Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice

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In the recent efforts to examine closely the principles which govern the teaching of writing at colleges and universities, one fact has become clear. For nearly a century, teachers of composition have been dominated by a paradigm, a set of tacit assumptions which has determined how they define and carry out their activities in research and teaching. Of the several discussions of this paradigm, Richard Young’s is especially instructive. The paradigm, he explains, “determines, among other things, what is included in the discipline and what is excluded from it, what is taught and not taught, what problems are regarded as important and unimportant, and, by implication, what research is regarded as valuable in developing the discipline.” The overt features of this paradigm—what has come to be called “current-traditional rhetoric”—are apparent in nearly all of the numerous composition textbooks published in the last three generations: the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis); the preoccupation with the informal essay and the research paper; and so on.” The effect of this emphasis has been “a repudiation of teaching the composing process” and a focus on “a critical study of the products of composing and an art of editing” (p. 31).

While the external components of current-traditional rhetoric are familiar to anyone who has made even a cursory survey of composition texts in print today, the philosophical assumptions which make up the underlying paradigm are not as obvious. The most important of these assumptions are epistemological, having to do with concepts of the mind, reality, and the relation between the two. Our intention is to locate and analyze this paradigm—with a special concern for its epistemology—and to trace its implications for the rhetorical process. In doing so, we wish not only to dissect the paradigm, but to evaluate it, to make some statement about its adequacy for shaping a contemporary rhetoric. Our method, consequently, will consist of examining current-traditional textbooks to arrive at the tacit paradigmatic assumptions to be found in them. This, we think, will in turn lead to a better understanding of the nature of the rhetoric presented by the books, an understanding not possible as long as the implicit presuppositions remain unexamined.

The textbooks we have chosen are Sheridan Baker’s The Practical Stylist, Fourth Edition (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), Sylvan Barnet and MarciaStubbs’s Barnet and Stubbs’s Practical Guide to Writing, Revised Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), Clea G. Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s Modern Rhetoric, Fourth Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1979), and Gregory Cowan and Elisabeth McPherson’s Plain English Please: A Rhetoric, Third Edition (New York: Random House, 1976). We chose these four texts because they seem to be especially strong representatives of the current-traditional writing text. All four have gone through revised editions, all are widely known and used, and all are respected. These books stand out for us, then, not in that they deviate from current-traditional concepts, but in that they articulate those concepts more eloquently and thoughtfully than most of the numerous texts like them.

Before considering the paradigm, a brief look at some of its historical origins will provide a useful background. The source of current-traditional rhetoric can be seen in A. S. Hill’s The Principles of Rhetoric (1878) and J. F. Genung’s The Practical Elements of Rhetoric (1886), two college textbooks which are all but identical to the modern college rhetorics considered in this discussion. These two teachers of composition—Hill at Harvard and Genung at Amherst—were, however, not so much original thinkers as they were synthesizers of rhetorical theory coming from abroad, specifically the thought of George Campbell’s Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776), Hugh Blair’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), and Richard Whately’s Elements of Rhetoric (1828). These three treatises served as textbooks in American college classrooms during all or part of the first seven decades of the last century, and the main features of current-traditional rhetoric can be traced to them.

In George Campbell, the progenitors of current-traditional rhetoric discovered not only their epistemological position, but their general conception of rhetoric as well. Campbell agreed with the thinkers of the “common sense” school of philosophy, that the external world existed independent of the mind and that direct knowledge of this world was attainable. For Campbell, the ultimate source of knowledge is sensation, not rational concepts or general truths. These sensations then make up the ideas of memory which in turn make up ideas of imagination. Sensations and ideas are related by the principle of association. This epistemology makes possible the discovery of certainty in scientific ventures. Campbell, however, considered science outside the realm of rhetoric since rhetoric deals not with certainties but with probabilities (pp. 43-46). Genung and Hill, on the other hand, extend Campbell’s assertions about discovering truth in empirical investigation to the province of rhetoric, thus denying the probabilistic nature of the subject matter of rhetoric. This shift was also encouraged, it should be noted, by the success of the scientific method in the nineteenth-century.

Campbell also defines rhetoric in terms of his facilitative psychology. Rhetoric is concerned with communication and is defined as “That art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end.” Its ends are four, “every speech being intended to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will” (p. 1). Campbell’s definition not only offers an early statement of the four modes of discourse, but also provides the basis for the kind of facilitative psychology which will dominate current-traditional rhetoric.
Blair’s conception of rhetoric falls into a category which can be labeled vitalistic. For Blair, discovering the content of the discourse is unique in every case and cannot be taught. As a result, Blair excludes invention from the concern of rhetoric and focuses on style and arrangement. In doing so, he makes explicit what is only suggested in Campbell. Campbell’s shift in focus from the discourse to the ends of discourse encourages a diminution of invention in composing. Furthermore, Campbell — albeit only in passing — makes genius an important source of the content of oration (p. xlviii), and devotes the second and third books of his *Philosophy* to matters of usage and style. It was Blair, however, who explicitly distinguished between what in learning to write could be reduced to rule — i.e., what is mechanical — and what must be left to the individual’s resources. In doing so, Blair determined for Genung and Hill what could and could not be taught in the classroom. Blair’s influence was also strongly abetted by the Romantic conception of creation with its emphasis on innate and spontaneous genius.

Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* is in large part a response to the works of Campbell and Blair. Whately, for example, also denies the place of invention in the composing process and includes rules of style and usage. His emphasis, however, represents a departure from his predecessors. Whately defines rhetoric as the “finding of suitable ARGUMENTS to prove a given point, and the skillful arrangement of them” (p. 39). His is a rhetoric based on logic, even though he does not exclude the emotional appeal. This rational emphasis may have contributed to the distrust of persuasion found in current-traditional rhetoric. It seems most certainly to have influenced Edward Tyrell Channing — Harvard’s third Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory — in his redefining of the rhetorical situation so that it is almost exclusively rational. Channing in turn was probably not without his impact on the rational bias of Hill, Harvard’s fifth Boylston Professor.

The communication triangle, which is well known to readers of Abrams, Kinneavy, and other scholars, has been a useful tool for us in examining the philosophical assumptions of the current-traditional paradigm. We believe that an adequate conception of rhetoric must account in some reasonable way for the elements in the triangle: reality, the writer, the audience, and the discourse. We are also convinced that an adequate method of instruction in writing must give a prospective writer a conceptual framework that encourages exploration of each of the elements in the communication triangle in the attempt to bring forth discourse. Our discussion of the four texts, then, will attend first to their treatment of reality, then the writer, then audience, and finally the discourse itself. For the sake of economy, the discussion will refer to the textbooks by number as follows:

1. Baker’s *The Practical Stylist*
2. Barnet and Stubbs’s *Practical Guide to Writing*
3. Brooks and Warren’s *Modern Rhetoric*
4. Cowan and McPherson’s *Plain English Please: A Rhetoric*

**Reality**

For current-traditional rhetoric, reality is rational, regular and certain — a realm which when it is not static is at least in a predictable, harmonious, symmetrical balance. Meaning thus exists independent of the perceiving mind, reposing in external reality. Knowledge is readily accessible because of the consonance between the world and the faculties of the mind. Since reality is rational, it is best apprehended by the understanding. Imagination also is useful because it makes possible the production of the sensory qualities of an object or event. Emotion, on the other hand, does not contribute to our knowledge of the world because it is not rational. Because the reality that concerns current-traditional rhetoric is not probabilistic, as it was for Aristotle, or problematic, as it is for us, neither are knowledge and meaning. Error, in this scheme, is thus simply the result of inadequate observation or emotional perverseness.

These assumptions can be seen with special clarity in the discussions of the four modes of discourse typically found in current-traditional textbooks. Given the nature of reality, exposition becomes the most significant mode. One text’s treatment of exposition is, in addition, unusually explicit in revealing the relationship between its epistemology and the four modes. Exposition, it is explained, “quite literally means to set forth a subject. It appeals to the understanding.” Furthermore, exposition is “the most common kind of writing, for it is applicable to any task that challenges the understanding.” As might be expected, in responding to a rational world which readily reveals its meaning to the observer, understanding is the most commonly used mental faculty and exposition the most called upon mode of discourse. What is simply “set forth” by the world can then be simply “set forth” by the writer in prose. The authors offer further confirmation of this view in explaining why exposition is studied: “When we study the methods of exposition, we are not following an arbitrary scheme; we are following the way in which we ordinarily observe and reason about our world.” Moreover, as might be predicted for a world governed by rationality, all the modes of discourse appeal to the understanding in some manner: “argument also appeals to the understanding, but it does so, not to explain, but to convince the reader of the truth or desirability of something. Description and narration may, of course, lead to understanding, but their special appeal is to the imagination, to the reader’s capacity for re-creating the immediate qualities of an object or event” (3, p. 44). Thus is posited an uncomplicated correspondence between the modes of discourse and the mental faculties.

Current-traditional texts treat description in a like manner. A typical way of presenting this mode is to provide two descriptions of a similar event, the first the work of a beginning writer and the other that of a professional. One text that does so explains the difference between the two in terms of “patience with detail, the concreteness of the passage,” the specificity of the re-
sponse of the characters described, and, most important, "the observer's physical position" (2, p. 173). The underlying assumption of this presentation is that both the experienced and inexperienced writers are responding to an identical experience, and that they should then be writing in a nearly identical way. Both should perceive the same events, in the same way, because the material world is uniform to all who make the effort to attend to it. Thus, the teacher's task is to elicit writing that corresponds to this world. This is commonly accomplished by simply reminding the student to pay closer attention to detail.

Narration is taught in a similar way. One text regards it as "one species of exposition" (2, p. 191) while another considers it unsuccessful if it includes details out of order, excessive comment, or a shifting of viewpoint (1, pp. 31-32). These failures, once again, are largely mechanical: the event was presented clearly in the real world and the writer was either careless in perceiving or careless in recording it.

Reality — the world "out there" — is thus a component of the communication triangle that receives extensive attention within the framework of current-traditional rhetoric. Predictably, there is a premium placed upon referential discourse, that is, discourse whose primary purpose lies in the act of referring to external reality. In succeeding sections we will argue that there is a concomitant diminution of expressive discourse, which is primarily writer-oriented, and persuasive discourse, which is primarily audience-oriented in its purpose. Here it is important to notice that the emphasis on referential discourse is demonstrated by the fact that current-traditional textbooks tend to approve of writing primarily to the extent that it is judged reflective of the external world. This concern for correspondence with an objective, external reality helps to explain the dominance of the four modes of discourse in the paradigm, for, as James Kinneawy has observed, "a stress on modes of discourse rather than aims of discourse is a stress on 'what' is being talked about rather than on 'why' a thing is being talked about." 9 As that stress becomes extreme, however, and demands correspondence with an objective, external reality as the all-encompassing and only test for adequate discourse, then even modes tend to become confused and distorted, and all modes tend to merge into exposition, as we have seen description and narration do. Argumentation suffers the most, though, because the world of the paradigm is, ipso facto, not arguable. Disagreements become differences about matters of information. Evaluation, which is sometimes proposed as an alternative term for argumentation, suffers the same fate. In an epistemology in which meaning inheres in external reality and not in a transaction between the observer and reality, evaluation and judgment become meaningless or irrelevant concepts, and argumentation, like narration and description, merges into exposition, consisting only of "reasoned analysis" (2, p. 149).

The Writer

The assumptions underlying current-traditional rhetoric imply three distinct kinds of constraints upon the writer. First, they tend to foreclose heuristic processes, thus limiting the kinds of discovery procedures that are assumed to be at the writer's disposal in relating to and using reality in the generation of discourse. Second, they radically reduce the perceived importance of the writer even in relation to the management of the discourse. Third, they restrict the kinds of behavior that are assumed to be appropriate in the writer's relation with the audience.

Broadly speaking, the processes one may follow in working through any kind of cognitive or creative act are of three kinds: algorithmic, heuristic, and aleatory. The three categories represent areas along a continuum of procedures from strictly rule-governed with absolutely predictable outcomes (algorithmic) on the one hand, to strictly random with totally unpredictable outcomes (aleatory) on the other. Heuristic procedures comprise a wide middle ground of activities that are neither wholly rule-governed nor wholly random. The conceptual tools comprising classical invention — Aristotle's topoi, for example — are instances of heuristics. A heuristic may be defined as a systematic way of moving toward satisfactory control of an ambiguous or problematic situation, but not to a single correct solution. Because the three kinds of procedures do constitute a continuum, the boundaries setting one kind off from another are necessarily blurred, and there inevitably are arguments about whether a given procedure is algorithmic or heuristic. Further, one may find numerous definitions of a heuristic that differ from (and probably improve upon) the definition just offered. Precise definition of the three areas, however, is less important for our immediate purposes than is the fact that there are the three kinds of procedures.

It was precisely the failure to discriminate these three kinds of procedures that led Hugh Blair in 1783 to reject the heuristic procedures of classical invention as mechanical algorithms: "... one would think they [classical rhetoricians] meant to teach how a person might mechanically become an Orator, without any genius at all. They gave him receipts for making Speeches, on all manner of subjects" (II, 181 emphasis added). Imbued with a radical dualism, Blair undertook to redefine the province of rhetoric: "... it is one thing to discover the reasons that are most proper to convince men, and another, to manage those reasons with most advantage. The latter is all that Rhetoric can pretend to" (II, 180). Ironically, in reacting to what he perceived as mechanical, Blair reduced rhetoric to a residue that truly was mechanical.

One need not search far in modern texts to find that this legacy is still with us: "The stylistic side of writing is, in fact, the only side that can be analyzed and learned" (1, p. 1). However, the other side of the dichotomy, the vitalist side, continues to whisper "genius," and the text writers, discomfited, seek to ease their readers' (and perhaps their own) malaise through exhortations to relax and be creative: "Although some of what you are asked to do in this book may seem rather structured, it's not intended to stifle your creativity. The exercises you're asked to do, and the patterns you're encouraged to follow, should lead you to greater freedom in your writing, but it will be a more controlled freedom, deliberately directed toward the end you want to accomplish. Good writers must always find their own ideas, choose the best words to express those ideas, develop a sensible order, and work out their own support and examples" (4, pp. xvi-xvii).

Yet, if a student's very difficulty lies in not knowing how to do these things good writers do; then the observation that one simply does them becomes not a comfort but an implied accusation: "You, student, will never be a good writer because you are not doing these things now." One text suggests, "Even if you are not sure that you have a thesis and an organization, start writing" (2, p. 26). It stops short, however, of providing enough concrete procedural suggestions to comprise a heuristic, and the student is again left with the demoralizing sense that the composing process is totally beyond rational control. The only thing remaining in the view of the paradigm that can be controlled — and can be taught — is an array of mechanical procedures, which in fact are techniques for editing the finished product, the very product which the student could not effectively produce in the first place.

The current-traditionalist's conception of the composing process as mysterious and unteachable is, however, in the main im-
licit. When composing is dealt with explicitly, it reflects the reduction of knowing to an objective mechanical activity. Still, it must be noted, even here there are traces of vitalist assumptions. Since meaning inheres in external reality, it follows that not only the content but also the organization and indeed even the thesis of a composition would likewise inher in external reality. Hence, the writer is advised, “Find your thesis (1, p. 2). The thesis exists outside the writer. It becomes something which the writer casts about in search for, rather than something that grows internally and is the motivating force behind the writing in the first place. The writer is next advised, “Sharpen your thesis” (1, p. 4). This advice would seem to be leading toward the elucidation of a process, either heuristic or algorithmic, but what follows instead is a series of results, not a process, suggesting that vitalist assumptions about the process are continuing to operate. The third phase of advice removes any remaining doubt about where a thesis comes from: “Believe your thesis” (1, p. 5). If the epistemology allowed for meaning to grow from a transaction between the world and the writer, then it might allow for writing and for a thesis that begins in belief or commitment. The advice to believe one’s thesis would then be unnecessary.

Further results of this epistemology can be seen operating throughout the texts in their advice to the writer on finding and limiting a topic. Topic, thesis, and organization seem to come to the writer in whole cloth so that the composition is almost predetermined: “If, when you look at your main idea sentence, you cannot think of three or four paragraphs that would logically develop from it, discard that sentence and find another one” (4, p. 12). In another text, the student is assured that the external world is logical because it is unified. The text states that when one has arrived at an objective truth, because “unity is not a limitation imposed from the outside. It is inherent in the subject. If we decide that ’George Washington’ is too general and vague to give us a true subject for a composition—that is, that it lacks unity—and settle on What the Frontier taught George Washington,’we can do this only because the frontier did teach Washington something, and because, no matter how deeply related this fact is to Washington’s whole career, it can be thought about as separate; it has a natural unity.” The authors go on to assure the reader: “We recognize unity. We do not impose it” (3, p. 21).

As one moves to an examination of the writer in relation to the audience, one can see the paradigm continuing to militate against the writer. For example, one text recommends that traces of the self be removed from the statement of the thesis so that it becomes an objective account rather than a report of a subjective impression. The result: “You become the informed adult, showing the reader around firmly, politely, and persuasively” (1, p. 6). Another advises, “. . . when you write you are the teacher” (2, p. 19). The writer’s main function has now become essentially negative: to avoid getting in the way and muddying the lucid exposition of the external world.

Predictably, the texts spend little time discussing expressive writing. One text has a brief section on the journal, a genre one would expect to be almost solipsistic in its emphasis on self-expression. However, the text recommends the use of the journal not as a tool for self-expression but as an aid in acquiring fluency (2, p. 445). Thus the tendency of the paradigm to reduce the significance of the writer and to emphasize the mechanical aspects of composition remains consistently strong, even when the texts address a genre that would characteristically elevate the importance of the writer.

The Audience

The same assumptions that tend to diminish the importance of the writer also tend to diminish the importance of the audience. Just as the writer is perceived as the teacher or as “the informed adult,” the audience is perceived as a pupil, an essentially passive receptor of information. In short, then, the current-traditional paradigm tends to reduce the entire communication model to neutral observers in a neutral world exchanging neutral messages.

One result is that audience analysis receives little or no attention. Given the epistemology, there is no real need for it since the audience, like the writer, is perceived to be participating rationally and objectively in the observing of a rational, nonproblematic world. No particular audience seen through this lens should differ materially from any other audience. Hence, there is no reason to distinguish among different audiences. One text included here recommends asking three short questions about the audience in generating information about any topic (2, pp. 6-7), and all the texts make passing mention of the importance of engaging the interest of the audience. However, the kind of audience analysis found in Aristotle, Campbell, or Whately simply has no place in the current-traditional paradigm because of its anti-rational implications. To consider the audience is to shift from the focus on objective truth to the emotional subjectivism of persuasion.

In fact, persuasion, which was the raison d’etre of classical rhetoric, occupies an uneasy place in the rhetoric of the current-traditional paradigm. Persuasive discourse, discourse which has goals primarily related to the audience and to moving the audience to disappar from composition instruction informed by the current-traditional paradigm, only occasionally reenter through the back door in the fusion (and confusion) with the mode of argumentation. Two of the three bases of persuasion in Aristotle’s Rhetoric, the ethical and emotional appeals, are foreclosed altogether by the rational, mechanistic epistemology. Logos, the remaining basis of appeal to the audience, is reduced to a simple reporting of the facts. Given a uniform, knowable world, disagreement can only happen when one party is ignorant of one or more pertinent facts. To achieve agreement, the writer simply reports these facts clearly and concisely, and the decoder’s world view is then corrected and is once again congruent with that of the writer and with reality. The only alternative persuasive strategy such an epistemology allows is still worse: a cynical withholding of information, a deception.

An examination of the textbooks considered here reveals the ambiguous role of persuasion in the paradigm. In a chapter entitled “Writing to Persuade,” one text gives the following advice: “Although emotional appeals by themselves are not enough to support a belief, there’s nothing wrong with emotion as a way of getting readers interested” (4, p. 260). Even matters of belief become largely rational, and emotion can be used only to gain attention. Later, in giving advice on “Slanted Words,” the same authors encourage “define, specific language” but warn against making appeals to the emotions: “1. Are the vivid words used to make meaning clearer or just to get readers to purr—or snarl? 2. Is the appeal to your emotions or to your mind?” (4, p. 302). Another text offers the following definition for persuasion: “To persuade is to win over, or to convince. These two are not the same thing; if we win people over by, say, an appeal to their emotions, we have not convinced them, only conquered them. To convince them we must persuade them by presenting evidence and reasonable arguments for our opinions” (2, p. 144).

This text then goes on to define what is essentially the ethical appeal—“We must present ourselves as writers worth reading”—but does so strictly in terms of the writer’s style: spelling, appropriate diction, definition, examples. A third text is more
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Genung's *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric* and A. S. Hill's *The Principles of Rhetoric*, both written in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, are the prototypes of the current-traditional textbooks that have dominated composition instruction ever since. It should now be clear that the philosophical roots informing these textbooks extend back even earlier. We are convinced that these roots were intact some two hundred years or so ago, and that even many of the overt features of the paradigm were suggested by the rhetorics of Campbell, Blair, and Whately. It is our contention that the current-traditional paradigm is even more powerfully and profoundly entrenched than has been supposed. And if we are correct in our analysis of the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions informing the paradigm and the implications of those assumptions, then the current-traditional paradigm represents a danger to teachers, students, the wider purposes of our educational enterprise, and even our social and human fabric.

The fact that a debate has ensued for decades within English departments on the issue of what should and can be taught in the composition course appears to have obscured rather than clarified the alternatives that are available. This debate has been dominated by the two polar positions: those who would teach composition as stylistic correctness or facility and those who would teach composition as an act of genius. The former have defined composition essentially as algorithmic. The latter, restless under the strictures imposed by algorithmic definition, reject all methodical procedure, defining composition as an ales- tory process and approaching the teaching of composition as a purely evocative act. It is critically important to note, however, that these two polar positions converge on the underlying philosophical issues. Their epistemologies are wholly consistent with one another. Both ignore the problematical character of knowledge and meaning, and, hence, of discourse. To view composition as a complex heuristic procedure is to acknowledge—even to embrace—the assumption that the knowledge and meaning are tentative, problematical, elusive, and partial. The *via media* of the heuristic, rather than being a compromise between the other two positions, reflects a radically altered view of the world and of knowledge and meaning. And the long-standing debate in the English departments, rather than having been *about* a paradigm of composition instruction, turns out to have been *within* the paradigm. Thus, in a curious way even the centrifugal tensions pulling against one another within the paradigm have added to its endurance because the cacophony of the debate has camouflaged the underlying theoretical accord.

Do the textbook writers and the practitioners of composition instruction actually believe that the way we know is adequately represented by an epistemology that is innocent of Freud, Einstein, and Heisenberg, to say nothing of other disconcerting insights the twentieth century has given us about ourselves and our world? We think most do not. It seems likely that in many cases practitioners simply do not recognize the disjunction between their epistemology and their practice. As Richard Young has said, "The main difficulty in discussing the current-traditional paradigm, or even in recognizing its existence, is that so much of our theoretical knowledge about it is tacit." Since the theory is tacit, we may not be conscious of its implications. Hence, it is possible for the momentum of tradition to sustain an inconsistent practice over decades without any sense of dissonance. And it is possible for the author of a text that epito-mizes the paradigm to describe himself in the preface as being inescapably in the lineage of the heirs of Aristotle (1, p. vii). Such a statement does not seem dissonant until one looks carefully at the epistemological implications of the instructions to the writer that are summarized in the table of contents on the next page.

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The Discourse

If, as has been pointed out, one of the overt features of the current-traditional paradigm is its emphasis upon the composed product rather than upon the composing process, then the effect would seem to be an elevation of the importance of the discourse. But the epistemology suggests otherwise since it posits only a single criterion of adequacy: congruence with that objective, knowable external reality. Whether the discourse is responsive to a need arising from one of the other elements in the communication model—the writer or the audience—loses significance in the same proportions as those elements lose significance relative to the transcendent and determining importance of the external reality. Some modern rhetoricians—Lloyd F. Bitzer and Scott Consigny, for example—have talked about "rhetorical situations," complex systems of dynamic interrelated elements that include the rhetor (writer or orator), the audience, an exigency or urgent need to communicate, and certain other elements or constraints. A piece of discourse is judged in terms of how effectively it responds to the rhetorical situation out of which it was generated. On the other hand, the epistemology of the paradigm does not allow for this kind of complex and relative judgment of discourse. Within the paradigm, the discourse tends to be seen as an artifact rather than as a response to or an expression of a personal or social need, problem, or goal. Divorced from the dynamics of an authentic rhetorical situation, the discourse must be judged as adequate or inadequate according to its congruity with the fixed, knowable reality or with other artifacts that have been judged and admitted to the canon.

One may ask how one piece of discourse is to be distinctive from any other discourse, given the powerful impetus for conformity that grows from the epistemology of the current-traditional paradigm. The answer lies in the concern for style, for here is the one avenue by which one may write distinctive prose, given the assumptions behind the paradigm. Hence the elevation of style in the texts: "From the freshman's first essay through the senior's last paper (and on through the doctoral dissertation and the corporate annual report) the expository problems are always the same. Indeed, they all come down to two fundamental questions: one of form, one of style. And even form is spatial styling. Since, in general, writing well is writing in style, I have found it practical to teach writing almost as a tactile art, in which students learn how to shape their material and bring out the grain to best advantage" (1, p. vi). It is not surprising, then, to read in the critical literature of the discipline that the job of the rhetorician is "to choose wisely between ways of saying the same thing, between synonymous expressions."

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, scholars have pointed out that J. P.
“Find your thesis. Sharpen your thesis. Believe your thesis.” One purpose of this paper has been to make explicit this disjunction between the epistemology writing instructors probably hold and the epistemology they imply through their practice within the current-traditional paradigm.

Of course, even if a composition teacher senses a dissonance between epistemology and practice there remain powerful impulses for continuing to conform to the paradigm. The logistics, economics, and politics of the selection and use of instructional materials tend to militate in favor of the paradigm. In fact, it follows from the definition of a paradigm that there is limited availability of nonconforming material. More critical than the issue of materials selection, however, is the way in which any materials are used. For example, an institution might give free rein in the choice of materials and yet have a philosophy of governance demanding accountability based upon quantifiable, measurable behavioral objectives which are themselves sustained by a tacit set of mechanistic and objectivist assumptions. These concerns are clearly beyond the scope of our investigation, but they are part of a context teachers must recognize and must consider.

Some may wish to defend the current-traditional paradigm against our charge that it is reductive. They may point out that virtually all instruction in all disciplines necessarily entails reductions. Our aim here has been to distinguish counterproductive reductions from useful reductions. All models of the composing process, for example, are reductions. Some are useful, and so beneficial; some are not useful, and perhaps pernicious. When C. S. Lewis read a particular British upper-form textbook that was written in the mold of the current-traditional paradigm, he was so appalled that he was compelled to write The Abolition of Man. Lewis argues eloquently that to insist upon a strict disjunction between reason and emotion — to insist that good writing is simply a clear and concise representation of the objective, true, ultimately knowable world — is both contrary to the best that is known in modern science and is ultimately destructive of our humanity, leading to the abolition of man. 16

Similarly, Richard Ohmann, in English in America: A Radical View of the Profession, comments on the kinds of thought processes that are encouraged by the current-traditional composition instruction and traces the same kinds of mechanistic and objectivist patterns in many of the policy statements and rationales for U.S. policy during the Vietnam war. He then speculates: Is it possible that there is a causal link? 17

At least partly out of a sense of the inadequacy of the current-traditional paradigm, several diverse conceptions of rhetoric, including a renascent classical rhetoric, have emerged. John Warnock has commented on a common feature that runs through this diversity: these new conceptions of rhetoric are distinguished, most importantly, not by their content or by the scope of their compass, but by the way in which the writer, the reader, and their relationship are imagined. 18 In other words, a change in the way the human elements in the communication process are imagined constitutes a change in the way meaning is seen to occur and to be shared. Such a change is epistemological, but it has profound ramifications that are ethical, social, and political. Because of the importance of these ramifications, we need to scrutinize carefully the epistemology implied by our practice in the teaching of composition.

NOTES


5The immediate source of the influence in current-traditional rhetoric is Alexander Bain who is, in this matter, a descendant of Campbell. See Kitzhaber, pp. 191-195.


10By way of contrast, see Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Elbow shares the sense of ineffable mystery at the bottom of the composing process, but he builds upon that mystery a complex of procedures comprising an intentional heuristic.


13Glenn Matott, “In Search of a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition,” College Composition and Communication, 27, No. 1 (1976), pp. 25-31, presents a philosophical justification for writing instruction based upon acknowledged models of excellence.


15Young, pp. 30-31.


17See footnote 8.


Polarity in the Composing Process
Richard Koch
Adrian College

In his insightful essay of 1976, “Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention,” Richard Young de-
scribed the intense and growing need in our profession for the development of new perspectives on composition. He was particularly concerned with a search for richer and more accurate paradigms for the composing process. Since that time research in creativity and on the locality of different functions in the brain has brought us to the brink of discovering such paradigms. In this essay I would like to turn to the work of Owen Barfield, a student of the philosophy of language, to assist in the development of an experimental paradigm for the composing process that utilizes these perspectives.

We have been comfortable for some time with a view of composing as occurring in three stages, which we have called prewriting, writing, and revision. The nature of prewriting remains to this day quite mysterious. Occasional explorations like those of Gordon Rohman and Albert Wellecke in the early sixties have offered some guidance, but most writing texts fail to offer a clear guess about what is going on in this stage of the process. Donald Murray, in his essay “Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery,” points out that still less attention has been paid to the revision process, and consequently little is known about how it relates to other aspects of composing. Murray argues that viewing revision as a cleanup exercise is inadequate because it ignores the fact that fundamentally “writers use language as a tool of exploration to see beyond what they know.” He adds that “most texts and most research literature have not accepted this concept or dealt with its implications” (p. 87). The essence of the problem for Murray stems from the “segregation of functional and imaginative writing, creative and noncreative writing” (p. 88). Finally, Murray concludes that both creative and practical functions must be linked in the revising process, and he suggests establishing the concepts of “internal” and “external” revision. Internal revision, he explains, is the part of the process where writers read their own work “to discover where their content, form, language, and voice have led them” (p. 91).

I am interested in both of Murray’s major implications: that the revision process remains largely undescribed and that a fuller elaboration of it will be possible only if we view it as more creative and imaginative than we have been inclined to so far. Similarly, a fuller, more accurate description of the relationship among the three stages of composing will become possible only through a better understanding of the connections between its analytical and imaginative components.

A brief look at one of the richer composition texts of the past decade can further illustrate this problem. In Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, Young, Becker, and Pike introduce us to an heuristic, or problem-solving, approach to helping students better control the writing process. One main tool of heuristics is the helpful question, which the authors partly define as one which “increases the chance of discovering a workable solution” (p. 121). The text offers the concepts of “wave, particle, and field” (adapted from physics) as one series of perspectives which might assist in the development of helpful questions. It was their argument that any subject might be viewed as static (particle), as part of an ongoing process (wave), or as part of a multidimensional system (field).

The potential of that insight has not yet been exploited in the profession. The same is true of two related concepts from this text. The authors suggest the need for what they call the “incubation” stage of the development of an idea, where the writer gets help from the unconscious. And they suggest also that an heuristic may be distinguished from a rule-governed activity in that it requires the application of intuition. How to control or activate the incubation stage, and how to summon the proper amount of intuition are not well explained in the text.

Up until quite recently the profession has done little to further clarify the nature of the incubation stage or the methods for calling up the intuitive powers of the mind. But there has been a growing interest in a related subject, the nature of functions of the human brain. One of the leaders in adapting this research to our field is certainly Ross Winterowd, in several recent essays. The primary discovery presented by modern research on the brain is that the two halves of it seem to be distinguishable in their functions in terms very similar to those we have long used to differentiate between the two types of human thought. We apparently have a logical, linear, analytical half (the left brain) and an imaginative, intuitive, dream-like half (the right brain). It is, of course, the imaginative side we seem to know the least about. This fact is now leading to a new burst of interest in the imagination and creativity. Here again Winterowd is represented by a recent contribution, an essay called “Creativity and the Comp Class,” which appeared in the Fall, 1978 Freshman English News.

In that article Winterowd approaches creativity through an attempt to list its qualities, offering an accompanying clarification for each trait. Helpful as this is, it remains an almost wholly logical view of the brain’s imaginative functions. By its own intention the article suggests the importance of analogy, archetypes, attitude, and disassociation, among others, but not the relationship of these terms to one another. This is inherently an analytical classifying system, and so for all of its knowledge it leaves us where we were left before by Young, Becker, and Pike’s approach to heuristics, and by Murray’s approach to internal revision — in the dark in regard to defining the relationship between imaginative and logical faculties. Winterowd goes further in his new essay, “Brain, Rhetoric, and Style,” but even there the relationship between the two halves of the brain, and between the two major functions of writing, is only barely approached.

For the time being we seem to be experiencing a mental logjam between our growing interest in creativity and our ability to fully utilize that interest in teaching writing. I believe the key to freeing up this logjam will be our ability to better locate where and how different functions of the imagination fit into the writing process.

II

Another of Young’s ideas in his “Paradigms and Problems” essay led me to my attempt to apply the ideas of Owen Barfield to this challenge. In a search for new paradigms, Young explains, there is much to be gained from working with metatheory. At a higher level of abstraction we might be concerned not only with evaluating present paradigms but also with finding the bases for designing entirely new paradigmatic perspectives. We are beginning, as I have pointed out, to make use of theories of the nature of the brain in this way, but so far we face the same problem in this area as we have in composing theory itself: a lack of integrating principles. It is precisely this problem which the philosophy of language can be of assistance with.

I believe Barfield has done some of the most rewarding work of this century in examining the nature of language. Although he has written a series of exciting studies on language and the imagination from 1927 to the present, his reputation has been a curious one. He was known only to a small band of followers in this country until fairly recent times when his status has been enhanced first through the respect accorded him by Susanne Langer in Feeling and Form and later through the admiration of Shirley Sugerman, David Bohm, R. K. Meiners, and others in Evolution of Consciousness, a collection of essays dedicated to him.
Langer has compared Barfield in the complexity and importance of his ideas to Ernst Cassirer, a philosopher whose ideas are widely referred to in both theories of literary criticism and theories of discourse. The ideas of Barfield may be traced, in their highlights and as a sequential development, through the books: *Poetic Dictation*, *Saving the Appearances*, and *What Coleridge Thought*, although he has written a significant number of others.

Barfield quotes Coleridge in *What Coleridge Thought* as having argued regarding naturalists of the nineteenth century that their work constituted "the reiteration of the problem, not its solution," and that:

> the naturalists, who cannot or will not see, that one fact is often worth a thousand, as including them all in itself, and that it first makes all the other facts, who has not the head to comprehend, the soul to reverence, a central experiment or observation... will never receive an auspicious answer from the oracle of nature."

The same is true, I would argue, for concepts. One central concept, fully experienced and understood, may well be better than a thousand, if it puts the remainder into fundamental perspective as they relate to one another.

Such a concept comes to us in Barfield's treatment of Coleridge's notion of polarity. In Barfield and Coleridge polarity is a term used to describe a special kind of relationship between two forces or things. A relationship of polarity is one in which the two parts of the whole may be distinguished from one another but not divided. The two parts are unified without having become the same. In a polarity the two parts are not *either* unified or separate, rather they are both unified and individually identifiable at the same time.

A point Barfield makes is that language, as it comes down to us today, is ill-equipped to make these distinctions. In twentieth century western culture man has come perilously close to the position that logic equals truth. And in this near logical positivist framework language has become adept at clarifying dichotomies and at noticing separation, but it is at present impoverished when confronted with the need to notice similarities and the nature of interactions. The concept of unity has grown so nearly beyond description that it has come to seem mystical, whereas analyzing and classifying have been developed to a high art of a sort, a logical and technical rather than a creative art.

An example which may serve to demonstrate better both the nature of polarity and the difficulty in modern times in expressing it is the form versus content discussion in the field of literary criticism. The relationship of form and content has long been debated. Some have argued that form is content, in that it seems at times to dictate the nature of content. Still others have maintained that the two are the same. We can see, however, that although form and content are intimately related, they are not the same. In fact, literary critics and writing teachers continually find it necessary to distinguish between them. Polar opposites, although they tend at first to appear to be contradictory, are actually both part of the same whole and are *generative* of one another. In a polarity each part is also present to some degree in the other. Since the forces in a polarity are the basis of existence and yet not logical, Barfield argues that "the apprehension of polarity is itself the basic act of imagination" (p. 36).

In his presentation of Coleridge's "Scale of Mental Experience" Barfield moves from his general presentation of polarity to a specific context which can be very useful to us in relating creativity to the composing process. In studying a polarity we are particularly in a position to observe not simply what the parts of something are but how they relate. The two parts of a polarity cannot even be successfully imagined without at the same time imagining the "special relation between them" (p. 34). For this reason also Coleridge's paradigm for human mental experience can provide the basis for a paradigm showing interaction within the composing process.

The strongest relationships on Coleridge's scale are between terms which are above or beneath one another and between terms which fall alongside one another on the two lists. There is a magnetic-like power between forces alongside each other in that they attract and complete one another.

Understanding is a limited force, in Coleridge's view of it. It has the specific function of arranging phenomena for us, and it should be seen as having a passive (lower) and an active (higher) component. Reason, on the other hand, is in Coleridge's terminology not an individual power but the "source of all powers" (pp. 94-97). If we associate Reason with the higher powers of the Imagination, and Understanding with the processes of identifying and organizing in an analytical sense, we will have a basic orientation to this scale. A major implication in the scale is that there is a central polar relationship between Reason and Sense. This is an exciting fact because it suggests that the realm of the imagination, which we find mysterious, can be worked with and understood in important ways through the senses, which we find quite unmysterious.

III

Coleridge's scale, and especially this set of relationships from it, can serve as a rich source in again approaching the question: *what is the relationship between heuristics and the imagination in the composing process?*

From Coleridge's framework, and utilizing what we know of heuristics and creativity, we might attempt to describe the essential polarities of the composing process. If we adapt two terms, *meditation* and *analogy*, because of their apparent centrality in modern discussions of creativity (terms emphasized also by Rohman and Wlecke), we might get the following "Scale of the Composing Process."

On this scale (as with the Coleridgean scale) each force has a special relationship with those above and below it in that there is a tendency for them to overlap and even, at times, to merge. Each force has also a special relationship with its polar opposite (the term across from it on the inverted list) in that one of these forces tends to be generative of the other, and they operate as two extremes of a particular shared realm.

Further, the line between the top three and bottom three categories is not at all a hard boundary. It should be seen as desirable and inevitable that the line would be crossed habitually. What the line is intended to suggest (as with Coleridge's scale) is that there are traits which are more associated with the top three categories than with the bottom three and vice versa. We should think of the top three categories as primarily conscious, active, and involved in developing (or modifying) what comes to them (or what they turn their attention to). The bottom three categories should be seen as largely unconscious, passive (in the sense that their work involves receiving rather than seeking out), and as consequently involved in apprehending (or aggregating) activities.

Heuristics overall is being presented as growing out of meditation and flowing into analogy. The lower heuristics would include generative writing which might begin with activities like sensory recording, amplification of intense central moments in a story or essay, free writing based on meditation, and in general the informal, content-oriented preparation of an original draft. The higher more active heuristics would include the traditional...
emphases of composition classes with the focus being primarily on rhetorical techniques and the need to adapt to purpose and audience. The more ambitious aspects of heuristics introduced by Young, Becker, and Pike (the wave, particle, field theory, for example) would move us into the next higher level of the scale, analogy.

Meditation techniques provide the most direct route to making the incubation stage of prewriting a dynamic and systematic experience. Analogy is probably the major conscious tool through which intuition may be brought to bear on the problem-solving challenges faced in writing. Reduced each to its most basic function it could be said that meditation helps answer fruitfully the question: what area of experience should be written about? The process of analogy serves to answer the question: what is the essence of the experience being written about? Both techniques do both tasks, but their tendencies are clearly in these two different directions—their strengths lie in these two distinguishable functions.

On the importance of analogy as a device for bringing creativity into the problem-solving process there is much supporting evidence. William Gordon's work of the early sixties, *Synectics: The Development of Creative Capacity*, offers an imaginative problem-solving system based entirely on four types of analogy, which he labels: direct analogy, symbolic analogy, personal analogy, and fantasy analogy. And Gordon himself is building on a clear tradition. Albert Einstein, for example, called "combinatory play" the "essential feature in productive thought" (pp. 38-39).

Winterowd also offers a supporting insight on this in his new essay on the brain and rhetoric in discussing metaphor, when he concludes:

> And, of course, if our logic follows, the metaphor (which propositionalizes images) must be bitemporal while the image can be associated largely with the functions of the right hemisphere. (Does bi-hemisphericity explain the power of metaphor, which Longinus tells us, simply sweeps us away and thus is the most rhetorically cogent of figures?).

Analogy is often defined, rightly I think, as an extended metaphor. And at its fullest achievement I am arguing it has the power in the composing process which Winterowd and Longinus ascribe to it in rhetoric in general.

If I am right here about meditation and analogy, even if I am right only about the size of their role, then as a profession we are going to have to leave behind old prejudices against them as limited to some mysterious realm of creativity. We must begin to employ them more fully as functions in our classrooms, and we must take very seriously our responsibility to understand the unique nature of each. Mediation appears to be a key to understanding prewriting; and analogy, as a bridge between heuristics and creativity in problem-solving, may be the primary tool for the deeper revising processes, those processes Donald Murray refers to as "internal" revision.

In working our way outward from the center on the scale we arrive then at the two extremes, "wish" on one end and "image" on the other. Image here retains its traditional meaning, referring to an experience of one of the five physical senses. Wish may seem a strange term to represent the highest attainment in composing. But, I believe it is a highly functional term for two main reasons. First, what we are seeking in the writing process may be aptly characterized as the fulfillment of a wish. Second, wish is a proper term to head this list because in its meaning is a blend of the two fundamental imaginative forces we are trying to marshal to our advantage in the writing process, for wish is best seen as the combination of will and fantasy. The function of all of the powers on the scale is to bring these two qualities together, and their joining is the fulfillment of the work of the entire process.

A central implication of placing image on the bottom of the scale is that mental processes, imaginative processes, and the writing process begin most properly with "sensible experience" (to use Coleridge's term). The central implication of placing image and wish at the two extremes on the scale is that there is an intimate, mutually generative relationship between them. In his essay on creativity Winterowd points out that recent discoveries about the mind might be seen as encouragement to do more in the classroom with "touchy, feely, smelly" (p. 7 *FN*); but he argues that we should not move in that direction because experience has told us otherwise. His position on this, it seems to me, represents the only major lapse in his otherwise fine statement. In the humanities where the truth tends to be an elusive and delicate thing the lessons of experience must be read very carefully. In this case I believe the lesson of the late sixties is that sensory experiments and emotional responses tend to lead to a breakdown in meaning and to self-indulgence if they are not integrated into the whole writing process. However, the lesson of *this* study and others is that it is of central importance for us to develop further sensory techniques and emotion-based activities in our teaching of writing.

I have been arguing that the scale of the composing process should be seen partially as a movement from the bottom to the top of the list and partially as a set of polar relationships with the accompanying generative and imaginative power that implies. The locations I have ascribed to these forces are not a provable truth, but I would like to add a few brief statements in support of my scheme. 1. If Barfield and Coleridge's emphasis on polarity is at all persuasive, then the apprehending of a polarity (and the utilizing of it) is a fundamental function of the imagination, in writing as well as in thought. And I would submit that analogy, in its highest form, involves just such an imaginative act—it explores the essential relationship between two apparently unlike things, and in doing so discovers fundamental meanings in subjects. 2. While there are different types of meditation and different purposes for which meditation might be used, my locating meditation in the generative stage of writing is a recognition of the primary ability of meditative technique, which is to bring about receptivity—to experience, ideas, and the unconscious. 3. The locating of these two clearly creative forces on both sides of the two types of analytical heuristics suggests a flowing from imagination to analysis and back into imagination, not as a series of isolated steps, but as a series of assimilations in the writing process. This of course may not be correct, but it is at least an hypothesis which is responsive to Young, Becker, and Pike's concept of an incubation stage and to Murray's idea of internal revision. And, 4. the fundamental link between image and wish is suggested, I believe, everywhere we turn, in everything from "success manuals" to fairy tales.

A major condition necessary for bringing our creativity, recognized by Gordon (p. 94) and others, is a willingness to state the commonplace. Napoleon Hill, who wrote a series of books about how to succeed in life, tells the story of a man who was a major corporate problem-solver and who made it his habit to isolate himself in a spare room, taking only a list of all the known ingredients of the problem. Then, rather than trying to figure out how to solve the problem, he would simply concentrate as hard as he could on what was known, letting his greater understanding of it gradually raise possible solutions. One of our best sources of commonplaces about the imagination, I be-
lieve, is Freud. His work remains a significant reference point for both Robert Ornstein and Carl Sagan in their studies of the locality of brain functions. I believe Freud's work, along with Barfield's, may help call our attention to an important commonplace in regard to understanding the brain. So far most research has been concerned, rightfully and necessarily, with the separation of functions. But it is important to remember also that we will actually understand the operation of the brain only when we understand both the separation and the relation of its functions.

I would like to end with a final problem. It is a major assumption of synectics that "creative efficiency in people can be markedly increased if they understand the psychological process by which they operate" (Gordon, p. 6). This is also a clear implication of Barfield's work, which calls for a more systematic application of the imagination throughout modern life. Ornstein points out, however, that in order to directly observe the unconscious and the imagination they must somehow be removed from the shadow of the logical and conscious faculties. Ornstein likens this experience of bringing out the unconscious to causing the sun to set so that the stars can come out. The stars are there all the time of course; it is just that it requires special pains and patience to see them.

In the later part of The Psychology of Consciousness Ornstein reminds us of an old Sufi tale in which one man walks up to another who is searching for his lost keys in his front yard and begins to help him look for them (pp. 192-193). After searching for awhile the man who came up to help asks, "Where did you lose your keys?"

The first man says, "Oh, I lost them in my house."

"Then why are you looking for them out here?" the second man asks.

And the first man replies, "Because there is more light out here than in my house."

I agree with Ornstein's interpretation of this tale. It seems to be our habit to look for things in comfortable surroundings rather than where they can be found. And in the search for keys to the composing process we have been too much inclined to look for them in the comfortable light of logic, when we should know that they can be found only through a journey into the awkward darkness of the imagination.

End Notes


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10Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (New York, 1955) is the central work I have in mind.

Figure 1: Coleridge's Scale of Mental Experience

Reason
Imagination
Understanding

Understanding
Fancy
Sense

Figure 2: Koch's Scale of the Composing Process

Wish
Analogy
Heuristics

Heuristics
Meditation
Image

And, presented so as to better show the polar relationships:

lowest
Sense
Fancy
Understanding

highest
Reason
Imagination
Understanding

Understanding
Fancy
Sense
Reason

Figure 2: Koch's Scale of the Composing Process

Wish
Analogy
Heuristics

Heuristics
Meditation
Image

And, presented so as to better show the polar relationships:

lowest
Wish
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Wish
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Heuristics
Eureka! An Assignment: Heuristics in Theory and Practice
W. Ross Winterowd
University of Southern California
Barbara Crane
Ocean View High School

Prelude

Many years ago when I was a freshman in college, a teaching assistant gave me the very nasty surprise of an F on my first English paper! (In the body of the paper, the authors use "we," but the first section was written by only one of us, though it expresses the feelings of both. The reader is left to speculate on who is speaking in the singular in this section.) For the next four years, I feared writing, worried from the time I got the assignment until I turned it in, sat paralyzed for hours on weekends with a blank yellow writing pad in front of me, but no ideas forthcoming. Recently, I came back to the joy I had experienced in writing in my childhood and teens. The change came about because of an exercise I was assigned for a class, a paper on my own composing process. We were to explore our habits and the methods we use to write on paper. As usual, I felt great stress from the time the professor made the assignment. But this time, when I finished the paper, I understood my own composing process as I never had before. I saw the worry and concern as part of the process, and viewed in that light, the emotions became elements of my prewriting activities, when I, in an unstructured way, consider and reconsider approaches, sentences, paragraphs I will use when I write the piece. Now I welcome the thought and emotions that precede the moment I begin to write. I recognize these as part of the cure (the finished product), not an incurable disease.

Since the composing process paper was so important to me, in terms of my own writing and my teaching of writing, it has become the first paper that I assign to my students each year—a paper in which they explore in detail what they think, feel, and do with a writing assignment from the moment they receive it until they hand in the finished paper.

The composing process paper seems to be as illuminating and liberating for my students as it was for me, and I have begun to consider it an absolutely essential feature of my writing instruction.

**Purposes**

The purposes of the present essay are:

1. To provide secondary and college composition teachers with the details of a remarkably successful writing assignment, one that has been used with literally hundreds of tenth-graders and college freshmen and with dozens of graduate students;

2. to demonstrate the use of heuristics, which are methods that we believe to be extremely productive, even crucial;

3. to advance hypotheses about the relationships between heuristics and cognitive function and development.

When we give the composing process assignments to high school or university students, our purposes are:

1. to make students aware of their own composing processes and thereby enable them to become more effective writers;

2. to give students practice in the use of heuristics, which are, of course, powerful prewriting techniques;

3. to provide us with insight into the composing processes of our students, thus enabling us to intervene more effectively.

**Pragmatics**

The assignment for the composing process paper is merely this: In as much detail as possible, discuss your own composing process. When given to tenth graders, the assignment is rewritten, but remains unchanged in substance: Tell about what you do and think when you write—how you plan and organize, how you put together the first draft. Give as many specific details as possible. Do you revise? If so tell how.

Undoubtedly, this is a difficult assignment, for graduate students as well as fourteen-year-olds, and the difficulty is paradoxical, for the writer is certainly, in some sense, an expert on his or her own composing process, but since the knowledge is tacit, it resists explicit discursive expression. By definition, any writer knows how to write (no matter how halting and relatively unsuccessful the process may be), but very few writers have attempted to transform knowing how to into knowing about. This assignment demands just such a transformation.

The preparation for the writing assignment is, of course, different for tenth graders, college freshmen, and graduate students, but we find it takes at least a class hour to make the assignment regardless of the level of the students.

Over the years, we have again and again experienced the thud of stunned silence when we gave the assignment, then the chill of hostility, and finally the tentative, edgy questioning, the attempts to get us to explain what we have in mind. At this point, we frankly admit that the assignment is difficult: "Yeh, that ought to keep you busy for at least a weekend, if not longer." But we also explain that problematic, difficult assignments can, in the long run, be easier than those that are apparently simple, and we point out that writing about one’s composing process yields a real bonus: writers will be able to look closely at what they do and perhaps discover their own weaknesses and strengths. Doing the paper should be a real learning experience.

The problem, of course, is to get started on this intractable subject, to find some way or ways to handle it, and, as matter of fact, it takes at least an hour of class time to prepare students to get under way. (The preparation, of course, differs for tenth-graders, college freshmen, and graduate students.)

**Pragmatics I**

In the tenth-grade class, we spend an entire period making the assignment because, as in the case of the other papers that we will assign during the year, we want to energize the students’ imaginations through a quiet thinking time or a noisy sharing time, during which they can structure their prewriting processes. In talking about the paper, we explain, in both printed and oral directions, that “Writing a paper is a creative task, as creative as painting a picture or writing a poem. It takes imagination, thought, and a desire to express yourself, as does any creative art. The way each person approaches the task of writing a paper is unique to that individual.”

Clustering, a structured brainstorming session (illustrated in Figure 1), is the heuristic we use for the tenth-grade composing process papers. We write the words “composing process” on the blackboard, draw a line from them to the word “feelings,” and ask the students, “What feelings do you have when you are assigned a paper? For example, do you feel anticipation, dread, curiosity, anger?” This begins the sharing that occupies the larg-
student has written. This brief return to the assignment assures us that students have not forgotten what they have been asked to do, and they get a model of the sort of paper that we, the readers, will accept.

Pragmatics II

When we make the assignment for college freshmen and graduate students,

1. We point out that three simple perspectives (ways of looking at the subject) will start to make the prewriting and writing tasks seem easier than at first they might have appeared when only the brute assignment was given. These three perspectives are:
   a. The camera view. What would a sound camera record if it were focused on you as you compose? Place? Implements? Props (such as munchies or orange juice)? Sounds (such as mutterings or your reading aloud to yourself)? Tics? Rituals? Compulsions? Movements (such as pacing)? Other?
      In discussion, students should give brief answers to each question (provide examples) and should be encouraged to think of other productive questions that might be asked.
   b. The rational view. What conscious decisions do you make? Outline? Start with a jazzy beginning, or writing the beginning last? Audience? Thesis statement? Notes? Write to find out what you want to say? Write only after you know exactly what you want to say? Humor? Irony? Tone or point of view? Gimmicks (such as quotations)? Five-paragraph essay?
      Examples? Further questions?
   c. The intuitive leap. What hunches do you have about your composing process? Influence of your personality? Serendipity? Hidden goals? Relationships among hand, eye, voice, and mind (Composing as kinesthetic, visual, aural, mental)? Fetishes? Escape?
      Examples? Further questions?

2. Now we ask if the students find the assignment becoming less difficult and have them explain why that might be so.

3. We explain this point: If you can think of productive questions concerning any topic, you have begun to understand the topic more thoroughly and thus have the possibility of writing about it more easily and effectively. (If you can ask a productive question, you have the chance for a useful answer.) That being the case, other groups of questions, such as the following, should further enrich (and simplify) the assignment.
      Examples? Other questions?
   b. Time and place. A favorite spot? Deadlines? Day? Night? Writing in class? Intellectual climate (School, city, state, nation, world; day, week, decade, century; metaphorical place such as one’s place in a system of things, metaphorical time such as the age of electronics)? Emotional climate?

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When we have completed the clustering exercise, the words "composing process" are surrounded closely by several unduly modules. We suggest to the students how they can form each of these modules into a paragraph. For example, they can begin with a paragraph on their feelings when they get a writing assignment. A second paragraph will be on props—place, time, tools—a third on their writing process, and a fourth on rewriting. Thus, by the time they have left class, they have participated in the generation of a multitude of ideas on their subject and have perceived a way to organize these ideas.

The next day, we devote the first ten minutes of class to a discussion of a composing process paper that either one of us or a
c. **System.** How do the parts work together? With an all-at-onceness or in definite phases? Which part is most difficult? (Prewriting? Planning? Writing? Revising? Editing?)

Examples? Other questions?

d. **Distribution.** Relationship of composing to other activities? (Cognitive? Educational? Recreational?) To life style? To one’s culture? To one’s goals?

Examples? Other questions?

7. At this point, it should be stressed that everyone in the class now has enough potential for not just a paper on the composing process, but a book. A subject that originally stirred up only hostility and uneasiness has now yielded a world of possible ideas. For each student, the prewriting process should be well under way. The questions (probes) — answered, potentially answerable, unanswerable — provide substance (or will do so as students work with them), but do not imply a structure. That must be arrived at in the planning and writing stages. Of course, as this prewriting activity goes on in the classroom, students should take copious notes, and, in fact, we recommend handing the sets of questions out on a ditto, either at the beginning of the activity or at its conclusion.

**Problems**

The questioning session that has just been explained is not brainstorming and differs from that productive and enjoyable technique in some important ways — which the teacher must understand, but which it is not necessary to explain to students (though in fact we do give college freshmen and graduate students such an explanation).

Brainstorming and clustering are largely unstructured, and behind the techniques, there are no strong epistemological claims. They work, and that essentially is all that we need to know. The sets of questions that we have outlined in the “Pragmatics II” section of this essay are structured, and in their theoretical form do rest on epistemological assumptions. In fact, the sets of questions themselves are based on Kenneth Burke’s Pentad, Roman Jakobson’s schema for the discourse act, and Young, Becker, and Pike’s tagmemic discovery procedure.

To take Burke as an example: he claims that to understand any human action, we need complete answers to the following questions: What was done? (Act) Who did it? (Agent) Where and when? (Scene) By what means? (Agency) And why? (Purpose) These simple questions (which on the surface appear very much like the newperson’s formula) are portable; that is, they are elegant in the sense that they are easily remembered and can be “carried” mentally with no effort. They are also adaptable, as the following demonstrates: Act, questions concerning the composing process itself (or any other human action); Agent, questions concerning the composer (or any other humans who perform the actions in question); Agency, questions concerning the composer’s language, equipment, and structures (or any other means whereby humans perform actions); Scene, questions concerning the time and place in which actions occur; Purpose, questions concerning the motives for or reasons behind composing or any other human action. The act-agent-scene-agency-purpose Pentad is not subject-specific; the questions implied in its terms can be used to explicate a poem or a murder mystery, to analyze a political event or the action of an acquaintance or of oneself.

Furthermore, one can make the Pentad more powerful by using its terms in ratios: influence of time and place on the
composing process (Act-Scene); influence of the writer's individuality on the process (Act-Agent); influence of purpose (Act-Purpose); influence of language, form, and implements (Act-Agency).

In other words, one set of questions in the assignment was developed through the Pentad, a coherent heuristic, which is nothing more than a set of questions used to define and solve problems and to develop subject matter.

In this paper, we do not intend to explore the theory of heuristics or to outline the background for the heuristic based on Jakobson's work; explanations and applications are readily available. Our point is simply this: a writing teacher who understands a variety of heuristics has an extremely powerful teaching tool, one that can be applied, as I have illustrated, at the beginning of the composing process, when the assignment is made, and to the result, the finished paper. For example, when we discuss student essays in class, we begin with a series of probes (a heuristic) that will get the discussion going. Roughly, we ask students to talk about such matters as tone and point of view (in Jakobson's terms, questions concerning address); content (Jakobson's context); structure (message); style (code); and audience (address). In practical terms, this approach works more effectively than a random question such as "Can you comment on this paper?" or "How did you react to this?" As students use a heuristic over and over again, they develop a fluency that would be hard-won through unstructured discussion.

And for this reason. If the theory behind the heuristic is reasonable and powerful, then the questions are likely to get into the subject, to its depth, complexities, and facts. If, for instance, tagmeme does indeed give a reasonable explanation of how human beings know, then the heuristic based on that theory should be powerful, i.e., productive and useful.

Now then, there is a world of difference between a useful gimmick (and no one denies the value of gimmicks) and a technique with reasonable theoretical underpinning, for the gimmick must be ad hoc, contextless and cognitively shallow, whereas a theoretically based heuristic can be used deliberately in all contexts, and its cognitive richness shows through in extremely fortunate ways.

As professional educators, we are inevitably backed out of the classroom and into the ivory tower, in that we must finally be accountable for the theory behind what we are doing—and accountable to students (who have an uncanny ability to sniff out mindlessness and gimmickery), to administrators (who give us the responsibility for planning as well as implementation), and to the general public that supports us (on the assumption that we know what we're doing and can give reasons).

Which gets us to one of the points of this paper. As to the theme assignment—yes, it works, but that's not the real point. Yes, heuristics are valuable, even essential in the teaching of writing, but still that's not our point. Teachers must understand the theory behind what they are doing. That is the major point!

Our experience with heuristics raises some extremely interesting questions for research. Like most teachers who have used heuristics extensively, we have found that given heuristics work for certain students and not for others, as if clustering or the tagmeme grid or the Pentad were personality specific. Indeed, we have found that students become passionately pro or con regarding different heuristics, feeling totally comfortable with one and detesting another.

We suspect that heuristics relate to cognitive patterns. In fact, we have some empirical evidence that heuristics are even hemisphere-specific, relating to either the logical, sequential, deductive functioning of the left brain (which Bogen terms "propositional") or to the gestaltist, atemporal, inductive functioning of the right brain ("appositional"). It seems reasonable to assume, for example, that clustering would be extremely congenial to students with right-brain dominance.

... it is evident that the right cerebral hemisphere makes an important contribution to human performance, having functions complementary to those of the left hemisphere. The right side of the brain probably processes information differently from the left, relying more on imagery than on language, and being more synthetic and holistic than analytic and sequential in handling data. It is certainly important in perceiving spatial relationships. It also probably provides the neutral bass for our ability to take the fragmentary sensory information we receive and construct from it a coherent concept of the spatial organization of the outside world—a sort of cognitive spatial map by which we plan our actions.

The tagmemic grid, with its almost syllogistic inevitability, should be congenial to LH thinkers.

Briefly, the grid is based on two general assumptions: (1) that to know anything, one must (a) be able to differentiate that item from everything else in its class, (b) know how much the item can change and still be itself, and (c) know the place of the item in the system of which it is a part—and hence, contras, variation, distribution; (2) that anything can be viewed from three perspectives, as a particle (static), as a wave (dynamic, process), or as a field (system of parts). These epistemological claims yield an elegant heuristic, the tagmemic grid. (See Figure 2).

Each cell of the grid yields a "master question" regarding the item. For example, the first grid, viewing the item as a particle, yields the question, "How does the item differ from all other in its class?" and the second cell (particle-variation) yields the question, "How much can the item change and still be itself?"

Success in using this heuristic depends on one's ability to make discrete logical connections. It is not unreasonable to explain the ninth cell (field-distribution) with a logical claim.

Every item is a system.
Every system is part of a larger system.
The larger system of which the item is part is a system of systems.

In fact, that is the precise meaning of the ninth cell, and this meaning is derived, it seems to us, by a logical process which is characteristic of left-hemispheric thinking.

But regardless of logical niceties and both our firm and our tentative knowledge of LH function, it seems to us that the tagmemic heuristic relates more closely to the propositional thinking of the LH than to the appositional of the RH.

As we have said, preliminary research does yield some hints concerning the rationality of our hunches. Heuristics are problem-solving devices; therefore, certain of them should be more congenial to LH thinkers while others work best for RH thinkers.

We are now undertaking an extensive and controlled study of the relationship of heuristics to hemisphericity or cognitive style. If, as we strongly suspect, highly structured heuristics such as the tagmemic grid appeal to and are most readily used by the LH dominant students, while RH dominant students are most comfortable with relatively unstructured procedures, then we would conclude that "heuristic hopping" may well be the most productive technique for gaining the maximum utility from these procedures. As Young and Koen point out, "one pri-