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COMMITMENT TO WRITING AND COMPLEXITY OF THINKING

It has become a truism of composition research today to say that more than one piece of writing from a student needs to be examined before it is possible to make any meaningful assessment of the student's writing ability. What has not yet been explored in these analyses of multiple responses to a range of writing tasks is the effect that translating a general task into one that engages personal commitment by the writer has on the cognitive strategies employed to respond to that task.

In this paper, I am reporting on one aspect of a study in which I examined the writing of basic skills and regular freshman composition students from three universities on the same three tasks, one calling for expository development, one calling for argumentative development, and the third calling for speculative development (Sternglass 16). I found that the degree to which the student writers transformed the generalized tasks into ones that were personally meaningful to them affected strongly their critical and creative thinking processes and their ability to utilize complex cognitive strategies in responding to the problems that they had posed for themselves.

Two types of changes occurred: (1) reading and writing were conceived of as meaning-making processes that gradually induced greater personal engagement on the part of the writer and thus

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fostered the display of more complex thinking, and (2) the writers changed in terms of their reliance on source texts in the essays they produced. Before exploring these points, I will describe briefly the cognitive model used to analyze the student papers. Then I will present a case study of one basic writing student to illustrate the changes that occurred.

The model used for analysis was one developed by Andrew Wilkinson and his associates in *Assessing Language Development* published in 1980. The Cognitive Processes aspects of this model reflects movement from concrete to abstract reasoning processes. The first two categories, Describing and Interpreting, are envisaged as concrete operational (in Piaget's terms), and the second two categories, Generalizing and Speculating, are seen as moving toward formal operational use, although the Generalizing category contains aspects of both concrete and formal operations. Mike Rose has wisely cautioned against labelling students too rigidly on Piaget's scale because it is important to examine those situations in which students can analyze and generalize, i.e. operate formally, and distinguish them from situations in which students cannot. According to Rose, the area of difficulty is the "unfamiliar web of reasoning/reading/writing conventions that are fundamental to academic inquiry" (127).

What I am attempting to explore in this paper is the range of cognitive strategies that are available to student writers when they are attempting to respond to tasks within academic constraints, especially different types of tasks that appear to call for different cognitive strategies, and the effect that engaging with the task has on the strategies employed. One issue often raised in composition research is that students have inherent abilities which they do not always demonstrate. This study then looks at two questions related to that issue: (1) Does the mode of the task influence in part the cognitive level drawn upon, and (2) Does a deeper level of commitment to the task encourage more complex thinking?

It was not surprising to me to find that more complex cognitive strategies were generated by the students as the task demands appear to become more complex, i.e. seemed to call for greater abstraction. What was surprising was the degree to which the individual students did or did not translate the generalized tasks into something personally meaningful to themselves and by so doing raised or lowered their level of commitment to the writing they were producing.

Since the three tasks were based on readings undertaken by all the class members and the instructors, that meant that there

was a great deal of information shared by the writer and his or her potential reader(s), whether they were the instructors or the classmates. This shared knowledge also meant that the degree to which the writer remained tied to the source readings and the class discussion determined whether the information or perspective introduced would or would not generate any genuine interest or enthusiasm for either the writer or the reader because it was possible that no new information or perspective would be included in the paper being produced.

What happened for the students was that many attempted to pose questions for investigation of the generalized topics that had the potential for original development, but often those questions were not fruitfully explored. To illustrate the relationship between commitment to the task and complexity of thinking, I will describe two aspects of the nature of response that one of the basic skills students produced: the degree to which she posed and responded to her translations of the generalized tasks, and the degree to which she relied on or freed herself from the source texts.

Joan was a basic skills student at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University. At this campus, basic skills students are identified as the weakest of the incoming freshman class in their language skills on the basis of a formula derived from their SAT-Verbal scores, Test of Standard Written English, high school grade point average, and relative high school class rank. For example, while the mean SAT-Verbal for all entering freshmen (in 1980 when Joan was a freshman) was 460, the mean score for basic skills students was 350. (The national mean SAT-Verbal for college freshmen in 1980 was 424.) Students having the lowest composite scores are then counseled into basic skills sections of freshman composition, but they are not compelled to enroll in them. (At the Bloomington campus of Indiana University, the basic skills sections replace the regular sections of freshman composition; they do not precede them.)

The first task, calling for expository development, was based on the reading of two personal essays. Students were directed to explore possible common ideas or perspectives displayed in the readings which dealt with two individuals describing similar experiences of professional success accompanied by separation from their families and heritages. The students were guided toward developing synthesizing ideas to relate the readings and then asked to select a particular emphasis or point of view to develop. Typical synthesizing topics included the following: "To Gain Yet Lose," "A Life With Two Roots," "Conflicts in Roles," and "Success and Happiness—An Intangible Pair." Most students

developed their papers through the expository approach of comparison and contrast. As can be seen from the nature of this generalized task, students appeared to be explicitly directed to stay close to the source materials and they were only peripherally encouraged to bring their own experiences into their analyses.

Joan titled her paper, "Career Choices: Are They Really Worth It?" She drew on a great deal of evidence from the source texts to develop the point that the authors of the personal essays were separated from their families because of their career choices, but she never addressed the question she posed, *was it worth it?* She apparently saw her task as the transfer of information from the source texts, rather than the transformation of that information into something she could analyze from her own perspective (Harste 1). Joan developed the cause and effect aspects of the issue she raised, but she failed to employ critical evaluative thinking skills that would have generated an original response to the question that she had raised in her title.

A brief excerpt from her paper captures the flavor of her presentation:

Both Rodriguez and Ullmann were somewhat separated from their families because of the career choices they had made. They had both decided at an earlier time in their lives that they wanted to have a higher standard of living as compared to what they would have had. Rodriguez wanted a better education and Ullmann wanted the wonderful life of an actress.

Even in the conclusion of the paper, no assessment is made of the implications of the individual's decisions.

The two stories do have quite a lot in common, but I think the main point that they convey is that they were both striving to have their own identity—and in the process they gave up something—their past lives and their families.

Thus, the writer comes so far—but no further. What has been given up by the authors of the essays she has read is articulated in her paper, but not the assessment of whether the gain was worth the loss, the question she had formulated. In this paper, then, Joan has started to transform a generalized task into a personally meaningful one by conceiving of the question, but she has failed to follow through and to fulfill the promise of that potential.

For the second task, an argumentative paper, students read a variety of essays on the value of a college education. They were

then instructed to develop a point of view and take a position on this general issue. They were directed to list the major arguments and counterarguments from the source texts so that they could be supported or refuted. As in the earlier task, students were told to look for ways to relate the arguments and counterarguments from the source materials. Prior to reading the source materials, the students participated in class discussions that centered on their own reasons for deciding to enter college, so it was hoped that they would bring their own experiences into their argumentative papers.

Once again, Joan formulated the title of her paper as a question, "Is education all it's made out to be?" She stated her hypothesis in entirely positive terms and selected evidence from the source readings to support that position. She supplemented the evidence from the source readings with examples from her world knowledge which she then assessed, two steps that had not occurred in her first paper. Furthermore, she questioned one of the assumptions found in the source readings, another cognitive strategy she had not demonstrated earlier. These new strategies likely reflect a cognitive potential that was already there, but not brought out by the nature of the response she made to the first task.

Two excerpts from her second essay illustrate these new strategies: In the first example, she brings in personal background knowledge and assesses it, and in the second example, she questions the assumption stated in one of the source texts that individuals only acquire values through the college experience.

For example, someone may have a degree for teaching, yet they may end up managing a small business instead. This job of which has some potential. There are also appealing jobs available that don't require a college education. For some occupations, such as skilled trades and some technical fields, special training can give one better credentials than a Bachelor's degree in liberal arts.

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My third and final argument is that the controversy over educational worth has moved beyond its monetary benefits to less tangible areas. Areas in personal development and life enrichment. For example, in theory a student is taught to develop their values and goals of themselves through college, but there's no assurance that going to college can affect anyone in this way, college alone cannot take all the credit. Most people have already acquired certain values before even going to college, it may just be a matter of strengthening these already acquired values.

This latter example demonstrates the inherent potential for independent analysis which Joan develops further in her third paper. It also illustrates Vygotsky's notion of a zone of proximal development (90) through which students are moved from their actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving to their level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. In other words, here Joan has been stimulated by an instructionally more challenging task and has started to respond by viewing reading and writing as the sources for original meaning-making (Harste 1-4; Tierney and Pearson 568-580). She has gone "beyond the information given" (to use Bruner's term) to begin to assert her own knowledge in the assessment of the conclusions drawn in the source readings.

In the third task, intended to be developed from a speculative perspective, students were asked to reflect on possible family structures in the year 2000. Perhaps because of the controversial nature of some of the source readings, in particular an excerpt from B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* and a description of an actual community modeled on Skinner's fictive one, a considerable number of students chose to critique the structures pictured by Skinner rather than construct their own. But Joan was virtually liberated by this task. In a rather dramatic breakthrough, she began to search her own world knowledge and experience to create new meanings, meanings unique to her on her topic, "Our Changing Sex Roles," the first generalized task truly transformed by her into one that was personally significant.

In this essay, Joan takes a position on the roles of women and proceeds to develop it with information from the source readings, from her personal experience, and from projections of her current knowledge, hence fulfilling the speculative demands of the task. She is no longer simply transferring information from the source texts, but she is creating an original synthesis and a new meaning for herself from the particular knowledge, background, and perspective she brings to bear on the topic. She has created a response that can be characterized as transactional from a reader-response perspective (Bleich 1978; Petrosky 1982). Petrosky has described such a response as "an expression and explanation of comprehension; and comprehension means using writing to explicate the connections between our models of reality—our prior knowledge—and the texts we recreate in light of them" (24-25). Thus, Joan has used the source texts as the basis for her own text in which she creates a moral stance about human relationships that she wishes to convey to her readers. Although her paper presents

an idealized view of such relationships, she draws on cognitive strategies that had been dormant and hidden in her earlier writing, but are released by her commitment to this new personal perspective. Some samples from her paper illustrate her engagement and the more complex thinking that accompanies it:

In today's society, a recent change in the traditional sex roles has developed; both in the home and in the community. Women are now allowed in job fields that were once only considered a masculine job, and more men are working in the home—helping with the housework and childrearing. Although these changes have come about, the family structure isn't actually hurt by them. There are some benefits: the married couple tend to share an unspecified and unlimited amount of obligations; the husband-wife bond is strengthened by equally sharing the work and other responsibilities; and the parents are more actively involved with their children.

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According to John B. Holland, the family is considered a type of group—one in which their concern is not with national calculations and limited obligations, but with flesh and blood people and their felt obligations to them. The married couple share an unspecified and unlimited amount of obligations. For example, the husband may be continuing his schooling, and in the process, his wife takes on a part-time job to help him through college. There is nothing in the marriage contract stating that the wife can, or cannot work. Another example could be that the wife's family goes into debt because they missed a \$200 rent payment. There is no written obligation on the husband or wife to meet their family's needs, but since they have intimate feelings for these particular relatives, they loan them the money with no questions asked. Neither of these obligations were written on paper, they were merely blanket obligations—which in the final analysis mean—an obligation on each of the marriage partners to help in whatever may arise in their common life together.

What I hope this discussion and these excerpts illustrate is the transformation of a basic writer who has become increasingly engaged with the topic areas proposed to her for writing about and who has increasingly used her personal resources to develop these topics. In the process, she has been able to demonstrate the use of appropriate cognitive strategies. Her resources include, of course, her increasing familiarity and comfort with the nature of academic tasks, practice in using source materials as evidence

and as initiators of material to use in her writing, and confidence that she can employ the increasingly complex strategies of explaining, inferring, assessing, deducing, abstracting, summarizing, evaluating, concluding, reflecting, classifying, hypothesizing, exploring, projecting, and speculating. Joan's papers demonstrate that perfunctory responses to generalized writing tasks draw on only a small range of these cognitive operations, while more engaged and committed responses foster increasingly complex thinking and writing.

One additional characteristic of Joan's writing reinforces the changes just described. As she moved through the tasks, Joan's reliance on the source texts dropped off markedly. Her first paper consisted primarily of a string of quotations taken directly from the source materials, loosely held together by transitional sentences (an all too familiar pattern for freshman compositions). Her second paper, while eschewing direct quotations, consisted primarily of material paraphrased from the source materials. Only with the third paper did Joan reconceive the way in which the source materials would be used, this time as a takeoff point for the development of her own ideas. Three brief excerpts illustrate this progression:

Expository paper: Rodriguez chose to further his education in an American way . . . "When I was beginning grade school, I noted to myself the fact that the classroom environment was so different in its styles and assumptions from my own family environment that survival would essentially entail a choice between both worlds." He obviously chose to go on and further his education, thus leaving his Chicano past behind.

There is no question that the selected quotation is germane to the point that Joan wishes to make, and she draws an inference from the quotation, but her extensive dependence on the exact language of the source texts reflects some uncertainty about analyzing the experiences of the writers whose lives she has been reading about. Stringing together a chain of direct quotations is a deliberate strategy, one often invoked by student writers who wish to avoid any deeper level of engagement with the materials being presented. Alternatively, this strategy is also frequently used by students who do not understand the source material well enough even to paraphrase it. As a writing strategy, direct quotation allows the writer to fulfill the demands of providing specific examples and details in support of her generalizations while at

the same time presenting only surface inferences to link the meanings together, if, in fact, any inferences are supplied at all.

Argumentative paper: One argument against college is that the salary differential between college graduates and other Americans is narrowing. According to the article about the value of a college diploma, which appeared in a 1975 *US News and World Report*, in 1969, full-time male workers with four years of college earned 53% more than male workers with four years of high school; in 1978 it decreased to only 40% more . . .

The argumentative demands of this task require Joan to marshal evidence to support her position. This she does, selecting details from the source readings and “plugging” them into the neatly laid out paragraphs of support. It becomes difficult to separate the inferences she draws independently from those drawn by the authors of the source texts. Only by observing the selections of points drawn from the source readings for inclusion in the paper do we gain any real insight into the mind of the writer. She is not drawing on complex cognitive strategies because, for the most part, she is not analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating the evidence from any original or personal perspective. In other words, she is still treating writing from sources as the transfer of information rather than its transformation.

Speculative paper: The husband and wife have an intimate relationship based on sentiment, for this is usually why they are united in marriage, because of the special feelings they have for each other. They are kept together by a bond, or a feeling of belonging. One aspect of this bond is the sharing of work and other responsibilities. The husband helps cook, clean and wash dishes, while the mother helps with the children, or vice versa. Or a situation could arise where the husband is out of work, so the wife supports the family with her job. The husband then takes care of the responsibilities in the home. Since jobs around the house are shared equally, the husband and wife have respect for each other’s feelings . . .

None of the ideas from the previous excerpt came directly from the readings in the class or from the class discussions. Rather, in this paper Joan has used the topic and the contextual cues as an opportunity to explore an aspect of her thinking hitherto unanalyzed. Although her analysis may appear unsophisticated,

it is evidence of her willingness to take risks in her writing that might have seemed impossible to anyone viewing her earlier writing in the course when she appeared to be completely boxed in by a reliance on the source texts and an apparent belief that writing was merely the transfer of information. She has freed herself from the bondage of the source texts, she has reconceived the generalized task into one that is personally meaningful for her, and she has liberated the cognitive strategies that lay dormant in her earlier writing.

Such an analysis vindicates the notion that multiple texts must be examined before it is possible to draw conclusions about a writer's ability and performance. Furthermore, it strongly suggests that a writer must be strongly encouraged to create a personally meaningful task from a generalized one if increasingly complex cognitive strategies are going to be exercised and fostered.

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