Writing in CyberSpaces

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Abstract

Much is known about the process of writing and the successful pedagogies of teaching recursive drafting and peer review. This discussion looks at online venues and applications that will enhance best practices in teaching writing, particularly at the more advanced or academic levels.

A Snapshot View of the Writing Process

The chart below (Figure 1) attempts to give some idea of the recursive processes of composing and the complex variety of elements that influence its success. Each of the main aspects will be discussed in the following sections.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

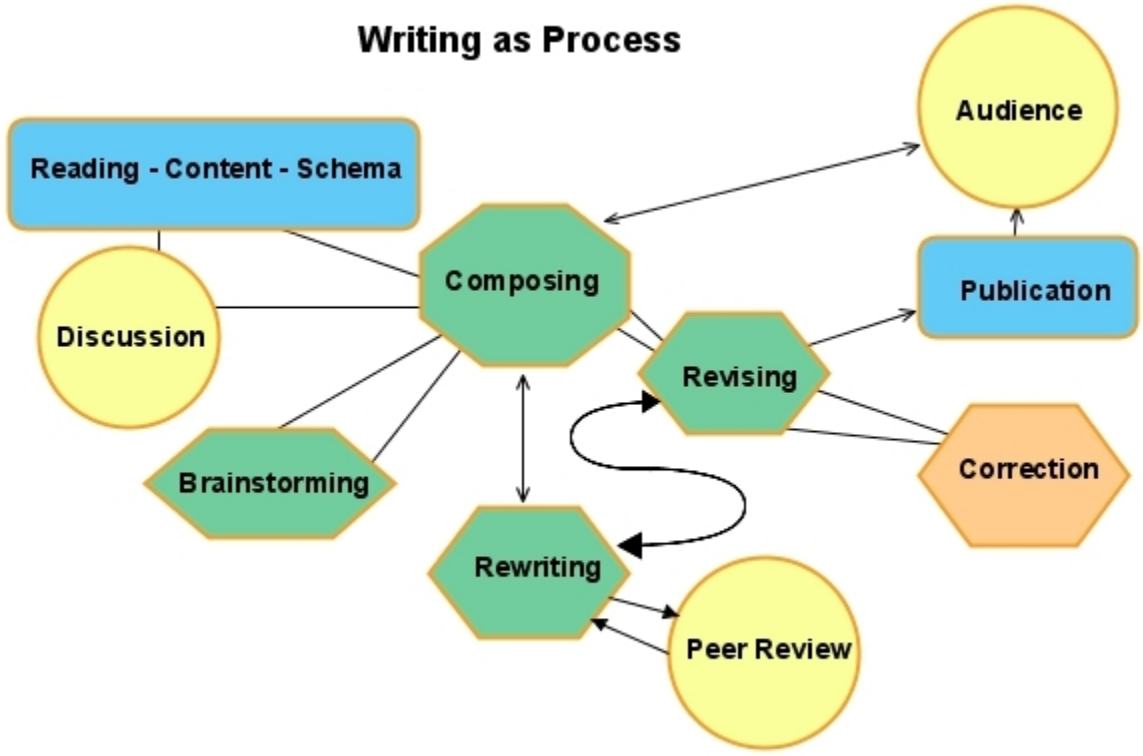

Figure 1. The elements of writing as a process. (Image created at Gliffy.)

At the heart of writing as a process is the idea of revising and rewriting through successive drafts (see Zamel, 1976 and 1982). The pedagogy of writing in the 1970s and 1980s moved from a constrained focus on correct grammar and usage to a study of how recursive, generative pre-writing, free writing, and re-writing helped writers at all levels discover and express their meaning. The growing movement toward communicative teaching approaches in general (see Widdowson, 1978) influenced teachers' new-found realizations: that language students actually had something to say, that writing was a way to explore emotions and ideas, and that through the processes of drafting and revision, "intention and expression become one" (Zamel, 1982, p. 205).

The revolutionary emphasis on meaning and self-expression in writing pedagogy was quickly followed by concerns about passing college entrance and exit exams--the Writing Proficiency requirement in California colleges and universities, the writing portion of the SAT, and the TOEFL Test of Written English. As Raimes (1985: 250) puts it, "Attention to process is...necessary but not sufficient." My own university composition program resolved the debate by judiciously including (1) a focus on the relationship of reading (and discussion of readings) to writing, (2) the use of successive drafts, concentrating first on the development of ideas and only later on polishing grammar and syntax, (3) peer editing (in line with communicative teaching and learning notions), and (4) publication--a final corrected draft that might be submitted to the college literary journal or to a literary competition--for reading by an audience of peers. As Zamel points out in her landmark essay (1985) on teacher strategies for responding to writing, during the process of revising and developing ideas, many grammatical or syntactical problems simply cease to exist. The focus on publication for an authentic audience beyond the classroom gives authentic purpose to the revision and correction process.

Other issues in writing pedagogy can be seen in relation to the renewed interest in cognitive approaches to language teaching, that is, in schema theory and the direct teaching of academic discourse models (see Ellis, 1990; Johns, 1986). Most language programs in the U.S. now view composition as a significant means to language development as well as the only way to enter an academic course of study. Moreover, most programs incorporate a judicious mixture of free writing (e.g., in journals) and structured process writing, often combined with extensive reading and publication (e.g., a student newspaper or literary journal).

The Internet in colleges and universities has, since its inception, seen the rapid expansion of email exchanges for peer editing and Web pages to provide an authentic audience (see Gaer's *Email Projects Homepage* [2007], which she began back in the mid-90s). Eventually, the World Wide Web has brought the connected composition classroom a wide variety of tools and online venues that enhance the teaching, learning, and sharing of writing. This paper now turns to some of these options and how they fit into what we know about best practices composition. (For a more exhaustive list of Internet tools, the reader is referred to Godwin-Jones's 2008 article.)

Online Venues and Electronic Tools for Composition

Prewriting: Invention

An essential element in composing is development of the main idea or content. Reading has traditionally been the means to help students develop and manage content, skills essential to academic research and writing. Most college-level courses in the U.S. use a reader-writer textbook that contains reading passages, suggestions for discussion and brainstorming ideas, ways to connect the text to the writer's own life experiences, exercises in the vocabulary and grammar directly relevant to a given topic, and ideas for composition. Among the best of these texts is Spack's *Guidelines* (2006). Newer volumes also emphasize visual literacy--the need to analyze media of all kinds--for example in Burke's (2008) guide for middle-school teachers, *Illuminating Texts*. Burke cites the need for reader wariness because electronic documents and images, as well as textbooks themselves, contain ideological bias, outright errors, and commercial content (p. 5; see also Petrie, 2007, on "visuality"). In addition to content, readings provide awareness of the schema (see Johns, 1986) for academic discourse in the target language. (For some practical approaches to integrating reading and writing, see Tsai, 2006.)

A significant means to discover or invent topics resides in oral discussion. Whether in a classroom, online, or in a blended environment, teachers have students talk about their readings and their developing paper topics. Online, these discussions might occur in a forum (e.g., as found in network-based teaching systems [], e.g., Moodle or Blackboard), email exchanges, or perhaps most conveniently, in blogs, podcasts, or wikis. In addition to asynchronous communications, live online venues such as Elluminate or WiZiQ can save a recording of the audio and video chats, Websites visited together, and the text chat. The advantage of online discussion, whether live or asynchronous, is enormous, because it provides students with a written and/or oral record of the exchanges, and they can refer back to and reflect on their discussions to find new content resources, and to scaffold writing formats, grammar, and vocabulary.

The Internet can also provide a valuable source of content readings through news services, such as VOANews.com and the BBC, articles in Wikipedia, the free collection of literature at Project Gutenberg, and academic papers in a wide variety of subject areas. Reading two or three short articles taking opposing views on a question (for example in different news sources) is a good way to spur conversation and topic development. Mind- or concept-mapping tools for brainstorming, such as Bubbl.us or Gliffy (used in the diagrams in this article), are also easy to find on the Web, and the diagrams can be readily shared among students as they discuss their paper development.

The Recursive Composing Process

In the process approach to writing, multiple drafts are a standard part of composition, and successive drafts are often assigned specific goals: the development of ideas, attention to audience and voice, correction. While some instructors feel that what is learned in writing one paper transfers to subsequent papers, I found in my own ESL college composition classes that students experienced great satisfaction in drafting a paper several times, all the way through to a finished product, which then became part of their final portfolio of work. I also offered students the opportunity of re-drafting one final product in their portfolio if they felt their marks were too

low.

While word processors are usually the writing tool of choice, increasingly, advanced wikis, e.g., Google Docs, encompass many of the features of word processors and are far easier to share among peer review groups. A Google Doc may be viewed and commented on directly online, or mailed to multiple recipients. (The latter also may be a feature of your NBTS). Other word processors online, such as Ajaxwrite or ThinkFree, have features more comparable to Microsoft Word, but are not as easily and transparently shareable as Google docs. Think Free can be viewed from a phone, though the utility of this feature for longer documents is questionable. Blogs and wikis (e.g., Blogger and PBwiki), though not as sophisticated in their formatting apparatus, are used by many teachers, particularly for free writing/journal writing. Free writing is an important adjunct to the more formal writing requirements of academic prose, because it gives the student a way to develop a personal voice and style. Assigned (that is, structured) journal writing on a blog can give students daily practice with small, manageable chunks of thought, and may also be useful in developing vocabulary when students are asked to incorporate specific new words into their writing. Blogs and wikis are also a great help in the pre-writing discussion stage, as mentioned above, because of the ease of making comments, or in the case of wikis, actually revising collaboratively online. Students working in a peer-editing group may be instantly informed by RSS of new material appearing on a page. Wiki pages or blog entries can become in themselves an electronic portfolio of the student's progress over time. For all aspects of the writing process, online writing tools produce an immense saving of trees.

In addition to processing words, the grammar and spelling checkers in most word-processing applications (including those online) are invaluable in easing the teacher's task, and there is some evidence that both grammar and spelling can be improved by their use. Jacobs and Rodgers (1999), referring to their study of students using a French grammar checker, conclude the following:

> In general, an excellent way to use foreign language grammar checkers as a learning resource is the way in which native speakers tend to use them, that is to say, as a flagging tool which brings possible errors to their attention. Students reported to us that the use of the grammar checker encouraged them to consult grammar books because of messages generated by the checker. (p. 523).

Better still, students might refer to an online concordancer, such as The Compleat Lexical Tutor (Cobb, 2008), for a search of problematic expressions. This kind of in-depth exploration might form the basis for pre-writing or post-composing grammar lessons specifically oriented to the topic under consideration and the level of the student's acquisition.

Earlier, I mentioned the need for visual literacy. Increasingly, compositions have come to include media of various sorts--photos, audio recordings, video, graphics--and the selection and appropriate use of media should be considered as belonging to the composing process proper. Many online tools are available to enhance the media aspects of composition: the Internet Archive is an excellent searchable source for all types of media, as are many of the major museum Web sites, such as the Smithsonian Institute or the Louvre. Peer review and discussion of media and their appropriateness can form the basis for critical thinking about the media we are

deluged with daily.

Publication for an Authentic Audience

Presentation of one's work to an appropriate audience (beyond the teacher) is one of the pleasures of authorship, and writing for/to an audience, real or imagined, is crucial to the development of voice. In the simplest instance, an authentic audience of peers can do the job. In my college composition class, students presented their final papers in stages. They were allowed to write the final research papers for other classes and so their topics were greatly varied, from sports therapy to international economics to an analysis of an American poet. However, they had to fit their topic to the I-Search scaffold (Macrorie, 1988): what do I know and what do I want to know, what are my resources, what did I find out (the bulk of the paper, which involved research and the citation of academic articles). Students became genuinely interested in each other's work, first through the pre-writing discussion, in which their ideas were elaborated; then through discussion of their drafts, which involved organizational problems commonly shared; and eventually through their final presentations, in which they were not allowed to read the paper, but had to explain their solutions to the writing problems involved, and their conclusions. (For a sample format and exemplars of the I-Search, see Seagrave, 2000.)

With younger students in a special summer institute, I had middle- and secondary-school students use presentation software for a final evening performance, in which they demonstrated to their parents what they had learned about their own and their peers' cultures. Media included photos found on the Internet, scanned from their own collections, or taken with the program's digital cameras, poetry illustrated with their own drawings, short video, and music. Students learned how to handle a variety of media tools and focused their work on the presentation to the audience: What media would be most effective, who would show which parts, what explanations would enhance the display, what visual and aural experiences would be significant to a cross-generational audience, etc. (see Hanson-Smith, 1997). In the current online environment, students may readily create multimedia Web pages (e.g., through SeaMonkey or at a wiki); mount podcasts with text, photos, and video, as well as embedded audio (see PodOmatic); create a slideshow with timeline, commentary, and viewer comments (e.g., at SlideShare or VUE); videotape their presentation, edit with desktop tools such as Windows Movie Maker or iMovie, then upload it to YouTube; and present their work online live through a media-enhanced meeting environment, such as Elluminate or WiZiQ, mentioned earlier.

The Internet allows a much wider and more truly authentic audience because anyone across the globe can access a Web page presenting a final product, view a wiki, make a comment on a blog, watch a recorded chat, or participate live in a meeting space. The Webheads in Action, an international community of computer-using teachers (Stevens, 2002), makes a point of directing its members to the work of their students for comment (see, e.g., Yeh, 2006 and 2008) or to participation in live presentations with each other's learners (e.g., as described in González, 2006, pp. 20-21). A number of semester-long collaborations have also been undertaken as longer content-based projects. Zeinstejer's (2007) ongoing exchanges involve blogs, podcasts, photos, and cross-interviewing via free Internet phone calls with Skype, as preparation for research papers. (See also an earlier US-Argentina exchange described in Hanson-Smith, 2007, pp. 131-132. For more examples of student work, as well as links to video and presentation tools, see

Hanson-Smith, 2006-2008). These types of media-based student collaborations and the participation of an authentic audience are intensely motivating. We've come a long way since paper and stamp pen pals.

Conclusion

If we look again at the writing process enhanced by the electronic applications suggested in this article, the outline might appear as follows:

[Insert FIGURE 2. Writing in CyberSpaces, ABOUT HERE]

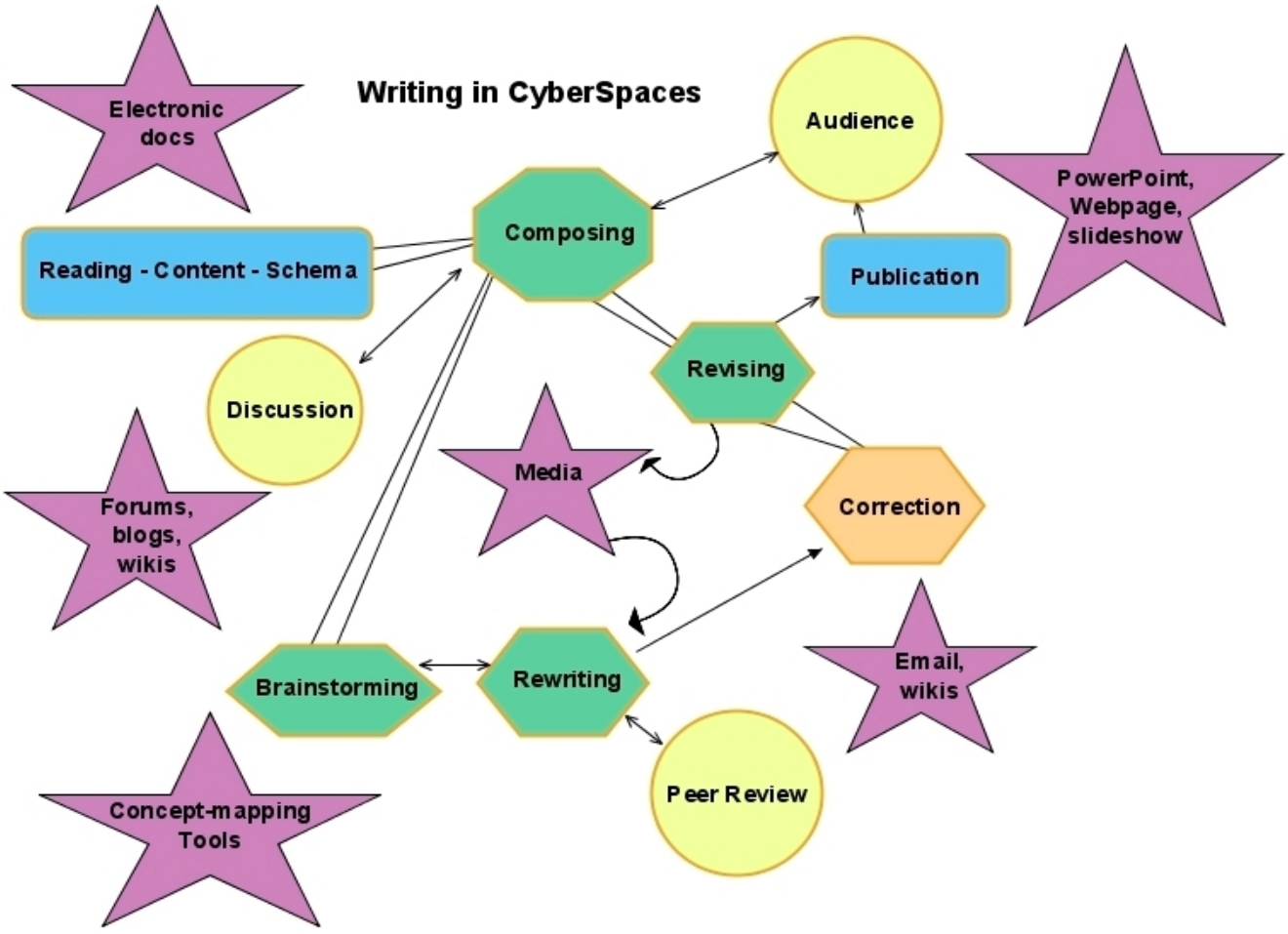

Figure 2. Writing in CyberSpaces. (Image created with Gliffy)

Egbert, Hanson-Smith, and Chao (2008) cite the goals for 21st century learners promulgated by state and national legislation throughout the world: the US national ESL standards (TESOL, 2006), the *TESOL Technology Standards* (TESOL, 20the ISTE NETS Project (2000-2005), and

the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework* (2001). These 21st century learning standards include, in addition to traditional literacy and numeracy, the mastering of "*visual, information, technological, and media literacies* that are crucial to help learners succeed outside of classrooms" (p. 4). The inclusion of media and the easy use of increasingly powerful electronic tools can greatly enrich the writing class and provide students practice with the 21st century skills they need.

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