and lacks a prescriptive "how to" approach for teaching writing, the talk-write theory ignores the tools with which writers use to write and how these tools may shape context for writing.

The expressive, cognitive, social-epistemic, and talk-write models all offer significant insights about key aspects of learning to write, but many of these models equate writing with problem-solving thinking, which in turn promotes circular reasoning and simplistic views of how students actually write. They do not take into account how the context of learning, such as the social structure of the writing classroom, or the writing tools themselves, such as computers, may affect the processes students use for writing. Missing from all traditional models of writing is how adults actually construct meaning and learn to write in the ABE, GED writing classrooms or developmental writing classroom of community colleges, technical schools, and other adult education locales. Drawing upon the field of anthropological psychology and activity theory, we argue that we need to re-conceptualize adult writing theory as a "situated activity" shaped by how writing students shape and are shaped by the social practices of interaction, the activity of writing itself, and the culturally-provided tools used in writing.

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Situating Learning

Traditional cognitive psychological understandings of learning describe a conceptual process of acquiring and storing knowledge for future use (Driscoll, 1994). The expressive and cognitivist models of the writing process depend upon such notions because they focus on learning a process for writing that can be mentally internalized then transported for use in any context or social situation. Situated cognition suggests that knowledge is a relationship between the individual and the social or physical situation in which he or she learns. Knowing, from a situated cognition perspective, is not just an independent internal mental process, but is fundamentally situated as a product of activity, context, and culture. Culture is a "shared way of making sense of experience, based on a shared history...these learned systems are mediated primarily through language, which is itself interpreted through culture-specific conceptual frameworks of meaning and emerge through shared experiences, so that no two individuals share in precisely the same set of meaning systems

in precisely the same way" (Jacobson, 1996, p.16). Learning a culture from a situated perspective, then, means that we recognize how others may make sense of the world so that we can interact with them in ways that makes sense to them. How these interactions are negotiated through tools and activities becomes essential to understanding how cultures are learned and can shape how writing is taught to adult learners.

Missing from many studies concerning literacy and teaching writing to adults is the cultural dimension of learning. Schon (1987) describes knowledge as a continuous negotiation of meaning and dialogue in progress, further describing novice practitioners as learning in practice and in conversations around their practice. Cognitive apprenticeships in which adult learners would have opportunity to learn new cultures of practice has been advocated by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), Farmer, Buckmaster and LeGrand (1992) and Wilson (1993), but little research to date has been found concerning the cultural dimension writing instruction for adult learners (Hansman & Wilson, in press). Lave (1988) and Giddens (1979) argue that learners constitute and are constituted by society, or as Lave says, live in and fashion their society at the same time. Lave argues that learning cannot be understood simply as an internal, individual mental process in which the mind acquires and stores knowledge for future use in any context. Instead, human cognition is profoundly situated: learning and knowing are structured by people interacting with each other in tool-dependent environments. This approach to adult learning incorporates the mind, body, activity, and culturally-provided tools in a complex web of recursive interactions (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Viewing learning from this perspective as socially constructed through social interactions within the writing classrooms situates writing students as actively constructing their own processes for writing.

Theories of situated cognition (Lave, 1988; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), which suggest fascinating accounts of how adult learners might actually learn to write, enhance the ideas suggested by the social-epistemic and talk-write views of the writing process and have profound implications for examining the process of writing in a writing classroom. The social-epistemic view of the writing process suggests that learners are constituents of a culture. But learners live in and fashion their society at the same time (Giddens, 1979; Lave, 1988). How adult learners write, then, may well depend on the context within which the learning is taking place, and, as Lave suggests, on the tools they use as they learn.

It is our view teaching writing requires us to create a "world" of writing with learners actively participating in that creation. Such writing classrooms provide opportunities for adult learners to see writing modeled and model it to each other, receive coaching both from instructors and other adult learners, and actively practice writing using the computers as tools for writing, all of which contributes to students' constructing their knowing about writing. Duin and Hansen (1994), while describing the dialogic nature of writing as being socially constructed in the computer networked writing classroom, argue that learners are not "helplessly awash in a storm of social forces" (p. 91) but contribute to and actively construct their social context, explaining further that it is "a two-way, not a one-way process" (p.91), and that computer writing classrooms allow the social construction of knowledge about writing through social interaction and action. We propose

that students learn best when situating their thinking and their making of meaning in a real-world situation that promotes active participation in the learning process (Hansman & Wilson, in press). Social interaction, which allows exchange of ideas and discourse between students in writing classrooms as they read and discuss each other's writing projects, leads to socially constructing knowledge about writing.

Conclusion

So what does this mean to teachers of writing to adult learners? Viewing knowledge about writing as socially constructed through social interactions within the writing classroom situates students in the active construction of their own processes for writing. The implication for teachers of adults, then, is that modeling, coaching, and practice are the best approaches to foster learning (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990; Farmer, 1991; Schon, 1987; Wilson, 1993). The process of learning to write is a complex task that requires recognition of the context, culture, other people, and tools available to the learners. If culture is seen as a collective way of making sense of experience mediated primarily through language, which is itself interpreted through culture-specific conceptual frameworks of meaning and shared experiences, then in terms of academic writing, adult learners may not have the experiences to participate in academic cultures and understand writing conventions. Learning a culture from a situated perspective means that we recognize how others may make sense of the world so that we can interact with them in ways that makes sense to them. How these interactions are negotiated through tools and activities becomes essential to understanding how academic cultures and conventions are learned. In addition, academic cultures should be examined so that we recognize who has power to decide academic culture and conventions and how these academic conventions become privileged knowledge. Teachers of adult learners need to recognize how tools for writing and the social interactions in the writing classroom structure learning and plan curriculum which incorporates interactions of people, tools, activity and culture.

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