

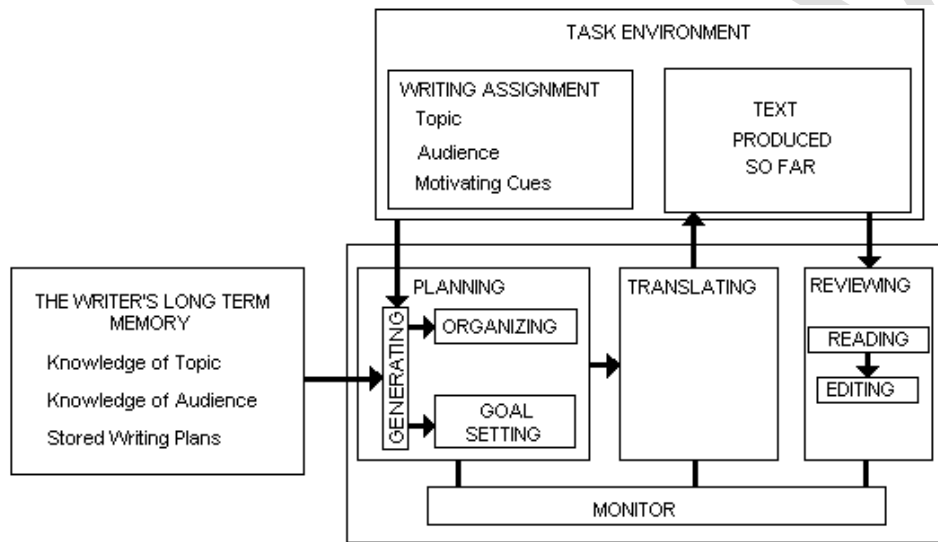
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Textual Revolutions

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The Great Divide: Reckoning Distances in Composition Feedback

In the 1980s, cognitive psychologists thought it would be a grand idea to try to map out the composition process, such as John Hayes and Linda Flower's model (11):



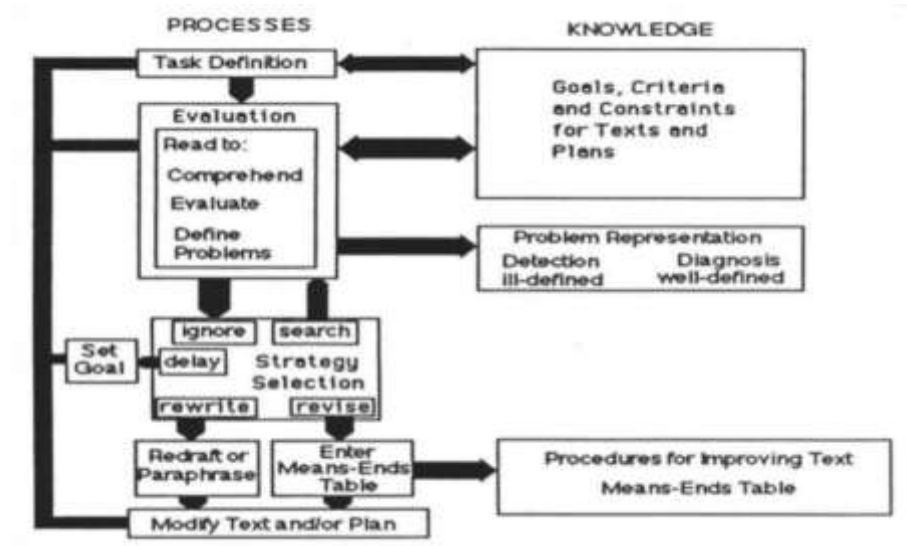
With neatly arranged boxes and arrows, cognitive psychologists tried to capture the complexity of what happens when a writer tries to put pen to paper. Though there are some problems with Hayes and Flower's model (and modest revisions *have* been made since), what I want to talk about today is actually much more focused on what instructors do within the composing processes of college writers (especially first and second year writers). Because we are instructors and we generally like to be involved in every little part of everything, we do tend to intervene in nearly every part of Hayes and Flower's model: we impart knowledge of topics and audiences, we assign the topic and design the cues, we ask for outlines and drafts that motivate students in

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the planning stages. Most importantly to me, though, we provide feedback that prompts students to revise, a process which has models of its own.

Studies conducted on revision have revealed the process is complicated by the problem-solving ability and skill level of the writer/reviser. Hayes et al. found four central themes: writers revise in different amounts, they revise in different scales (local versus global), writers struggle when they try to revise their own text, more so than when they review others' texts, and lastly, even issue is becomes apparent, the writer may not actually be able to address or resolve it because identifying problems is not the same as being able to *fix* problems (176). Hayes et al. conclude, "Success in revision [...] appears to lie not in the amount of revision but in how effectively the revision solves the text problem" (223). By extension, revision success lies in how effectively the reviser can identify and produce effective solutions to the problem, which is more challenging for novice or less experienced writers, such as the ones we see in first- and second-year courses.

However, there are two significant problems with this information about revision. First, very few studies of revision actually look at revision when an instructor or someone else is assisting with the process. Most models, as Hayes et al.'s shown below (185), conceive of the revision process as entirely writer-driven, with the writer engaging in all of these tasks on their own: evaluating the text, identifying the problems, and so on:



Revision models like this one fail to take into consideration how other people play a role in revision tasks. For instance, what would this model look like when an instructor, not the writer, engages in the evaluation and problem representation stages? To my knowledge, there is no model of revision that takes into account the writer's need to evaluate a reviewer's feedback of their text, where some parts of the process come from a reviewer and others come from the writer. This activity, when a reviewer helps with the revision process, compounds and complicates the revision process enormously, and yet the revision models and studies of revision overlook this issue.

The second problem is that the interventions of a reviewer create gaps in communication and comprehension. According to Thomas Kent's theory of paralogic rhetoric, there are "uncodifiable moves we make when we communicate with others, and ontologically, the term [paralogic rhetoric] describes the unpredictable, elusive, and tenuous decisions or strategies we employ when we actually put language to use" (3). He claims: "paralogy corresponds to guesswork. When we communicate, we make guesses about the meaning of others' utterances, and we, in turn, guess about the interpretations that others will give our utterances" (5). That guesswork means we are constantly attempting to navigate distances between ourselves and

those we communicate with. To do so, Kent pulls on Donald Davidson's concept of triangulation: "we must possess [...] 'three sorts of knowledge corresponding to the three apices of [a] triangle: knowledge of our own minds, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of the shared world'" (89). If we attend to where those apices intersect, then we theoretically have a place where we can engage in successful communication.

What about when we place students and instructors into the process, though? When instructors provide feedback, they attempt to do so by striking a careful balance in the degree of assistance provided. They avoid giving students a full solution to their textual problems and instead provide just enough guidance for students to develop their own textual solutions. This balance employs Lev Vygotsky's social development theory (specifically, the zone of proximal development), which says that "students, with the assistance of more expert collaborators, move from what they currently know to what they are able to understand with assistance" (Mackiewicz and Thompson 14). Richard Haswell, for instance, recommends the practice of minimal marking, where an instructor provides guidance in the form of indirect codes in the margins (generally a checkmark) notifying students of an error. He claims, "The best mark is that which allows students to correct the most on their own with the least help" (604). Similarly, David Nicol, in his study of feedback processes, argues that feedback "from external sources must ultimately trigger inner dialogue in students' minds around disciplinary concepts and ideas" (504).

Helping students to enter the zone of proximal development through feedback ideally prompts students to think and learn, but the process requires that students first understand instructors' feedback. Nicol observes that effectively triggering that "inner dialogue would involve students in actively decoding feedback information" (503), a process complicated by a

variety of paralogic factors, foremost of which are the students' and instructors' different worlds and skill levels.

As students and instructors get further apart in their skill levels, communication becomes increasingly complicated. Hayes discusses a study that found writers "use themselves as their primary model for the audience" (25), meaning writers compose in ways *they* understand, not always seeing when the text may be too complex or unsuitable for their actual audience. Hayes notes the pedagogical implications of this: "it is easy to understand why experts [i.e., instructors] have trouble writing clear instructions for novices" (25)—the expert understands the process and the message they are trying to convey but fails to see where others may not.

Skill level aside, we must also consider the instructor's disciplinary knowledge, aspects of which they are trying to impart to their students. In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss diverse types of audiences that require special treatment, such as students, who are seeking entry into new fields of knowledge. They note, "Entry into a specialized group requires initiation. While a speaker must normally adapt himself to his audience, this is not true of a teacher responsible for teaching students what is accepted by the particular group they wish to join" (99). Instructors *must* maintain a level of disciplinary rhetoric for students to learn, which increases the already great risk that students may not fully understand them. With these complications, it perhaps becomes a little clearer why students so often do not respond to feedback as we expect them to.

Peer review in the classroom, naturally, is a common intervention in the feedback and revision process that could potentially circumvent these types of issues. Studies of classroom peer review indicate revision success is generally on par with revision guided by instructor feedback (Nicol; Paulus; Ruegg). However, these findings are, I think, not indicative of the

success of peer review—it is simply unlikely that peers can provide remarkably effective feedback. Instead, I fear that these findings reveal more about the insurmountable distance created by instructor feedback. Could these findings instead imply that students so wildly misunderstand instructor commentary that even novice writers can motivate similar amounts of revision?

More importantly, when peers are the ones giving feedback, we create skill-level silos that inhibit learning. Students provide a certain level of knowledge and receive the same in return, leaving students with understandable feedback but without the skilled guidance necessary to enter the zone of proximal development. Patricia Bizzell comments, “If the curricular goal is to foster mastery of academic discourse, such a classroom organization will not be very productive unless many of the students have already achieved the desired goal and so can teach the others. But it appears that today’s students typically do not have enough prior knowledge of academic discourse conventions to help each other to mastery of them” (198). She argues that it is not pedagogically effective to receive feedback from peers who are equally inexperienced. Additionally, even when peers are more familiar with academic discourse, other students have commonly expressed suspicion of in-class peer evaluations because they fail to recognize their peers as an ‘authority.’

At this point, anyone who has worked with me or has asked about my research interests likely knows where my next intervention is heading: the writing center. While I assume my audience today is one which is well aware of the merits of writing center pedagogy, I will nonetheless provide a brief background of the reputation of writing centers. They began around the end of the 19th century as supplements to current-traditional approaches to composition. During that time, Harvard and other universities engaged in attacks on entrance examination

essays, damning many students for issues like poor handwriting and mechanics. Because faculty often had neither the time nor inclination to take on face-to-face instruction to improve those issues, they sent students whose writing they deemed below standards to writing laboratories, as Sharon Crowley discusses in *Composition in the University*. This relationship cemented writing centers as a place for remedial and mechanical writing help.

While this reputation persists to some extent today, Stephen North argues in his landmark article, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” writing centers no longer fit that role. To quote what has become the slogan of the field, writing centers are places “to produce better writers, not better writing” (438). In making this claim, North also emphasizes that writing centers serve writers—not instructors. While some instructors still mistakenly perceive of writing centers as bastions of editing and error correction resulting in drafts with nary a comma splice, North argues that it is not the instructor's place to find ways writing centers can serve *them* but to instead understand that the center's goal is to assist students in their composition development.

I argue that writing centers and writing consultants serve as the bridge between less experienced writers and their instructors, a bridge that can facilitate learning but which is often overlooked. Writing center scholarship regularly points out this intermediary position of writing consultants, which “is concerned with the betwixt-and-between state in which so much of [their] work must be done” (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Bouquet 9). Sometimes, that in-between state can be troublesome: consultants, graduate or undergraduate, are in what Gellar et al. describe as “difficult boundary positions between student and professional, between tutor and professor stances, between full-fledged members of a profession and peripheral participants in their respective communities of practice” (68). That in-betweenness, however, I argue works strongly in the favor of students in need of writing guidance because it positions consultants

(who are experienced writers) to more effectively help novice writers move into the zone of proximal development. Consultants themselves are peers, but they are not peers of a comparable skill level, which avoids the skill silo of in-class peer review. Consultants are instead experienced peers, and in that role, they can theoretically provide feedback that students can more readily understand, intervening in the composition and revision process in ways instructors sometimes cannot. In their study of collaboration, Colette Daiute and Bridget Dalton suggest, “perhaps [...] the slightly more able peer [like the writing consultant] serves as a *different type of guide* in the ‘zone of proximal development’” (266), a different guide to help students bridge that distance in their understanding of instructor feedback.

While I argue that consultants make for a tidy if underutilized intervention in composition instruction, nearly all of what I have discussed here is conjecture. For instance, in *The Practice of Response*, Richard Straub states, “The best way of developing [effective feedback] is [...] *intuiting*, over time, the ways good responders comment” (75, emphasis added). Outside of cognitive research from the 1980s and ‘90s, little empirical research has been done on what feedback works or how students actually understand or revise with feedback. Instead, information on feedback and student revision has primarily been produced through what Stephen North, in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, calls lore, “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs” (22). Lore is based on informal experience, on feelings and impressions about what ‘works’ and what does not. If what we know about revision comes from lore, I am left to question, then, where do we go from here? For me, this conjecture about feedback and revision has only led to more questions. Do students really have that much trouble understanding (and therefore acting on) instructor feedback? Can students more readily

understand (and therefore act on) writing consultant feedback? Does the lore on feedback used by instructors and writing consultants actually work?

These are questions I will continue to explore in the next phase of my research, albeit in a slightly nontraditional way: by using a mixed methods study design (a combination of qualitative and quantitative data). Ideally, by supplementing the lore we currently have on feedback and revision with data on student revision habits, instructors and consultants can better understand the actual revision moves students make, knowledge which can improve the ways we guide students in composition and revision.

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