OF PRE- AND POST-PROCESS:
REVIEWS AND RUMINATIONS


In composition courses we do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely expect them to.

Francis Christensen, 1963

Everyone teaches the process of writing, but everyone does not teach the same process. The test of one’s competence as a composition instructor . . . resides in being able to recognize and justify the version of the process being taught.”

Jim Berlin, 1982

For compositionists who are in professional middle age or younger, “writing is a process” is an aphorism without impact. As Elizabeth Ervin explains in her contribution to *Post-Process Theory*, “by the time I attended my first 4C’s in 1990, composition’s

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epistemological break from a product orientation for the most part was complete and taken for granted" (Clifford and Ervin 182). Joe Harris says, "that writing is a process . . . strikes me as a claim that is true, banal, and of a real if limited use" (57). And Joe Petraglia writes that "we now have the theoretical and empirical sophistication to consider the mantra 'writing is a process' as the right answer to a really boring question" (53). But to those of us with longer career memories, the earliest books and articles on process were professional lightning bolts, offering brief but stunning glimpses of otherwise dark terrain: "process seemed a pedagogical breakthrough" (Clifford 180).

I took first-year composition at a compass-point state university in the Midwest in the early sixties. It wasn't a bad program; with full profs as teachers, I read a lot and learned a lot. But it was decidedly a pre-process program. I want to describe it because I suspect many readers of this journal have never experienced a genuinely "product"-centered composition class.

In the fall quarter, we had an anthology of readings, a handbook of grammar, and the 2nd edition of McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose*. We wrote at least five papers. One assigned topic was "My First Day at School." Another was "any philosophical issue." A third was a limited research paper about some historic person, who we were to argue was or was not "great" based on several readings in the anthology. Dr. Staton would assign the topic orally, and we would have about a week to write. Then he marked the paper, put a grade on it, and a brief comment. Mostly I got C's and B's, but he liked my "great man" paper on Lenin: "You can write with precision I am glad to see." What that implied about my previous papers was pretty clear. The most memorable experience was the day Dr. Staton read one of my papers aloud for class criticism—after it was graded of course. It had one serious problem, as the class quickly pointed out, and one virtue that Dr. Staton pointed out. That day I learned (more-or-less) to avoid the problem and to repeat the virtue. We had a final exam that consisted of reading Mencken's "Homo Boobians" from the anthology and making an outline of it.

Let's notice what was "missing" from that course that any able composition teacher today expects. First, there was nothing about prewriting. Although the final exam involved an outline, I don't recall that we were directed to outline our papers, and certainly we did not turn in either an outline or any prior drafts with the manuscript. There was never any small-group work. And there was no revision after Staton read the
paper, not even required correction of the errors. Finally, there was no mention of the idea that I had any particular audience to write to.

My second course was similar, but it was supposed to focus on the theme of language, so our anthology was a collection of scholarly articles about language and usage. The course was also supposed to emphasize research—or more accurately, research format. The English department did not intend us to use the library but to write our papers by drawing from the book of articles on linguistics. The departmental final exam required us to read several short articles about language and produce a correctly documented miniature research paper—without the aid of our handbooks—in two hours. Those were the days of genuine foot-notes (bottom of the page for each reference) and separate bibliography, each with their own rules. Even at age nineteen I had assumed that you didn’t need to memorize those forms but would be able to look them up when needed. I never saw the grade for my final, but I knew as I concocted the wholly artificial piece that it wasn’t “right.” I didn’t do too well in the course.

And a third course was required, a traditional literature-based writing class. I enjoyed it, met a teacher who would become a mentor for me as I later migrated from math into English. In addition, she was the first teacher who had ever told me to write to a formula—the five-paragraph essay. We were to underline the thesis in the first paragraph and put brackets around the topic sentence of each body paragraph. This was the first time anyone had told me I needed to have a thesis. I had never heard of the form before, and it made writing a lot easier. Naturally, this too was a process-less course.

Only later in my career did I run into courses that were even more pre-process or non-process, courses built on in-class impromptu writing—a topic students had not known about in advance, fifty minutes to outline and write, followed by marking (in teacher code based directly or indirectly on The Harbrace Handbook) with a grade. I’m proud to say that in almost forty years as a writing teacher I have never done that to my students.

So what is my point (beyond an exercise in personal nostalgia)? There really is a distinction worth making between product-based classes and process-based classes, although variations certainly fall along a continuum. Jim Berlin dismissed the distinction when he wrote that “everyone teaches the process” (777). Obviously in one sense he is correct. My first-year courses, and the teachers I later observed giving
impromptu essays, did "teach" a "process" of sorts. It was linear and truncated: choose a topic, outline, write, and proofread if necessary. Even the "outline" wasn't essential. Basically pre-process teaching constructed writing as an "act"—not an extended, complex process, not a process of "discovering" meaning or something worth saying, not a recursive, messy procedure, but a simple set of activities that any competent writer could perform "on demand."

Writing was rather like riding a bicycle. If you knew how to do it, then you could demonstrate your ability on demand. Hence the idea of in-class and time-limited writing, including my final-exam-as-research-paper. Of course, there were degrees of ability; some rode/wrote more gracefully or faster than others. And there were different writing/riding situations—long flat rides/writes, short sprints, uphill climbs, and easy downhill narratives. And there were a few variations, such as learning to switch from a "regular" bike to one with gears, or switch from a pedal brake to new-fangled handbrakes. And some riders/writers were not in the best shape, while others flew along the page/path, perhaps even performing stunts and earning style points during the act of writing/riding. Of course those who are not in shape need exercises.

Nowadays, the leading thinkers in composition seem to me to share the following view of our recent history. There were the bad-old days. I have been calling them "pre-process." More often they are described as the period of "current-traditional" rhetoric (following Young who took the phrase from Fogarty), or what Maxine Hairston, borrowing from Thomas Kuhn, called "pre-paradigmatic." But then came the "process revolution," and amid much feuding at least a quasi-paradigm for the field was formed.

That much would be agreed upon. Now, however, we can look back on that revolution and study it as history. The first college composition text to have the word "process" in its title was Susan Miller's Writing: Process and Product published in 1976. Miller's approach (reflected in the title) is that "Writing is a complicated mental process that produces a completed physical product" ("Afterword" 141). "Although the process of writing is personal, private, and necessarily self-expressive, the product of writing is public" and "judged by someone else" (94). The book has three large sections, a background introduction to what college writing teachers expect, a section on "How to Write: Assigned Creativity," which is directly about invention and drafting, plus "How to Write Well: It's Not What You Meant, It's What You Said," which is more about written products, including several common writing types/genres. The book combines a classical rhetorical orientation with a largely linear view that
the process of writing involves four sequential skills: observing, having an idea, developing the idea, and presenting it. Miller offers students ways of overcoming writer’s block, stresses the importance of focusing on a single idea (thesis) and adapting to audience. I’m not sure that Miller is the first textbook that can be described as “process-based,” but it is surely one of the earliest. And it gives an interesting perspective on what it would look like to teach “writing as a process” in the early days of the revolution.

Of course, not everyone in the business has progressed so rapidly. There are still current/traditional teachers out there, even though they are not represented in our journals. They co-exist, somewhat uncomfortably, like folk medicines with antibiotics. And process theorists like nothing better than to criticize the unenlightened who still do grammar exercises to strengthen the mental muscle and who lecture students about features of good writing. But now the process theorists are also being treated as backward, hopelessly retro from the perspective of “post-process” theorists. The small revolutionary post-process group look down their noses at old-fashioned “process” folk, and want to drag them into the 21st century, a brave new postmodern post-process (pmpp) era of composition.

I believe John Trimbur and Anthony Pare get the credit/blame for introducing the term “post-process” into our scholarly discourse in separate articles in 1994, but the term has been rapidly picked up, especially in two scholarly anthologies that use it in their titles. These two collections plus three earlier collections on process are the subjects of my ruminations. I’ll return to Trimbur and these post-process collections later, but first let’s talk further about the “process” revolution, which still may be more an artifact of our published scholarship than a reality in our classrooms.

THREE COLLECTIONS ON WRITING AS PROCESS

We now have three contrasting anthologies concerning process approaches to teaching writing: Sondra Perl’s Landmark Essays on Writing Process (1994), Lad Tobin and Thomas Newkirk’s Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the ’90s (1994), and Writing Process Revisited: Sharing Our Stories by Donna Barnes, Katherine Morgan, and Karen Weinhold (1997). It is perhaps surprising that something often referred to as a “paradigm” would generate such different books. But many of the contrasts can be explained by the books’ origins. Perl’s collection, like all the “Landmark” series, involves reprints of previous key works (twenty-two pieces mostly dating from the 1980s but picking up several earlier pieces). The Tobin and Newkirk work gives us sixteen
papers, most of which were originally oral presentations at the University of New Hampshire’s conference “The Writing Process: Retrospect and Prospect” (1992). Barnes, Morgan, and Weinhold apparently met at the University of New Hampshire, where they fell under the charismatic sway of Don Graves. Two are elementary teachers, the third (Morgan) a high school teacher. As their subtitle suggests, theirs is a collection of teacher narratives, mostly from experienced elementary teachers, many with university ties.

Is there such a thing as “the writing process”? And was there a “writing process movement”? The precise answer to both questions is “no.” Obviously there are many different “writing processes”; what works for one writer may be disastrous for another, and what works one time for Writer Jones may completely fail for her at a later time. And calling a set of changes a “movement” suggests a sort of unity and organization and leadership structure that the various “process pioneers” never had. Even a brief list of the most famous pioneers will produce a group of scholar/teachers who differ as much as they agree: Janet Emig and Don Graves; Linda Flower and James Britton; Maxine Hairston and Don Murray; Richard Young and Peter Elbow.

On the other hand, however, in ordinary usage the words process and movement operate somewhat indiscriminately to refer to related groups of dissimilar, even contradictory, activities and actors. We may loosely refer to “the anti-war movement” of the sixties, yet not mean that it was a single organization of like-minded agents. Similarly we may for simplicity refer to “the process of directing a play or coaching debate,” knowing full well that there are many processes for directing a play or for teaching students competitive oral argument. When we use process in this loose aggregate sense, we should always be aware that the usage is different from that in a phrase like “the Bessemer process of making steel.” For it turns out that it’s easy to forget the differences between the broader usage and the focused one. Based on that slippage, it then becomes easy to accuse defenders of writing as process of advocating a rigid linear procedure—a type of procedure that is fine for making steel but not so fine for producing text. More on this below under the discussion of “post-process.”

I suggest we imagine the supporters of writing as a process not as a “movement” but as a political party (the WAP), with members frequently willing to vote together for the same candidates, and more or less united around certain slogans lacking in nuance and short enough for bumper stickers: “Teach process not product.” “Down with Current-Traditional
Rhetoric." "Say no to grammar." In that case, the party has at least two identifiable wings, the "rhetorical process" liberals and the "process expressivist" libertarians.

**Overview of the Two College Collections on Process**

If I carry out the political party metaphor, then Perl's Landmark collection represents mainly the rhetorical process liberals, while *Taking Stock* reflects views of the more individualist/romantic or expressivist libertarian wing. (But it also includes work problematizing that perspective.)


Then comes a series of theoretical syntheses or criticisms: Berthoff, Hairston's "The Winds of Change," Berkenkotter's famous study of Don Murray himself. These are followed by several articles problematizing process research, primarily by pointing out how social and cultural contexts complicate notions of writing processes and writing process research: James Reither raised several of the questions in 1985; Lester Faigley analyzed three different views of "process," including a "social" view in 1986. And Min-Zhan Lu and Elizabeth Flynn called attention respectively to cultural and gender influences on writing processes.

The last seven entries in Perl's collection are a bit of a surprise, since they shift the emphasis from cognitive questions or even social questions to deal more with the personal and affective dimensions of composing. Here Perl finds room for one of Don Murray's many essays on process ("All Writing is Autobiography") and for Nancy Sommers' declaration of individuality, "Between the Drafts." However, the other reprinted texts are not by compositionists at all, but primarily by recognized essayists: Annie Dillard, Deena Metzger, William Stafford, and (from 1938) Brenda Ueland. Like Sommers and Murray, these professional sages advocate the creative sharing in prose of personal observations and experiences. The volume thus mirrors Perl's career path from empirical/cognitive researcher to a leader in the movement primarily concerned with the affective/spiritual dimensions of writing (now finding a home in the
Association for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, an NCTE affiliate. That move, it seems to me, was signaled, in Perl’s 1980 article “Understanding Composing,” in which she stressed the importance of a writer’s experiencing a “felt sense” of his/her desire to write. Perl includes that article also (she and Sommers, the only authors represented twice, both show something of the same shift in emphasis). It’s a bit as if some members of the traditional/liberal wing of the WAP were shifting to the personal/libertarian pole.

The Tobin and Newkirk collection, Taking Stock, is easier to describe since the editors place the articles in sections with headings. But as usual when you try to fit existing papers into slots, some don’t seem to match the headings especially well. First come four articles under “Reading the Writing Process Movement,” two by pioneers (Moffett and Murray) and two by historical analysts (Lisa Ede and James Marshall). Ede writes a wide-ranging and judicious survey, emphasizing that within “the process movement” are tremendously different classroom practices, as different as freewriting is from tagmemics, and arguing that writing-as-process helped legitimize composition studies, but that optimistic discussions of a “new paradigm” have turned out to be greatly exaggerated. She calls attention to a number of unfortunate binaries underlying much present discourse: personal expression vs. social construction, process vs. product, and theory vs. practice. James Marshall emphasizes how much the “writing process movement” was framed as a revolution by marginalized outsiders, “rebels” against the establishment, who preferred “free” writing to “constrained” writing, which they castigated as current-traditional. He challenges those who support “process teaching” to recognize that they are no longer the rebels, but the mainstream, with a responsibility to show that their now-dominant pedagogy, with its Deweyan echoes, actually works.

From background we move to “Teaching the Writing Process,” which includes a piece by Ken Macrorie, plus an article about using poetry in the writing classroom (by Daniel Reagan) and one about the problematic authority of women in the writing classroom (Michelle Payne). If you were actually interested in how teachers approach writing as a process in their classrooms, this section would not satisfy. Probably that is to be expected since the papers come from a conference dedicated to “taking stock” of “writing as process,” not just explaining how it plays out in classrooms.

Section Three, “Institutionalizing the Writing Process,” includes editor Thomas Newkirk’s “Politics of Intimacy: The Defeat of Barrett
Wendell at Harvard,” plus Charles Moran’s narrative of “How the Writing Process came to UMass/Amherst.” Both are interesting and enlightening historical studies. The section also includes a fascinating critique by Mary Minock, “The Bad Marriage: A Revisionist View of James Britton’s Expressive-Writing Hypothesis in American Practice.” I’ll return to it later in my discussion of the complex entanglement of “expressivism” with writing-as-process.

In Section Four of Taking Stock, the editors join three papers under the heading of “Deconstructing the Writing Process,” one by Elbow on the values of binary thinking, plus Robert Yagelski writing about “subjectivity,” with the sub-title, “A Student of Donald Murray Enters the Age of Postmodernism.” (More on Yagelski below.) Thomas Recchio writes an essay about the value of “essaying.”

The book closes a bit oddly with a section called “Narrating the Writing Process.” Susan Wall writes a strong article about teachers’ talk and how the metaphor of “owning” one’s discourse can be easily deconstructed from a social-construction perspective yet still makes sense in terms of material and social conditions in public schools. Wendy Bishop discusses ethnographic writing research; and James Britton gives the peroration, “There is One Story Worth Telling,” developing the idea that [all?] authentic and effective language use grows from telling our stories to make order from the chaos of experience.

Perl and Tobin Introduce Their Collections

Perl and Tobin write prefatory essays to the collections, each narrating the rise and ossification of the process “movement.” Perl writes as a participant, one of the fervent early researchers into writers’ processes, while Tobin writes as a convert, a young teacher once mired in the rigidities of the five-paragraph essay until he saw the process light in Perl’s “shining moment.” Each essay names the party’s pioneers; each author acknowledges that his/her story is not a simple reflection of a reality but a rhetorical construct giving order to events and publications that might look orderly only in hindsight. And they agree that by the nineties, “process” had both faded on its own and come under severe critique.

For Perl, the work done in the early seventies that looked “directly” at writers during their composing was the start of the brief “shining moment.” Its patron saint was clearly Janet Emig, whose The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders appeared in 1971. (Notice that “processes” in her title is a plural, although I have frequently seen it mis-cited as “process,” as it is in the footnote on page one of Perl’s collection that
identifies the source of the chapter.) Tobin would begin the story somewhat earlier, perhaps with Murray’s A Writer Teaches Writing and James Moffett’s Teaching the Universe of Discourse (both in 1968), although he too alludes to Emig’s crucial role. For the WAP liberal wing, early empirical research was the harbinger of change. But expressivist libertarians find that sort of research hard to swallow, so they downplay the work of Emig, Flower, Sommers, and Perl while stressing the introspective and classroom-based thinking of Murray, Moffett, Elbow, Macrorie, and Britton.

The introductions differ dramatically in tone. Perl is saddened by the fading of that “shining moment,” while Tobin welcomes the idea that “process” faces critique and a turning point. While Perl doesn’t say much about the causes of the “process decline” (implying that researchers simply moved on), Tobin discusses succinctly three trends “process” will have to deal with in the 21st century: the effect of new technologies on writing, the role of teachers’ reading processes, and, most important, the leftist/cultural/feminist critique of process theory.

Tobin also raises a question that has always troubled me, the relationship between the idea that writing is and should be taught as an extended, complex, messy, recursive process and the notion that good writing should be strongly voiced expression about personal experience. Tobin accepts that the two are naturally connected; hence the deference to Murray, Moffett, Britton, and Macrorie, all of whom are included in the collection. Of those four, only Murray appears in Perl’s selection of “landmarks.” In turn, none of the early empirical researchers on process apparently spoke at the New Hampshire conference that Taking Stock represents. So Sommers, Flower, Emig, and Perl herself are missing from Newkirk’s book, although Emig is given due respect in the introduction. (I’ll return to “expressivism” and “process” below.)

Obviously then, Taking Stock and Landmark Essays on Writing Process give somewhat different portraits of what both volumes agree was a revolution in composition history. Perl’s collection (at least the first dozen articles) gives the more traditional history by reproducing what might now be called “primary documents” of the “movement.” These twelve selections would make a good set for graduate students in the field to read. Contrary to one of the expressed goals of the Landmark series, however, none of these is a reprint of an out-of-print book or hard-to-find journal article. They all come from Research in the Teaching of English, College Composition and Communication, College English, or they are easily accessible studies like Emig’s. Based on a conference, and true to
its title, *Taking Stock* joins some reflective essays by pioneers like Moffett (the first essay) and Britton (the last) with the work of younger scholars who extend, problematize, or situate “process.” It is both the more uneven and the more sophisticated collection.

**One View of Process in the Public Schools**

*Writing Process Revisited: Sharing Our Stories* includes ten personal narratives from (mostly) elementary and high school teachers; the editors contribute three and also write brief reflective responses to the other essays. If you like to read classroom stories, as I do, stories punctuated with quotations from students and their writing, or even with drawings, stories that are wry, humorous, touching, and well written, this short collection is a very pleasant read. Its direct value for college teachers is limited, yet by showing how “process” sometimes plays out in public schools, it provides a useful body of data for those of us who want to theorize about WAP.

These authors are all true believers in a particular view of what it means to “teach” the writing process, a model familiar to those who have read Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle*. Call it the University of New Hampshire College of Education model, identified with Atwell, Graves, and Calkins, or what I earlier described as the expressive/libertarian wing of the WAP. As editor Weinhold puts it, “over a three-week period during the summer, teachers are reborn as writing process teachers on the UNH campus in Durham” (In an editor’s response 175). In such a class the students must read good literature of their own choosing: “A writing classroom where there is little or no connection to literature becomes a ‘writing ghetto.’ Students’ writing can be greatly enhanced when they read examples of a genre before they write it” and “Bringing literature into the writing class is not only valid, it is essential.” (Beaumier 90 and 93).

After they read, students must choose their own topics for writing (and these topics will generate either personal narrative essays or stories or poems): “For students to truly develop personal identities, they must be given the freedom of topic choice” (Beaumier 88). “I didn’t want to start assigning topics because it went against the very teaching of process” (Belavitch 44). This view rests on the presumption that “student motivation to write is directly connected with their freedom to choose topics and genres. When this freedom is taken away, is anything gained which can counterbalance the potential loss of motivation?” (Morgan 75).

All writing must be shared for peer review: “the writing process provides collaborative and cooperative learning occasions which help
build student self-esteem and reduce the competitive atmosphere which has dominated classrooms for too long” (Morgan in an editor’s response, 51). “Is it necessary to have peer conferences remain as a part of the writing process? The answer is yes” (Morgan in an editor’s response to Weinhold’s article questioning the effectiveness of peer conferences 147).

And assessment of student performance is immensely problematic: “Don’t grades actually run counter to the whole process approach? What do teachers try to grade, the process or the product? Where is the student involvement in the assessment process?” (Morgan in an editor’s response 51). One teacher narrates her chagrin at being told by her principal that grades would actually be necessary for her eighth graders. “But writing is subjective,” I argued, “I can’t put a number grade on their ideas. I want the students to feel free to express themselves without worrying how I am going to pass judgment” (Belavitch 46). Doubly difficult since not all writing must be revised to completion, but all work is collected in a student portfolio.

Two essays actually raise small challenges to process orthodoxy. In “The Other Stuff,” Leslie Brown, who teaches first-year students at the University of New Hampshire, argues that a teacher of “the writing process” still needs to make sure students edit their final drafts appropriately. Brown gives a variety of pretty standard teacher approaches to getting students to spot errors of grammar and style, such as reproducing sentences from student papers for editing practice and actually having the students buy a handbook. More interesting is the contribution by editor Karen Weinhold. In “No Talking during Nuclear Attack: An Introduction to Peer Conferencing,” she expresses significant doubt that peer conferences will work for all teachers, even though this was part of the orthodoxy she converted to after her three weeks in the summer UNH workshop in 1981. “The anecdotes that follow are my confession that I am dissatisfied with peer conferencing’s effectiveness in all of the many, many ways I’ve tried to use it” (137). Part of her confession is that she is now “agnostic” (138) about peer conferencing, although she still abides by the faith and uses it. That, even though as a traveling teacher-in-residence for the UNH education department, “I traveled to many schools to observe graduate students doing their teaching internships. Everywhere I went I focused on the conferencing techniques and strategies being used, at all grade levels, readiness through grade 12. I was appalled by what I saw” (141), and this was true both with the novice student teachers and with their cooperating teachers. The religious imagery, by the way, is Weinhold’s. She calls herself a “doubting
Thomas" (145), worries about whether her "skepticism" is "blasphemy"(142), but isn’t about to start a "crusade" since hers is a one-year position (142).

One reason some of the most up-to-date folk in composition studies are now critiquing "writing as process" and saying that we are now "post process" is the linear orthodoxy implicit in this account of how one "teaches" writing as a process, even while acknowledging that writing processes vary and are anything but linear.

Is "Process" Equal to "Expressivism"?

In one of the longest essays in the Tobin and Newkirk volume, and for my money the most useful and insightful, Mary Minock argues that the "writing process movement" was a peculiar "marriage" of James Britton's "expressive developmental theory" with American expressivism and American faith in miraculously rapid progress. So the idea that many other discourse genres were based developmentally on the child's use of self expression (Britton) became built into a curriculum for college students in which the expressive/narrative/freewriting from early in a semester "develops" into the end-of-course academic argument—a narrative we might call "The development of writing abilities: September to December." Although there was a political "logic" to alllying the two positions, since both opposed current-traditional or formalist teaching, the marriage belied what was most essential to both views. Minock points out that Berlin in his first of several taxonomies did not classify Britton and Moffett as Expressivists. Nor did I.

Tobin discusses the tendency to associate expressivism and process in his introduction to the collection: "there is not a necessary connection between process pedagogy and personal writing, that is a teacher could assign a personal essay but ignore the writing process or assign a critical analysis yet nurture the process" (6), yet having said it he notes, "the two have often been linked in practice and perception" (6). He leaves the issue there.

Ede remarks on a related matter when she alludes to "the substantial diversity of the activities that are often lumped together under the rubric of the writing process movement" (36), and elaborates, saying, "A class structured around freewriting and personal narration differs substantially from one that emphasizes structured heuristics and academic writing, for instance, yet both approaches have been cited as examples of 'process' teaching" (36). Again, perhaps, the distinction between the expressivist and rhetorical wings of the WAP.
In one of the most helpful essays in Taking Stock, Robert Yagelski ponders the problem of whether a process approach to writing is theoretically justifiable in the light of postmodern criticisms. As he notes, if writers have no individual “agency,” “the process approach to teaching writing would seem to be a sham” (204). He interweaves his own story of being a New Hampshire graduate assistant, and working with Don Murray, with postmodern critiques of “process” by Berlin, Clifford, and Jarratt. And he points out that such critiques “problematize the notion of ‘individual’ or ‘subject’ as often conceived in expressivist discussions” (207). He concludes that these critiques are not really about the “idea that writing is a process,” but about political implications of “expressivist” conceptions of writing and the “self” (208). He notes that even Berlin, in discussing his preferred social-epistemic rhetoric said, “This effort locates the composing process within its social context” (qtd in Yagelski 208). 1

Two “Post-Process” Collections

If some in the profession believe it is time to “take stock” of the “process movement,” others believe the movement itself is passé. So we now have two collections featuring the term “post-process”: Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm edited by Thomas Kent, and Grading in the Post-Process Classroom edited by Libby Allison, Lizbeth Bryant, and Maureen Hourigan. The first is a strong collection; the second isn’t. Kent’s book includes thirteen articles by well-known scholars looking at “process” and “post process” from varied perspectives. The collection on grading includes eleven chapters obviously focused on the title issue, plus an “Afterword” by Victor Villanueva.

Thomas Kent’s Argument: Teaching Writing Is Impossible

In his introduction to Post-Process Theory, Kent summarizes an argument he first advanced in “Paralogic Hermeneutics and the Possibilities of Rhetoric” in 1989 (and later developed in Paralogic Rhetoric). Borrowing from the theories of Donald Davidson, Kent argues that all communication involves guesswork on the part of both rhetor and reader. For a simple illustration, the rhetor must “guess” whether the auditor will understand and react positively to a given vocabulary choice (e.g., axiology), and in turn the auditor has to guess at just how the word should be interpreted in its context of deployment. This necessary guesswork makes writing a “thoroughly interpretative act” (Post-Process Theory 2), an act that Kent calls “paralogic hermeneutics.” And because of this necessary yet atheoretical guesswork, “no codifiable or

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generalizable writing process exists nor could exist” (Post-Process Theory 1). Because communication is not “codifiable,” “we are forced to acknowledge the impossibility of teaching writing and critical reading as an epistemologically centered body-of-knowledge” (“Paralogic Hermeneutics” 35). “No single course can teach a student how to produce or analyze discourse, for the hermeneutic guessing required in all discourse production and analysis can be only refined; it cannot be codified and then taught” (“Paralogic Hermeneutics” 39). Kent’s is a radical position, one not shared by most of the contributors to his collection.

Presentations of Post-Process Theory

Kent’s collection presents thirteen essays by authors who presumably agree that in some sense, at least, composition either is or must become “post process.” The articles are not divided with headings, but in the introduction Kent explains the structure. The first four essays respond to the question of “What is a post-process theory?” Then come three that “investigate the impact of post-process theory on specific kinds of writing” in answering the question “How does post-process theory break with the process movement?” Three further articles consider the “pedagogical implications of post-process theory.” While the final three “discuss some of the possibilities for institutional and critical reform broached by post-process theory” (5).

Although several of the contributors use “post-process” in their titles, I don’t think most of the authors actually agree that we are or ought to be “post-process,” and among those who do agree, the term’s meaning seems to shift radically, reminding us that there is not a “post-process” movement, any more than there was a “process” movement. If these authors are united, they are united only by what they oppose; consider the following four points.

One: First, there is Kent’s meaning, described above: because every communicative event rests on “paralogic” guessing, each one is unique, and thus no systematic features of communicating exist. There is no “process” that can be taught. Thus, for Kent, the process theories of the last three decades have in fact been wrong-headed. But that is the most extreme of viewpoints, not one held by most of the contributors (Sidney Dobrin even refers to Kent’s view as “post-post process” [133]). Gary Olson in “Toward a Post-Process Composition: Abandoning the Rhetoric of Assertion” almost outdoes Kent. After a good summary of the history of writing as process (not the expressivist version but the rhetorical one), he repeats Kent’s view that since writing cannot be codified, it cannot be
taught. Moreover, to assume it can even be described is to engage in “theory building” (8) or constructing a model, activity we know to be in conflict with the postmodern critique of master narratives. So the entire “vocabulary of process is no longer useful” (9).

I am reminded that Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrects-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric* devoted some space to what they called *autophagia*, using language that “eats itself up” by being self-contradictory, as when a student confidently asserts that “there are no absolutes.” It seems the ultimate in autophagiac irony for Olson to write a highly assertive argument that postmodern thought has proven we must avoid making assertions. (I don’t know whether Kent would agree that assertions are impossible; certainly he makes them quite confidently, as do all the postmodern theorists I have read. Perhaps it doesn’t go too far to say that postmodernism with its rejection of all foundational viewpoints and all master narratives is built on autophagia.)

Naturally if assertions are to be disallowed from writing, one might wonder what remains for the composition teacher to teach. Olson isn’t exactly “clear” about this (although he questions “clarity” itself as a virtue in writing 11). In a characteristic postmodern argument pattern, he bases his own assertions on the assertions of high theorists—Lytard, Haraway, Harding, “and many other theorists”—and concludes (asserts?) that we must move away from “a discourse of mastery and assertion toward a more dialogic, dynamic, open-ended, receptive, nonassertive stance” (14). Vague as the approach is, it is “undoubtedly . . . much more useful than process-oriented efforts to ‘master’ the writing process” (15). (On this issue of assertion vs. dialogism, see my “Transcending Our Conception of Argument in Light of Feminist Critiques.”)

Two: For Dobrin, “post-process in composition studies refers to the shift in scholarly attention from the process by which the individual writer produces text to the larger forces that affect that writer and of which that writer is a part” (132). Probably anyone familiar with our scholarly discourses of the last decade would have to accept this as an accurate description of the shift of scholarly attention, a shift that has often been referred to as “the social turn,” and which has simultaneously been a turn from empirically based studies to application of “theory.” Instead of interest in writers’ processes of composing, scholarship of the social turn more generally investigates how social and cultural forces operating through discursive formations enact hegemony and deprive students of agency. And that view forecasts the third meaning of “post-process.”
Three: John Clifford and Elizabeth Ervin, representing separate generations of compositionists, co-author an article on “The Ethics of Process,” an article structured (successfully) as a dialogue between them. They present this social viewpoint as embodied in classroom practice. They regard themselves as “post-process” because “process” did not “prove rich enough” (Clifford 185), and Ervin found herself “‘doing process’ for no better reason than because that is what you do when you teach composition” (190). Both of them thus went “beyond” teaching process to focus their pedagogy on “challeng[ing] sociohistorical subjects caught in a flawed social order to enact a democratic rhetoric” (179). Call this the “ideological post-process theory.”

Four: For others, “post-process theory” more simply “signifies a rejection of the generally formulaic framework for understanding writing that process suggested” (Petraglia 53). David Russell describes the anomaly of his daughter’s public school teaching the writing process as a formula, spelled out in large printed posters, PREWRITE, WRITE, REVISE, EDIT. Russell asks, “What might it mean . . . to go ‘beyond’ process?” His answer is in fact consistent with process theory: “From the activity-theory perspective I have been developing here, it means to realize that there are many writing processes, study them, (re)classify them, commodify them, and involve students with (teach) them in a curriculum” that moves from the “germ cell of insight” that writing does consist of varied activities that can be performed mechanistically “to a progressively wider understanding of writing processes” (88). That, of course, is a far cry from Kent’s view that no codifiable and thus teachable writing processes exist.

The differences in implications for practicing compositions teachers of these four concepts of “post-process” are stunning. Kent’s “hermeneutic paralogic” definition makes teaching writing impossible. Dobrin’s definition, based on where scholarly interests currently reside, is consistent with Joseph Petraglia’s shrewd observation in “Is There Life after Process?”: “journal articles and conference presentations on writing seem to be growing both in theoretical sophistication and in irrelevance to the composition classroom” (60). The ideological definition implies that the goal of the composition classroom is not to teach students to write more effectively but to understand the role(s) discourse plays in maintaining an oppressive and undemocratic society and to use writing for liberatory purposes (sort of the Berlin/Shor position). But if the problem with “process” is that it has been reduced to rigid formulas, then the “post-
process” classroom would simply involve a broader notion of processes, as Russell suggests.

Kent’s Post-Process Theory is a thoughtful and provocative collection, mostly written by well-known composition scholars. You don’t have to subscribe to a post-process viewpoint to find it valuable reading. In addition to those already mentioned, George Pullman argues in “Stepping Yet Again into the Same Current,” “that the history of the writing-process movement is not so much a history as a rhetorical narrative. [It] sacrifices one truth in order to more clearly represent another” (16). And on that remark, obvious in itself, he builds an interesting critique of the standard history of “process” as presented above, although to do so, he must seriously oversimplify. Barbara Couture, in “Modeling and Emulating: Rethinking Agency in the Writing Process,” does a close reading of Moffett and Elbow, both of whom wanted writing not just to be a technique to be mastered, but a humanly uplifting endeavor. She then invokes theories of Charles Altieri to argue for a view of the writer as self-creating agent, thus allowing post-process theories to fulfill the goals of Moffett and Elbow. David Foster in “The Challenge of Contingency: Process and the Turn to the Social in Composition” discusses the ways that social interactions among contact groups with unequal and unstable power relationships can create classroom problems not contemplated in process theory, when one presumed that there was a unitary writing process teachable to all students.

And Finally Grading in the Post-Process Classroom

One of my personal tenets is that product never reveals process: on this I agree with Murray when he says, “process can not be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage” (3). So it is dangerous for a reader of a text to critique the process assumed to have led to it. Nevertheless, Allison, Bryant and Hourigan’s collection, Grading in the Post-Process Classroom: From Theory to Practice, bears all the marks of an anthology whose topic was somehow announced to the composition public and anyone who had a paper that was at least distantly relevant sent it in. To be so blunt as to be professionally discourteous, this is a bad collection. And not just because it (sometimes) assumes that we do already live “post-process.”

The ideological critique of process seems to be the view of editors Allison, Bryant and Hourigan when they say in their introduction that “the collection is titled ‘Post-Process’ because contributors move beyond the process writing movement’s focus on a scientific, cognitivistic, and
universalistic approach to writing expertise toward a focus on such social factors as race, class, ethnicity, and gender” (9). One of the standard moves in criticism of prior views is just such a straw person; it’s easy to sum up and simplify the views you dislike, and make them easy to dismiss. Process theorists have certainly created a straw person of the Current-Traditional teacher, and I may have done the same with the views of Kent and Olson. But it is hardly fair to disparage three decades of thoughtful work in composition as “scientific, cognitivistic, and universalistic.”

The eleven essayists are united in the largely unexamined (foundational?) presumption that grading, by its nature, is evil. Because it is hierarchical, because it presumes and promotes competition, because it is thus phallocentric, because it is subjective on the part of the teacher and reductive as a descriptor of any single student writer, grading, these authors simply assume and readers are taken to agree, ought to be done away with. Since “we” are also agreed that such an educational utopia is unlikely to come about in “our” careers, most of the writers propose some compromise, one being to give only ratings of pass/fail or to use grading contracts, but the more common being to use a portfolio—as if that resolved the problems. And I cannot resist pointing out that the use of a portfolio of student work, assessed as a whole at the end of an evaluation period, is one standard feature of a “process” approach to composition—since students continue to revise their work until the portfolio is due, something that the old-style product teachers would never have considered.

Many of the essays in Grading in the Post-Process Classroom, in fact, are simply about the difficulties involved in grading student writers (e.g., departmental concerns about grade inflation interfering with teacher judgments), the same difficulties WAP teachers have discussed frequently. The authors frequently make no reference to our being post-process. The keynote essay, an eloquent rant, by David Bleich, for instance, would apply equally well to product-based teaching, process teaching, or post-process teaching. He indicts the essence of grading since “testing and grading . . . are the pedagogical means by which an unfairly structured society is perpetuated” (28) and further “tests and grades in school are what weapons are in the world at large—instruments of control, domination, and in many worst cases, exclusion and suppression” (29). Bleich ends up proposing narrative evaluations of each student, although he realizes the proposal to be “idealistic.” In his own classes, he gives no exams, and only one grade at the end of the course (and from another source, the grades are all A’s and B’s [Know and Tell 152]).
The general anti-evaluation animus is shared by most contributors to *Grading in the Post-Process Classroom*. Ironically, some of the writers are clearly not “post-process” in their thinking but speak positively of “process”: “using a process-multiple-drafting pedagogy is at the heart of teaching writing effectively... even the weakest writers can often achieve some measure of success and produce better written products than they might have in a more traditional writing course” (Agnew 37), which is likely to appear to administrators as “grade inflation.” Similarly “the postponement of grades and the emphasis placed on creating multiple drafts and revisions highlights the importance of process rather than product” (Shiffman 63).

For me probably the most disappointing thing about the book is that many of the authors seem to lack familiarity with the ongoing scholarly discussions about evaluation, grading, and assessment that have been a staple of our field. Edward White is one major guru of evaluation. His *Teaching and Assessing Writing* (1985) is a legitimately canonical volume within the sub-discipline. So is Diederich’s *Measuring Growth in English* (1974) and probably *Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies* by Greenberg, Wiener and Donovan (1986) and Cooper and Odell’s *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (1977). Concern over the evaluation and grading of writing goes back at least to the early twentieth century (see Hillegas [1912] and Huxtable [1929]). Of the eleven lists of sources, one alone cites Diederich and White. Kathleen and James Strickland, who suggest “Demystifying Grading: Creating Student-Owned Evaluation Instruments,” a suggestion Ed White discussed at length in his book, cite no sources at all. Like several of the articles, this is an essentially “here’s what we did” piece. In fact, there is an irritating tendency in the essays to offer, as new and creative grading procedures, ideas that have been commonly put forth in the past (some of them already rejected). Strickland and Strickland present sample grade sheets to assist readers in assigning points to student writing. Another author actually refers to having a rubber stamp made that commands students to “REWITE” (Flores 123).

As a radical suggestion for using portfolios in a post-process age, Xin Liu Gale tells of a course in which in addition to the syllabus and goals, she “handed out the grading criteria that summarized the major characteristics of an A, B, C, or F paper” (85). She includes the criteria in an appendix. And this, even though it is a portfolio class in which no paper will receive an actual grade. The standards she describes seem perfectly sensible to me: “A paper that presents or implies a thesis that is developed
with noticeable coherence is an ‘A’ paper. The ‘A’ paper usually presents substantive, sophisticated, and carefully elaborated ideas” (92) and so on. I suspect, however, that they will be vague to students. Just like the standards describing the various letter grades that were printed on the backs of the “theme files” at Ohio State University when I taught there in the 60s and just like the ones on the similar folders students purchased at East Texas State from about 1973 to 1990. By and large, this is a shallow and naïve collection, giving the lie to our much-vaunted notion of the advance of scholarly “knowledge” through dialectic with the past. Few of the articles it contains would have been accepted for publication had they been submitted to one of our refereed journals. (A better but still problematic collection in my view is Theory and Practice of Grading Writing by Zak and Weaver.)

WHAT WOULD A “POST-PROCESS” COMPOSITION COURSE LOOK LIKE?

What the various post-process and “social” pedagogies have in common is that they don’t “teach writing” (in the sense of explaining various invention and revision tactics for students and directing the students to practice using them) but do require it, while focusing on reading instead. What I mean by saying that post-process teachers do not “teach” writing is that there is no indication from write-ups of their courses that they try to explain to students, and have them rehearse, such practices as various techniques of invention, principles or tactics of revision, the rhetorical uses of titles and introductions, etc. Instead, the students and instructor read some texts together, usually texts on liberatory topics, often with all the writings being about a single theme for a semester. Then the students write about the readings and their own worlds. There may be peer response groups (because that fits in with the idea that writing is social), and in all likelihood students will be allowed or required to revise papers for a portfolio, because portfolios are seen as less grade-based, less-competitive, and less-hierarchical.

So when I say that the social and post-process pedagogies don’t “teach” writing, I am not saying that they are like the much-derided current/traditional pedagogies. They aren’t. And students can learn a lot from well-run discussions of provocative texts followed by having to write about them. Xin Liu Gale makes this approach overt. She was attempting to improve the way a portfolio worked: “I changed the class structure from process-centered to text-centered” (85), and simultaneously replaced her rhetoric text with a book of thematically organized readings. (If the handbook is the prototypical textbook for pre-process or current/tradit-
ional teachers, then the rhetoric full of procedural advice is the prototypical text of a process teacher, and the thematic anthology best suits the post-process classroom.) What we have then is a course in texts, a course in reading, in which writing simply grows from the reading. “Instead of making prewriting, drafting, and revising the major in-class activities, I organized class activities around the four major writing assignments... and the four groups of articles that were related to the topics” (85). Her students did do conferences, using questions she provided, and students did revise their papers in response to her comments. She put no grades on the individual papers, even though she had given out to students rubrics describing A, B, C, and F papers.

Lad Tobin has called attention to this shift from teaching writing processes to classroom reading. He attended a conference explicitly devoted to what composition teachers should do in a post-process age, since the turn to process had left the writing classroom with no “content.” The participants apparently described a lot of courses in which readings supplied a content both for the course and for student writing, including one course on the “semiotics of the cosmetics industry” (“Process” 13). He concludes, “preprocess and postprocess teachers are apt to assign more reading and to devote more class time to discussions, interpretations, and assessments of the works of professional writers” (16), not, however, for the Bartholomaen purpose of learning to write academic discourse but for the purpose of cultural critique. If the major goal of a course is to show students how they are constructed by the discourses of the dominant, then it makes sense to spend class time reading and discussing those discourses. And once again it lets English professors do what they are generally best prepared for, engage in sophisticated reading.

And that makes all the more sense if one accepts Thomas Kent’s argument that it’s not possible to teach writing anyway. Because it is clearly possible to teach reading, even reading from a cultural studies, quasi-marxist perspective. As far as student writing goes, text-based courses may well fit with Christensen’s remark in 1963—“we do not really teach [students] to write better—we merely expect them to” (155).

Both process teachers and post-process teachers apparently are “coaches.” They are simply coaching different activities. Process teachers often use reading to provoke/motivate writing, but it is the writing that they are coaching. Post-process folks use student writing more or less as feedback about how well they have coached the process of reading from a cultural studies perspective.

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I have spent most of this summer of 2001 trying to come to terms with the various critiques of the "process movement," especially the assertions that we are now post-process. My work has reinforced my perspective that "process" doesn't mean "personal expression" (after all, classical rhetoric was the original process pedagogy), nor does it mean a linear writing formula or classroom routine. For instance, one can teach "process" and never use peer response groups. Or one can teach process and still assign topics, with or without readings, and with or without grades on papers. And (pace Kent), the fact that writing processes cannot be "codified" does not mean that students cannot be coached to write better. My reading has confirmed for me again that the "process turn" was a major advance.²

But my post-process summer has also made me reflect on movements in my own teaching. I claim to be a rhetorical process teacher, a member of the liberal wing of WAP, although I do not use portfolio assessment, and rarely use peer-response groups. But I too like to read and interrogate provocative texts with my students, often full-length books that make arguments about contemporary culture (see my "Full-Length Books in Freshman English"). I wonder if I have always been "post-process" without knowing it.

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Notes

¹The question of why, historically, "process teaching" and "expressive axiology" often came to be seen as one entity deserves a full-length study. My speculation is that it grows from two causes. First, in opposing current-traditional pedagogy, many teachers objected to its deadly dull emphasis on correctness and, like Ken Macrorie, wanted students to write lively prose they cared about. No "English" allowed. So a personal voice pedagogy developed that opposed current-traditionalism. It didn't necessarily privilege expressive discourses, but lumping revolutionaries was easy.

Second, it happened that several of the pioneers of process seemed to favor expressive writing. Emig, in The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (1971), was most interested in "Lynn's" "reflexive" mode of writing, one that had not been encouraged in her schooling. And Britton in 1975 was bothered that so much of the prose written in British schools was purely presentational. Murray gave us the central slogan of the process movement(s) when he wrote "Teach Process Not Product" (1972), and he has always been known for emphasizing personal writing, even to the point of writing another article entitled "All Writing Is Autobiography." When Tim Donovan and Ben McClelland put together their collection entitled Eight Approaches to Composition (1980), they chose Murray to write the section on the
process approach, "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning." Actually Janice Lau"er’s chapter on the rhetorical approach in that volume could equally well have been labeled as being about "process." Its subtitle was "Stages of Writing and Strategies for Writers." And ironically the real chapter on expressive pedagogy was Stephen Judy’s "The Experiential Approach: Inner Worlds to Outer Worlds." Similarly, the researchers who gave us the term "pre-writing," which became central in "process" teaching, were mainly interested in affective techniques: journal-keeping, meditation, and analogizing (Rohman). Rohman opened his 1965 article by saying, "Writing is usefully described as a process, something which shows continuous change in time" (106). All this work, plus that of Elbow, Graves, Moffett and others, was pulled together and presented to thousands of public school teachers through the National Writing Project. In the excitement of the anti-current-traditional revolution, precise logical distinctions weren’t always necessary.

2 "Process" was at least an advance in principle, anyway. I’m still not sure how far actual teaching of composition has become informed by process theories. And the national mania for high-stakes, timed-writing assessment seems to be forcing more and more public school teachers into teaching formulaic writing. In Texas, high school students must pass a state writing exam. The task is always to argue about a public issue. Teachers insist that only a strict five-paragraph format will pass, and that if a student ever were to include an argument "for the other side," the paper would fail for lacking unity. Since one of the criteria for these papers is "elaboration," but students cannot be expected to have information about the issue raised, they are told explicitly to "make up" relevant data, facts, figures, quotations, studies etc.

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