

skill, and how certain could we be that this particular aspect of knowledge or skill would be helpful to the writer in the future? But issues of how to teach writing depend upon how we learn to write in the first place. I deal with that issue in chapter 2.

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Language is acquired only by absorption and contact with an environment in which language is in perpetual use.

—Samuel Thurber, "An Address to English Teachers," 1898, as paraphrased by Judy and Judy

The world that emerges for us is a conceptual world. When we are puzzled about what we encounter, we renegotiate its meaning in a manner that is concordant with what those around us believe.

—Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*

2 Learning to Write

IF COMPOSITION STUDIES HAS an underconceptualized notion of what writing is, it has an equally underconceptualized notion of how human beings learn to write. Writing is obviously related to speaking—to Walter Ong, writing is a kind of second-order discourse, a formal self-conscious way of recording speech (82)—and a great deal of what we assume about how people learn to write is based on analogies with how they learn to speak. And yet there is a mystery at the heart of how we learn to speak, which also seems to apply to how we learn to write. To get at that mystery, linguists and cognitive psychologists have devoted an incredible amount of time and energy. The results are a host of detailed descriptions of infants and young children in the process of learning to speak and write. And of course these descriptions of language learning have in turn produced a complex web of interrelated models and theories of how infants and young children accomplish this task. The question is, just how successful are these models and theories of language learning, especially in terms of their implications for how writing should be taught? More specifically, since we know much more about how children learn to speak than we do about how they learn to write, how or in what way is learning to write based on or influenced by our ability to learn a native language in the first place?

In the first chapter, I argued the case that the ability to write is a complex combination of many different abilities and of many different kinds of knowledge. Because these abilities are so many and so various and because what we need to know in order to write involves so many generalizations, abstract principles, algorithms, and ad hoc considerations at so

many levels of generality—to say nothing of what we need to know about the specific subject matter and context of each unique rhetorical situation—it is very difficult to conceptualize what people “know” when we say that they know how to write.

Of course, the problem is compounded by the fact that most of what we characterize as the ability to write is “mental,” an operation of the mind, and of course, the problem in talking about mental life is that we have no direct knowledge of mental operations; we can only infer how our minds work from what we say and do. We *can* use introspection, but introspection is notoriously unreliable (Stich 228–42). Still, we talk naturally about our thought processes all the time; it is part of the way we think about the world and the basis for a great deal of the way we interact with each other. We all have what Wittgenstein calls a “picture” of mental life, a concept of how our minds work, and a great deal of research in composition studies in the last forty years has been to create such pictures and refine them.

The significance of research in learning theory in general and language learning in particular has been to remind us of all the things our minds do or can do when we write, to create a sort of composite portrait of all the possibilities of mental life when we learn all of the many kinds of knowledge and skill we need in order to compose. Researchers in learning theory and language acquisition primarily construct taxonomies of all the things we can do mentally when we learn to speak and write, and then they arrange these lists of possible mental operations into a model that represents a possible relationship between the various concepts suggested by the taxonomy. What these researchers have *not* done is get us any closer to an understanding of how our minds actually function when we learn something about writing.

Most models of language learning are basically elaborate analogies between something we know little about, what Rom Harré calls “the *subject*” of the model (in this case, the mind) and something we do know about, what Harré calls “the *source*” of the model (computers, for example) (38). The problem with models, as Michael Pemberton explains, is that they may oversimplify the complexity of the subject because the source of the model lacks many of the properties of the subject. Think of the many properties of the mind that have no counterpart in a computer. A model may even misrepresent its subject because the source of the model has properties that the subject lacks. Think of what a computer requires but what the mind does not. The best models suggest things about the ways we speak and write that we may not have thought of before, but none of them even pretends to be a model for how our minds actually work. As Pemberton puts it, “Models are not intended to be thought of as anything more than potential and reasonable explanations for observational data” (46). To which I would add that models help us to focus and refine research questions and provide heuristics for instruction.

However, models are all we have: we don’t know enough about mental life to construct a traditional “theory” of the mental operations involved in learning to speak and write, at least in the way psychologists and cognitive scientists use the term, in a way that can be empirically tested and verified. Most of what some researchers call “theories” in linguistics and cognitive psychology are what I call “models.” However, there are many testable and verifiable “theories” of various individual aspects of larger models of learning to speak and write.

Now with the “social turn” not only in composition studies but in linguistics and cognitive science in general, with a new emphasis on the social contexts in which we interpret and understand, we seem to be approaching the limits of what models can tell us. More and more, models of learning theory and language acquisition are becoming contextual and asserting that if there are generalizable mental “rules” or “strategies” for how we learn, these rules and strategies have to be applied in particular social circumstances, that in order to understand adequately how infants and children learn language, we have to know the circumstances in which they do so (for a history of this development in relation to composition studies, see Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt).

Despite the limitations of our models of language development, there is broad consensus among a variety of disciplines for a primitive model of how we learn to speak. The fundamental basis of most of these models is that we *acquire* our ability to speak; we do not learn to speak primarily in response to formal instruction. I would argue that increasingly, studies of young writers indicate that we develop our ability to write according to the same basic principles as we learn to speak and that for all practical purposes learners must have a fundamental sense of what writing is and how to do it before they receive any formal instruction. Of course, if writing is primarily acquired and not learned in response to formal instruction, the nature and indeed the relevance of formal instruction in writing is very problematic.

My argument in this chapter will proceed in two parts. In the first part, I will briefly summarize the models of how we learn to speak and then show how writing development seems to proceed according to the principles of these models. In the second part, I will provide the evidence that most of what we know about writing must be acquired and not learned from formal instruction. I will end by offering a model of writing acquisition and discussing the implications of this model for how writing should be taught.

Learning to Speak and Write

Learning to Speak

The “pictures” presented by most models of language development are primitive indeed. However, they do share some basic features. Most models of language acquisition are based on the following propositions:

- Children learn various aspects of their native language in regular stages and they progress through these stages by gradually approximating the spoken language of those around them.
- Children must in some sense “imitate” or model their language after the language they hear in the world around them; they do not just imitate that language “directly.” Indeed, the language of children is often very different from that of adults, and until they are ready to learn certain aspects of language, children seem impervious to correction.
- Children’s language is from the first creative, what linguists call “generative.” Children seem to use language according to their own internal rules.

The evidence for these propositions is considerable. Infants and children go through stages of development in all aspects of language. Although they may go through these stages at different ages, and although there is considerable variation among individuals, all infants and children go through all of these stages in the same order: they go through stages of babbling to eventually achieve sentence-like intonation and produce protowords (Sachs 42); they develop morphology and syntax in regular stages, starting with what some linguists call telegraphic speech of one to two morphemes, such as “more car” and “bye-bye baby,” through basic simple sentences, until they master such complex patterns as passives, coordination, and relative clauses in early elementary school (Tager-Flusberg 180, 183–94, 179); they also develop a sense of meaning in an orderly way: in their second year they learn words that are intellectually and socially meaningful to them, such as *mommy*, *daddy*, *doggy*, *blanky*, but not words such as *tree*, *bus*, or *policeman*. These early meaningful words also happen to be easy to pronounce.

Although children seem to develop language in orderly stages, they do not seem to do so by imitating the language of those around them. Usually their early ways of speaking are not at all like those of adults, and they are impervious to attempts to make their language more like adults before they are ready. Consider the case of the child who asked her father, “Want other one spoon, Daddy?” Despite the father’s repetition of the correct expression, “You mean, you want THE OTHER SPOON,” and drilling the child until she mechanically repeated what her father told her, given the first opportunity to speak spontaneously, the child said, “Other . . . spoon. Now give me other one spoon?” (Pinker 281).

In addition, young children constantly use new forms of language that they have never heard adults use. Rather than imitating adults, young children seem to generate original expressions using their own internal sense of how words and syntax work. That is, they often *overextend* or *underextend* the meanings of words: they use words to refer to more things than an adult would, or they use words in a much more limited set of circumstances than an adult would. For example, “they may use ‘duck’ for birds that swim, ‘bird’ for those that fly, and ‘chicken’ for those that don’t fly” (Pan and Gleason 134).

Of course, the fact that young children learn spoken language by developing their own internal rules does not mean that their environment is not important. Obviously, children need to hear language spoken in order to know what it is they must learn: a child born in a province of China will learn a dialect of Chinese; a child born in the United States will learn a dialect of English or Spanish. And just as obviously, children need to interact with others who speak the language so that they can observe how language functions in the give-and-take of social interaction and so that they can practice using language themselves.

The standard way of explaining this phenomenon is to say that children *acquire* a language; they are not taught it. James Paul Gee defines “acquisition” this way:

Acquisition is a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functional in the sense that acquirers know that they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function. This is how most people come to control their first language. (*Social* 146)

But of course this definition explains nothing. It simply puts a label on a process we do not understand very well. In conceptual terms, the problem is what Carl Bereiter calls “the learning paradox”: “Learners must grasp concepts or procedures more complex than those they already have available for application” (“Toward” 202). To put it another way: if we want to explain how children learn the complexities of language by some sort of internal mental process, we have to posit that their internal mental life is just as complex, if not more so, than what they have to learn. After all, how could an organism with a few rather simple mechanisms for learning grasp the complexities of language, indeed the complexities of experience? This conceptual problem has driven many linguistics and cognitive psychologists to posit that our ability to learn language is somehow innate because only a richly complex mental ability—early linguists called it a LAD, a Language Acquisition Device—could make such systematic sense of our experience as children appear to do when they learn a language. On the other hand, many researchers in language acquisition do not want to go so far as to assert that the ability to learn a native language is entirely programmed by our genetic inheritance. Clearly, some aspects of the environment are important, too. These researchers would argue that if we do possess an innate ability to learn language, this ability must be dependent upon other cognitive abilities and many kinds of social interaction. One theory is that language abilities are released or triggered by models. But ascribing much of what the learner acquires to his social context does not solve the learning paradox either: Such a view does not explain how we internalize the complexities of language from our environment.

Models of Learning to Write

Writing, however, is not speech. The texts of writing usually differ significantly from the utterances of speech:

- Written sentences are generally longer than spoken sentences; they also contain more subordination and other complexities of syntax.
- Writing contains more abstractions, fewer self-reference words, and a more Latinate vocabulary. (Chafe; Akinnaso)
- Writing is usually “extended”; that is, at the very least, it contains a number of sentences about a single topic. Even shopping lists can be interpreted as extended lists of items in support of the topic, What I Need to Buy.
- Writing is usually structured hierarchically, often with an elaborate patterning of more general assertions and more specific assertions in support.
- As a result, writing must usually be planned, be self-monitored, and involve consideration of audiences. (Snow and Kurland 191–92; see also Crystal 179; Grabe and Kaplan 61).

Children learn to speak “naturally” by simply listening to others and by gradually building up a repertoire of words and syntax that approximates the language of the people around them. But surely, learning to write is not so “natural” and cannot be simply acquired. Surely, learning to write must depend to some extent on explicit instruction or formal schooling or at least some form of self-conscious reflection. Gee calls this process of explicit instruction or formal schooling or self-conscious reflection “learning”:

Learning is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter. (*Social* 146)

Now I think the distinction between “acquisition” and “learning” is clear. However, I have been referring to our overall ability to “learn to write,” so it may be confusing to talk about “learning” as opposed to “acquisition” as one of two major ways of “learning” to write. Ross Winterowd calls the process of explicit instruction in writing “drill” (*Culture* 52–56), but that term also has its problems. It calls to mind a certain *kind* of instruction. Consequently, in the hopes of avoiding confusion, I will refer to what Gee calls “learning” as explicit instruction, although like Gee I realize that writers may learn a great deal about writing through their own analysis and reflection, without any outside help.

The most well-known model of learning to write in composition studies is James Britton’s *Language and Learning*. Britton’s model does not account for any of the ways learning to write may be different from learning to speak or even for the ways it may be different from learning in general. I would like to briefly review Britton’s model and then discuss the ways the model would have to be refined in order to be more helpful.

The “picture” of how we learn to speak in James Britton’s *Language and Learning* is one of “active learners” constructing their own individual mental representation of the world, what Frank Smith calls “a theory of the world in the head” (*Comprehension* 11). Learners develop this private and unique mental representation by noting distinctive differences among sensations, images, ideas, and other objects of thought, and by internalizing and abstracting a “representation” of experience into a complex series of interlocking conceptual hierarchies. In order to adequately represent a concept mentally, they have to note the similarities between two objects or actions or ideas and determine what larger class of related objects, actions, or ideas they belong to. They note the similarities between certain aspects of their experience—for example, between animals: say, a dachshund and a collie—and they abstract particular aspects of that experience in order to “represent” the concept of a “dog” so as to distinguish it from other similar concepts, say, of a “cat” or of a “cow,” all of which have hair, four legs, and a tail. In Britton’s scheme, children seem to construct a conceptual hierarchy, such as “animals,” with subcategories determined by a complex set of interlocking distinguishing features: color, shape, and size, to name the most basic. Given these complex conceptual hierarchies, children can learn to distinguish between cats and dogs and between breeds of dogs with a high degree of accuracy.

One such conceptual hierarchy related to speaking and writing is syntactical. We tend to think of concepts as a function of the way they are represented in syntax: that nouns represent things, for example; or that verbs represent action. We also tend to think of concepts as being related the way they are in the structure of our language—the subject-predicate relation; the verb-object relation; and the modifying relation (Britton, *Language* 195–201).

In addition, to Britton, learners seem to learn best when what they need or want to learn makes sense to them; that is, when that information fits into their previous mental representations. And they appear to learn most effectively when they are actively engaged in making sense of what is new and unfamiliar, and when they can be relatively sure that what they are trying to learn will help them accomplish something they value.

Clearly, Britton’s model is very basic. It does not even directly confront the issue of how learning to write may be different from learning to speak. In order for Britton’s model to be more helpful in conceptualizing how we learn to write, it would have to account for how or in what degree writing—

a second-order language activity—is based on or develops out of our innate ability to learn spoken language. In other words, it would have to account for two things: first, what we currently know about the transition from speech to writing in young children, and secondly, the relative roles of acquisition and explicit instruction in learning to write.

The Development of Writing Ability

More and more research is confirming that we begin the process of learning to write at a very early age, often before school, and that like the development of speech, the development of writing proceeds in stages. However, these stages are not nearly as orderly and sequential as the development of speech. If young children are exposed to reading and writing and if they recognize that reading and writing have a purpose or function that will serve their needs, they will spontaneously begin to develop their own approximations of these tasks without formal instruction, and their approximations will gradually evolve into what we label “literacy.” These approximations are what Thomas Newkirk calls “intermediate forms” (*More* 72), analogous to the early stages of oral speech, or what Eleanor Kutz, borrowing from the literature on second-language learning, calls an “interlanguage,” a form of discourse containing features that do not occur in the target language (392–93).

There is some dispute among scholars who study young children’s first acts of writing whether those efforts are an extension of speech or drawing. Lev Vygotsky interpreted the early scrawls, the “undifferentiated squiggles and lines” of certain three- and four-year-olds as beginning symbols. In a classic experiment, Vygotsky’s team of researchers asked children to “write” or mark down a list of phrases in order to help them remember the list later. Most of the children were bewildered by the task and claimed that they could not write. Nevertheless, most of the children made marks of some kind in response to the list of phrases. Afterwards, most of the children did not use their scrawls in order to help them remember the phrases, but a few did. A few seemed to “read” their scrawls as if the scrawls were writing; moreover, they could do so repeatedly and consistently, suggesting that certain specific marks denoted certain specific phrases (114–15). Vygotsky’s experiment is evidence that learning to write may begin as a process of differentiating pictures and other graphic signs from symbols of speech (see also Gardner).

Moreover, Newkirk has shown that young children spontaneously draw pictures that can be distinguished as either “descriptive” or “narrative,” accompanied by scrawls and early forms of words, an example of what he calls “symbol-weaving” (*More* 37, 44–59; see also Dyson 31–33; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 88–89). The fact that children seem to draw different “genres” of pictures and text may confirm Vygotsky’s insight that learning to write re-

quires that children distinguish and internalize the differences between the two different symbol systems.

Vygotsky’s experiment may also indicate that children have to recognize what writing can do for them, that they need to see how writing can help them accomplish various tasks, what M. A. K. Halliday calls “the functional extension of oral language”:

[W]hat is learning to read and write? Fundamentally it is an extension of the functional potential of language. Those children who don’t learn to read and write, by and large, are children to whom it doesn’t make sense; to whom the functional extension that these media provide has not been made clear, or does not match up with their own expectations of what language is for. (*Language* 57)

Once they sense what writing can accomplish, once they grasp how it can function in their lives, children begin to use a combination of drawing and writing for a variety of purposes. Often before they go to school, children begin to write in a variety of genres in order to accomplish various tasks. In the spontaneous writing of early childhood, we see examples of stories, lists, notes, plans, and cards and the beginnings of the full range of aims and purposes we associate with writing: to express feelings and attitudes, to inform and explain, and even to argue (Newkirk and Atwell; Gundlach, “Children”; Jacobs).

Scholars have categorized these spontaneous writings in a number of ways, but there is now general agreement that the range of young children’s writing represents much of the range of later adult discourse. For example, contrary to the early speculations of James Britton and James Moffett that children naturally write narratives before other genres, a number of studies in the last two decades document that young children use expository and persuasive forms, albeit as exploratory and hypothesis-testing approximations of the target genres. Here is an example by a six-year-old girl of what Suzanne Jacobs calls the “attributive mode”: a central topic and several predications of the topic:

Whales are black and some are gray.
Whales are big. They can eat you in one bite.
There are brown whales and there are black whales too.
There are white whales.
There are blue killer whales. (422; see also Sowers 832)

Notice that this writer has already internalized the notion that writing is not transcribed speech, that writing is usually done in sentences rather than conversational fragments and that it is more coherent, more directly related to a theme or topic, than the give-and-take of conversation.

And here is an example of a nascent argument in two separate signs that a young preschooler posted on his bedroom door: the first sign is a request or demand followed by a reason for the request; the second sign is a request or demand, followed by a qualification of that request:

DO NAT DSTRB GNYS AT WRK
(Do not disturb. Genius at work.)

DO NAT KMLIN ANE MORE JSTLETTLES
(Do not come in any more. Just little kids.)
(Newkirk, "Hedgehog" 597)

Gradually, young writers expand their ways of writing various genres and begin to make them more cohesive and more hierarchical, thereby increasing the ways their writing approximates adult discourse. Here, for example, is a piece by a third-grader about Ralph, the class mouse:

1. Ralph likes to eat Skippy peanut butter. 2. Ralph is in a cage. 3. He has a spinning wheel. 4. He has a motorcycle. 5. It's red. 6. He has a toilet. 7. The first time Ralph was in the classroom Ralph stepped into the box. 8. Ralph likes to climb to the top of the cage. 9. Ralph has two tiny teeth. 10. Everytime Ralph gets down he cleans himself. 11. His tongue is one centimeter long. . . . (Newkirk, *More* 73)

Although we might first think that this piece is entirely associative, it does have the beginnings of a more complex hierarchical structure. Newkirk notes that this writing contains three clusters of related statements: one cluster notes what Ralph has in the cage with him (sentences 2–5); another catalogues what Ralph does in his cage (sentences 7–8), and the last is about Ralph's mouth, what it look like and what Ralph uses his mouth to do (sentences 9–11). Newkirk argues persuasively that this is just one example of how children's writing begins to develop a topic-subtopic structure we associate with exposition (*More* 72–88).

Other genres proceed in the same way: through no set pattern of development, but over time, increasingly approximating the structures of adult written discourse (Graves, *Case* 29; Newkirk, *More* 29–31). George Kamberelis concludes:

[C]hildren's developing understanding and enactment of different genres are emergent phenomena. By this suggestion I mean that development is complex, non-linear, and constitutively related to differential linguistic complexity and abstraction, task conditions, proximal and distal learning experience, and other contextual variables. As with many other developmental phenomena, children seem both to progress and regress as they learn to differentiate and eventually creatively integrate the forms, functions, and contexts of different genres. (448)

(For some examples of the development of writing from the same children at ages eight, twelve, and seventeen, see Loban, appendix D, 112–20. For a list of adult genres across socio-economic groups and races, see Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 123–90.)

Young children also learn to spell in stages, but again these stages are not necessarily sequential, and any of the early stages may be skipped. According to a study by Donald Graves, the stages are: invented spelling; such as "Potallprnssas" (beautiful princess); words in transition, in which the same word may be spelled in a number of different ways, such as "wuz" and "was" for "was"; stable inventions, such as "valin" for "villain" and "neis" for "nice"; and finally sight words, the final correct spelling ("What" 314; see also Gentry and Gillet 25).

I might add that the use of invented spelling is analogous to the fact that children often invent words when they forget a word or have not learned the adult equivalent in the first place. For example, they might use *power* for *cup*, *needle* for *mend* and *plant-man* for *gardener*. These inventions seem to follow fairly regular patterns (Clark 390).

Finally, children also seem to develop the use of written syntax in an orderly way. In general, over the course of their elementary and high school careers, children's written syntax follows their oral syntax. Both develop toward longer coordinate sentences, then toward more complex sentences using dependent clauses, and then toward denser sentences. The denser sentences primarily result from the use of gerundial, participial, and other syntactic forms that transformational grammarians explain as deletions and transformations of adjectival clauses. Usually, the more complex and denser forms of syntax occur more frequently in the writing of "high proficiency" writers four to six years before they occur in the writing of "low proficiency" writers (Loban; see also Hunt, *Syntactic*). Walter Loban explains this difference in developing abilities as primarily the result of social factors, especially the way language is used in the home, but it may also be the result of "psychological and physical factors" (88–89).

It seems then that writing ability may develop in ways that may be analogous to the development of speech, but not in as orderly a way. In addition, as with speech, different aspects of writing develop in different ways. Written syntax follows the development of oral syntax fairly closely, but the development of conventions specific to writing—spelling, punctuation, and genre conventions—develop at their own pace, apart from speech.

Much of the research in the last twenty years has tried to account for the many factors that contribute to the complexity of writing development, and more complex models than Britton's would have to account for these factors: social background (Heath, especially 190–262); the mentoring of adults (Snow and Kurland; Greenfield); reading (Stotsky, "Research"; Tierney and Lays; Bereiter and Scardamalia, "Learning"); learning styles (Davis; Claxton and Smith; Reiff); gender (Gilligan; Belenky et al.; Coates;

Flynn); identity (Beach 57–59, 67–68); and motivation (McLeod, *Notes* 61; see also 47–64).

So we might conclude that there are good reasons for thinking that we learn to write using the broad principles of Britton's model, the model of an active learner who develops an individual internal representations of the many rules and conventions of written language, who tests hypotheses based on these representations by writing things down and seeing how more literate people respond to them, who modifies internal representations depending on the responses generated. Gradually over time, the writing of the active learner becomes indistinguishable from the writing of those using similar genres in similar social circumstances.

In addition, we might conclude that many aspects of writing proceed in stages, but these stages are not sequential, except in very broad terms. For example, we might say that writing development proceeds in these stages:

- Control over the physical aspects of writing: the ability to hold a pen or pencil and make marks or form letters on paper, or to use a key-board;
- A sense of the relationship between spoken and written language, the way the alphabet and other written conventions reflect speech;
- A sense of the text conventions for genres more closely related to speech: notes, stories, letters.
- A sense of the text conventions for genres more distant from speech, especially school genres—the descriptive paragraph, the personal essay, the research report;
- A sense of the text conventions for genres outside the classroom.

However, it is much more difficult to specify how novice writers develop particular aspects of writing ability. Much of their knowledge and ability to do certain things in writing seems to leap forward and then regress in ways unrelated to other aspects of writing. Thus, many aspects of writing do not seem to develop at the same rate. Young writers may be good in some things and not in others. They may be competent in the format of a certain genre but not as competent at spelling or punctuation. They may be competent in a few genres and not in others. They may be able to get words on paper in a relatively "correct" manner, but this aspect of writing may so preoccupy them that they don't have the ability to also monitor their writing in terms of their purposes and audience. The picture we have then of novice writers is of many kinds of knowledge and ability in various stages of development, each aspect of writing influenced by all of the factors I have mentioned. This is a messy picture with few neat lines.

The Acquisition of Writing

The Evidence That Writing Is Acquired

Thus, the question arises, among all of these kinds of knowledge and ability, can we distinguish between those aspects of writing that people acquire

and those aspects that must be explicitly taught? And the answer is, no. William Grabe and Robert Kaplan baldly assert that "writing abilities are not naturally acquired," but Grabe and Kaplan seem to use the word "naturally" to mean "biologically" as opposed to "culturally": they assert that writing abilities "must be culturally (rather than biologically) transmitted in every generation, whether in schools or other assisting environments." They go on:

The logical conclusion to draw from this [acquired/learned] distinction is that writing is a technology, a set of skills which must be practiced and learned through experience. Defining writing in this way helps to explain why writing of the more complex sorts causes great problems for students: the skills required do not come naturally, but rather are gained through conscious effort and much practice. It is also very likely, for this reason, that numbers of students may never develop the more sophisticated composing skills which transform information into new texts. . . . Saying that writing is a technology implies only that the way people learn to write is essentially different from the way they learn to speak, and there is no guarantee that any person will read or write without some assistance. (6)

Granted, we may think of writing as a kind of technology, that it is not acquired in the same way that speech is, that it is transmitted culturally and requires practice. Still, a great deal of evidence suggests that in certain circumstances, many young children seem to be able to develop much of their early writing ability—the ability to physically form letters on paper, the ability to recognize certain sound-letter correspondences, the ability to use certain genre conventions—spontaneously, without instruction, if they are immersed in a literate environment and their attempts to act like literate adults are encouraged. Obviously, the degree to which young writers can acquire certain writing abilities will depend on their own abilities and motivation and the degree to which they have been acquainted with some aspect of writing they either want or need to learn. On the other hand and just as obviously, most young children need explicit help in learning their letters or in deciding what to put in the letter to Grandpa.

There are, however, reasons for thinking that over time, novice writers need to acquire at least some sense of how any aspect of writing works before explicit instruction in that aspect of writing will be effective. That is to say, children need to have some sense of what letters of the alphabet are and how they function in some familiar genre before receiving lessons in how to print those letters. Otherwise, the instruction in writing the alphabet will make no sense. Likewise, older children need to know what stories are and the various conventions of the genre before they can be asked to write a story in response to a prompt. By the time they reach high school, students need to have a more sophisticated sense of what stories are in order for more advanced instruction to make any sense. For example, they need to know how sensory details function in a story and generally how few

details are needed in order to describe a person or scene in order for instruction in being more detailed to make any sense. To put it most paradoxically, in general a writer has to already know how to write before writing instruction can be of any help. Or in the language of current critical theory, novice writers are “always already” inscribed in various writing practices before they receive explicit instruction in writing, and explicit instruction will make sense only if it builds on what writers already know how to do.

However, the most powerful reason for thinking that learning to write, even for older students, is mostly acquired and not learned through explicit instruction is that the conventions of writing, as with speech, are entirely too complex for us to internalize self-consciously, through explicit instruction.

Consider for example how we learn words. By one estimate, by the age of seventeen, we have learned approximately five thousand words per year for sixteen years; that is thirteen words per day. We learn the overwhelming majority of these words in the ordinary give-and-take of conversation with no formal training and outside the walls of schools (Miller and Gildea 94). That is, we acquire our vocabulary; we do not learn it through explicit instruction.

But there is a more interesting aspect to how we learn words, which suggests why learning a language explicitly is inefficient and in many ways counterproductive. Put children in school, try to teach them vocabulary by having them look words up in a dictionary or by having them study the words in model sentences, and then use the words in their own writing, and the likely result is sentences like these:

- Me and my parents correlate, because without them I wouldn't be here. [Correlate: to be related one to the other]
- Mrs. Morrow stimulated the soup. [Stimulate: stir up]
- The blue chair was usurped from the room. [Usurped: taken]

Why do children misuse words such as these? One possible reason is that words are not discrete bits of knowledge; they are tokens with a range of potential meanings, depending on the contexts in which they are used. Given a dictionary definition, children will latch onto one aspect of the definition and simply substitute one term for another: they will use “correlate” as a substitute for “to be related to one another.” Given model sentences, they may do better, because with models, they must abstract the meaning of the word from the context. However, in the classroom, even with a great deal of attention to model sentences, if they are asked to use a new word in a sentence, once again they will simply substitute one apparently synonymous expression for another. What the children are missing from dictionary definitions and model sentences is any sense of the range of a

word's potential meanings and the contexts in which those meanings may be invoked. In order to really learn a word, children need to hear it used in a variety of contexts over time, so that they can internalize what aspects of the word's meaning is emphasized in each context.

To provide specific drill in this natural process of acquiring words would be extremely complex. It would involve providing instruction in how the word differs in both meaning and application from its synonyms. For example, it would involve explaining and giving examples of the difference between “usurp” and “take”:

When you usurp a title, job or position from someone else, you seize it or take it away even though you have no right to it. In the sentence “The king's brother failed in his effort to usurp the throne” *thron*e means not just the piece of furniture the kings sits on; it also stands as a symbol of the king's authority. (Miller and Gildea 99)

In other words, formal instruction would have to make explicit the subtle distinctions between words and their application in a wealth of contexts, which we recognize subconsciously in our natural acquisition of words. Such instruction would be extremely time-consuming and inefficient, which is why we acquire our vocabulary; we do not learn it in school.

But there may be a larger point to how we learn vocabulary: in order to learn how to apply different aspects of a word in different contexts: we *must hear the word in many contexts*. Explicit instruction is simply not rich enough to provide all of the contexts in which words occur and with which we need to be familiar if we are to truly learn how to use a word in all its different meanings and the subtle ways it differs from its synonyms.

All of this calls into question the rationale for explicitly teaching vocabulary development. If whatever words we choose to teach are an insignificant fraction of the total words our students will wind up knowing, then teaching vocabulary in and of itself is totally arbitrary and dependent on the teacher's whim. The only justification for explicit instruction in vocabulary development might be to insure that students know the essential concepts of the subject matter of a course.

Now consider the transition of the conventions of speech to the conventions of writing. We do not necessarily speak in complete sentences. In speech, fragments are common, as when we reply to a question such as “When are you leaving?” with the phrase “Next week.” But most written genres, except for transcribed dialogue and literary language that tries to capture the flavor of speech, require complete sentences. How do children learn which elements of their speech are sentences and are thus acceptable in writing? Consider that to describe all of the variations of a simple grammatically acceptable sentence, we would have to note that a sentence is

composed of a subject and a predicate, that the subject of a sentence is composed of five kinds of noun phrases (proper nouns, indefinite pronouns, determiners plus common nouns, plural common nouns without determiners, and personal pronouns), that predicates must have at least a verb phrase containing one of five kinds of verbs (intransitive verbs, which can stand alone or take a particle or a complement, such as "sat down," "drowned in the pool"; transitive verbs, which must be accompanied by a noun phrase; "become"-type verbs, which must be followed by a substantive; "seem"-type verbs, which must be followed by an adjective; "have"-type verbs, which must be followed by an noun phrase. In addition, predicates may contain auxiliaries, which include modals ("may," "can," "shall") and words that indicate "aspect," such as "have" and a past participle ("had gone") or a form of "be" and a present participle ("was going").

I could go on and on. I haven't begun to mention the various ways adverbials fit into simple sentences or the ways noun phrases function as direct objects of verbs and the objects of prepositions in adverbials. Nor have I mentioned many of the more subtle rules that govern the placement and choice of words in simple sentences: the distinction between count and noncount nouns, for example, or the order of more than one adverbial of different kinds or the function and meaning of tense in verbs.

However, here's the point: clearly the standard ways we have of teaching sentences don't begin to get at the complexity of the subject. Teachers may try to explain sentences by saying things such as "Sentences express a complete thought." Isn't "no" in response to a question a complete thought? Or teachers may say that sentences must have a subject and a predicate. Well, yes. But subjects and predicates come in so many different forms with so many sub-rules that it is very difficult for students to comprehend the terms or recognize them in various contexts.

I know of only one English curriculum that ever tried to introduce students to the full range of grammatical complexity of the English sentence, and that was the curriculum developed by Paul Roberts. Rather ironically, Roberts' curriculum took eight years to teach students the complexity of simple sentences, and thus, Roberts' students were speaking and writing the simple sentences he was trying to describe long before they were taught to recognize the grammatical descriptions of what they were already doing. The fact is that we learn to write simple sentences without formal instruction, or more accurately, we learn to write simple sentences in spite of formal instruction that doesn't begin to make us consciously aware of all the things we have to know in order to write simple sentences appropriately. Indeed, there is good reason to think that formal instruction in simple sentences can succeed only if students already tacitly know in some sense what simple sentences are.

The same could be said for our ability to write paragraphs, a form of language that occurs only in writing. Paragraphs come in so many different forms, with topic sentences in a single clause, "assembled," or implied, at the beginning, middle, and end of one paragraph or a group of paragraphs, that it is difficult to generalize at all about their "structure" or whether they have a structure at all (Braddock; Popken; Meade and Ellis).

Now, anecdotal evidence suggests that writing teachers usually teach paragraphing as a matter of stating a topic sentence and supporting it with details or as a matter of following a number of explicit patterns: comparison-and-contrast and cause-and-effect, to name just two. But clearly, the studies I have just summarized argue that formal instruction in paragraphing does not begin to confront the complexity of how paragraphs are actually written outside of classrooms. Indeed, most of the theorists who have confronted the problem of how we learn to write paragraphs have come to the conclusion that when we compose, we don't structure paragraphs in and of themselves. We tend to write top-down, as it were: we compose in whole discourse, in genres, and paragraphing is a way of breaking up our larger patterns of organization into readable "chunks" (Pitkin; Karfall). Paul Rodgers goes so far as to deny that paragraphs have any inherent structure at all, that paragraphing is simply a form of punctuation, a way of drawing attention to the sentences that occur just before and just after the indentation. According to these theorists, any explicit knowledge we have about paragraph structure, such as topic sentence/supporting details, is simply a way of checking our writing in certain situations. If we think we are rambling or not quite getting our point across, topic sentence/supporting details is one strategy among many for making our point more straightforward.

Whatever the particular theory of paragraphing, it seems clear that we must acquire the ability to paragraph, just as we acquire the ability to write in complete sentences. To do so, apparently we *must read paragraphs in many contexts* in order to internalize a complex notion of all the ways paragraphs can be written. Once again, explicit instruction is simply not rich enough to provide all of the contexts in which paragraphs are written in so many different ways.

I could make the same argument for genres, which scholars and critics are coming to realize are more like simple sentences in a natural language than they are rigid forms, such as the Petrarchan sonnet. Genres can be described and codified, but these descriptions are always reductive. It might be more useful to understand genres as part of the patterning of all language, the way human beings develop recurring strategies to use in recurring situations (Berkenkotter and Huckin; Devitt).

Take for example the news story, which is often considered a rigid form with a lead and an anticlimactic structure. However, Janet Giltrow has shown

that the opening paragraphs of the crime stories she studied ranged from eight to twenty-three sentences, and while the opening sentence always mentioned the crime and the criminal's sentence, the rest of the paragraphs had no set order, and the only information contained in all of the articles was a description of the events of the crime. Otherwise, the remaining information varied considerably and could be included or not, and be in any order (162). Once again, all the variations of a news report seem to be too rich and complex to be formally taught and learned. I think the same could be said of most genres, no matter how "closed" and conventionally formal they are. Like many other aspects of writing, such as syntax and paragraphing, genre conventions are too complex to be learned by explicit instruction. Robert Gundlach summarizes the evidence of the effects of explicit instruction this way:

Becoming literate seems to depend on instructional support and special conditions of language use associated with school. . . . However, while children's writing develops largely in such contexts, there is at best an indirect relation between what children are taught about writing and what they learn. Indeed, some children learn to write with little or no instruction, while others fail to develop as writers, no matter how much instruction is provided for them. ("On the Nature" 134)

A Model of Acquisition and the Role of Instruction

According to Gee,

The real issue [of writing instruction]—though too little debated directly in these terms, is when and how explicit information can be efficacious. . . . We still have to know what sorts of explicit information need to be given in what form and when in the learning process. And this requires theories of learning, of classroom practices, and of the nature and structure of the sorts of knowledge we want people to acquire. ("Vygotsky" 271)

Exactly. However, the conceptual difficulty here is that if novice writers develop their ability to use different aspects of writing at different rates and through different stages, depending on the novices' own capabilities and experience, and if novices primarily acquire these abilities in the first place, then we may need a different theory of learning and a different theory of instruction for each sort of knowledge we want novices to acquire. A single unified "theory" of instruction in writing may not be very helpful.

Figure 2.1 then is a very abstract model for the acquisition of writing. The central feature of this model is that it tries to capture the way novice writers must internalize representations of a wide range of experience and then practice using those representations over time, often with only partial success.

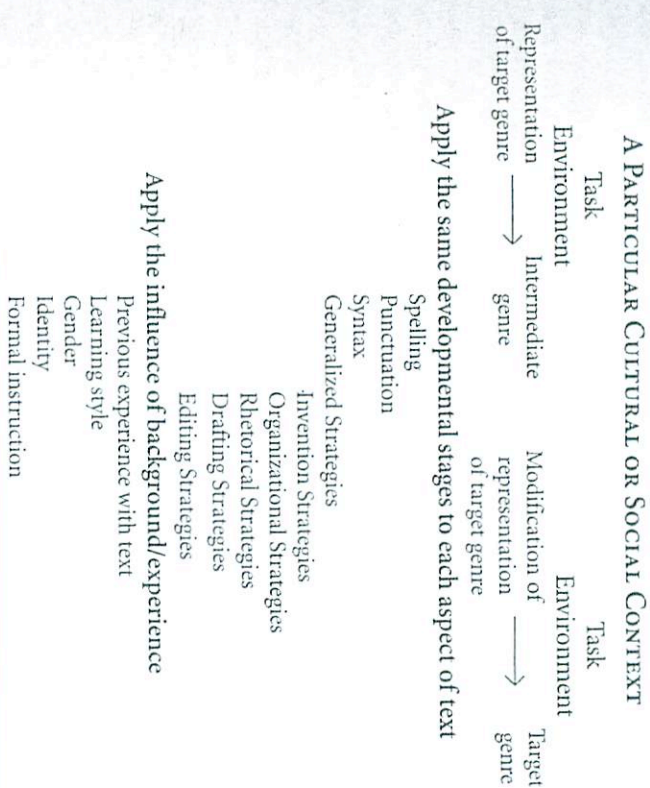


Fig. 2.1. A Tentative Model of Writing Acquisition

Gee is hopeful that future "theories of learning, of classroom practices, and of the nature and structure of the sorts of knowledge we want people to acquire"—or in my terms, refinements of various models of learning and acquisition—will help us to decide "what sorts of explicit information need to be given in what form and when in the learning process." Perhaps. But over the past decades, many scholars in many disciplines have devised any number of concepts of explicit instruction that might be helpful to novice writers. Unfortunately, the scholars promoting various forms of explicit instruction have failed to convince the profession of their worth. Some of these forms of explicit instruction are: *strategies* or techniques for accomplishing similar tasks; for example, the technique of brainstorming for getting ideas, or the technique of proofreading for one kind of error at a time; *procedural facilitation*, in which teachers describe a certain writing procedure such as revision in concrete terms, and then design a way to make that procedure routine for novices in order to reduce the "information-processing burden of [their] mental operations" (Bereiter and Scardamalia, *Psychology* 254–56); the *environmental mode* and *focus on inquiry*, in which teachers provide clear and specific objectives, select activities to engage students, usually in groups, in "specifiable processes important to some particular

aspect of writing"; and then organize discussions or other forms of peer interaction to explore the implications of what the activities have taught (Hillocks, *Research 122*); *distributed cognition*, in which groups work on related tasks and teach each other (Ann Brown et al.); *scaffolding*, in which teachers help novices accomplish tasks without simplifying the task itself, but by simplifying the learner's role in accomplishing the task "through the graduated intervention of the teacher" (Greenfield 119); and a pedagogy of *situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice*, in which teachers immerse students in various experiences that require writings, help them to focus on what is important about these experiences, provide a critical framework for interpreting their experiences, and re-immerse them in the experience "so that the students can demonstrate how they can design and carry out, in a reflective manner, new practices embedded in their own goals and values" (New London Group 35).

The most promising of these ways of conceptualizing explicit instruction might be scaffolding and the pedagogy of situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice, both of which I will deal with in some detail when I present my analysis of writing instruction at the college level in chapter 7. Here I would simply note that all of these notions have a certain amount of theoretical and empirical justification. And to a certain extent they share a common emphasis on engaging active learners in intellectually challenging tasks that allow the learners to practice skills and to reflect on and generalize from what they have learned from those tasks. I suspect that refinements of these ideas will be severely constrained by all of the factors I have mentioned. Future models of explicit instruction will have to consider the social background and personal experience of the novice; the gender, style of learning, and motivation and goals of the writer; and the degree to which the writer finds writing useful in meeting those goals. As a result, refinements to the model will continue to be more and more contextual studies, such as those by Elaine Chin and by Patrick Dias and his colleagues. These refinements will provide more information, for example, about how people with certain backgrounds and with certain learning styles learn to develop a certain aspect of writing in certain social situations. This new information will be helpful to those of us who are trying to promote similar kinds of writing for similar people in similar conditions. But this research will not significantly alter our current model of the active learner actively constructing meaning.

The evidence that we acquire the ability to write strongly suggests that novice writers need at some point to be, in a sense, *immersed* in various forms of discourse and the contexts in which they are used, so that novices can recognize and internalize a range of sentences, paragraphing, and genre conventions and other aspects of writing and how variations of the elements of writing effect meaning. To be an expert writer means being "fluent" in

writing certain genres in a certain social contexts. It means being able to call up all of the resources of writing, both broad strategies and those limited to particular genres in particular contexts, resources the writer has acquired from reading and writing in similar contexts. It means being able to apply those resources as needed. This can occur only if writers have sufficient experience in reading and writing in the social contexts in which they write.

Thus, there is something very limited about the common practice of teaching writing by introducing students to a small number of examples of a given genre; supplying them with a few rules of thumb (when writing narrative, for example, use specific detail); having them go through the writing process (getting ideas, planning, drafting, revising, and editing, even with appropriate feedback from teachers and peers); and then moving on to another genre, especially if these genres are school genres, the academic equivalent of the intermediate forms that young children produce spontaneously as they develop their internal representations of what it means to write a particular kind of discourse. This pedagogical practice in effect institutionalizes the teaching of genres that in young children we recognize as only approximations of real discourse.

The evidence that writing is acquired also suggests that beyond the sentence-level, writing is a process of *socialization*, of novice writers learning to use writing as a tool in order to accomplish particular tasks that they find meaningful and useful or in order to belong to social groups who can use writing as a means of participating in the group. In this sense, much of what passes for explicit instruction in schools may not be directly related to how students actually acquire the ability to write; rather, explicit instruction in schools may be *analogous* to the process of acquisition. That is, in learning the conventions of school genres students may learn to pay attention to the kinds of textual features they will need to learn in order to master the genres they will use outside the classroom. And in learning to write school genres in order to succeed in school or in order to please their parents and teachers, students may learn the power of writing as a means of learning and belonging, and this power may motivate them to unconsciously pay attention to how writing is done outside the classroom.

All this suggests that formal schooling and explicit instruction have a limited role to play in promoting writing, that the appropriate role for teachers and mentors may be to *stage manage*, as it were, novice writers' involvement with reading and writing, to provide occasions for them to be themselves, active learners, and to provide opportunities for them to think about and reflect on what they are learning, to make salient the conventions of writing and aspects of contexts they need to be aware of when they write. All the evidence seems to indicate that we acquire an ability to write through the complex interaction of a large number of factors, such as our own background and experience, our interests and motivation and goals for the fu-

ture, our familiarity with print, our preferred learning style, our gender, our sense of ourselves as writers. Formal explicit instruction will never be able to adequately compensate for these factors if they are missing. All formal explicit instruction can do is provide a context in which students of any age acquire literacy and a critical or analytic framework for thinking about the learning process. We can never teach writing from scratch. Our students "always already" have to know how to do much of what we want them to do or they would never understand our instruction.

If there are many different kinds of literacy and if we become literate through a long intellectual adventure in which our writing gradually approximates the language of the many different discourse communities we wish to join, then in order to improve our ability to promote writing at the college level, we may have to find ways to integrate instruction in writing into as many different settings and communities as possible and to make classroom practice more relevant to writing as it is done outside the academy. We may have to find ways to connect students to the writing they want to do and have to do for whatever goals they have for themselves. Placing students in those social contexts in which they need to write and want to write may be the best way to develop their sense of target genres, the kinds of writing actually done outside the classroom, and it may also be the best way to motivate them to work through their own intermediate genres and school genres so that their writing approximates more quickly writing as it is actually done in the social contexts in which they want to live.

3 *How We Compose*

VARIOUS SCHOLARS IN COMPOSITION studies have argued that the one great contribution of the field to our understanding of writing instruction has been the promotion of the "process approach" (see Crowley, *Composition* 187–214 for an overview). After all, the value of the process approach, which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, seems to have been confirmed by the major research on composing and cognitive processes done in the 1980s: as a pedagogy it provides concrete concepts such as invention and revision techniques for instructors to teach; it provides models to guide instructors in providing feedback and advice to their students (working through drafts, concentrating on only a few major concepts at a time, saving editing until the end); and above all, it is based on what we in the field *know* about how writing is done. The process approach "feels right": it seems to confirm our intuitive sense of how we actually write.

Of course, much of the discussion and application of the "process approach" seems to imply a fairly straightforward linear model of composing—invention, planning, drafting, revising, editing—and we can all cite exceptions to this model in our own experience and in the published accounts of professional writers. There are times when writers do not use invention techniques; they seem to respond "spontaneously" to the demands of a particular piece of writing. There are times when writers do not revise; the first draft seems to be entirely appropriate and need no further tinkering. There are writers who edit as they go and do no major editing when they are at the end of a series of drafts.

And of course, if we become reflective, we must admit that the model implied by the process approach has difficulty accounting for such two widely different composing processes as these: