

The Affective Domain and the Writing Process: Working Definitions

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Since the time of classical Greece, we have been accustomed to viewing humans as both thinking and feeling individuals. The dichotomy of cognition and affect is so ingrained in Western thought that it seems a natural one; the two elements have seldom, however, been deemed equally important in the scientific community. During the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, psychology gave primacy to affect; humans were thought to be at the mercy of various drives and passions. As behaviorism became more dominant in the field, affect was discounted; indeed, there were those who wished to exclude affect from scientific study altogether (Brown and Farber; Duffy). More recently, with the ascendancy of cognitive psychology, humans have been viewed as problem-solvers whose thinking processes operate rather like a computer. Often in such a view, affect is seen as “a regrettable flaw in an otherwise perfect cognitive machine” (Scherer 293). But most researchers who study human behavior and human nature agree that the views of both extremes—emphasizing only affect or only cognition—are undesirable. As Vygotsky said, the separation of affect from cognition

is a major weakness of traditional psychology since it makes the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of “thoughts thinking themselves,” segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses, of the thinker. Such segregated thought must be viewed either as a meaningless epiphenomenon incapable of changing anything in the life or conduct of a person or else as some kind of primeval force exerting an influence on personal life in an inexplicable, mysterious way. (8)

If we are to understand the whole person, not just discrete phenomena, cognition must be viewed in concert with affect, as Wilbert McKeachie told his colleagues in his 1976 presidential address to the American Psychological Association.

Toward a Common Vocabulary

Those who study the process of writing have been much influenced by cognitive psychology, in particular by information-processing models of how the mind works, and by the problem-solving approach to writing based on

those models. Of course, the studies of Linda Flower and John Hayes are perhaps the best-known and most universally applied in process-oriented classrooms. This problem-solving approach tells us a good deal about writing as a process and provides powerful insights into the cognitive difficulties student writers often have. But if we are to understand the whole process, we need to look at affective as well as cognitive phenomena. Why do some very competent writers develop writer's block in certain instances, as Donald Murray did when trying to write for Carol Berkenkotter's study of his planning strategies? Mike Rose's excellent study of the cognitive dimension of writer's block does not fully explain such a phenomenon. Why do some students, like those studied by Reed Larson, find their emotional involvement in a writing task enabling, while others of equal intelligence and ability find their emotional engagement crippling? Looking at affective factors in the writing process will help us to answer some of these questions. In order to examine these factors carefully, however, we need a shared vocabulary—one that will allow us to discuss affective issues among ourselves effectively.

The non-cognitive aspects of human activity have been difficult for the psychological community to define. These aspects are usually lumped under the rubric "affect," which is understood to be separate from (and sometimes opposed to) cognition. But aside from general agreement that there is a domain which we may label "affective," there is not much agreement on how to describe that domain. As the *Encyclopedia of Psychology* points out in its definition of "affective development," the word "affect" has been used by psychologists to include a wide range of concepts and phenomena, including feelings, emotions, moods, motivation, and certain drives and instincts. "Theorists and researchers have approached affect in numerous ways, often using idiosyncratic, contradictory or mutually exclusive conceptualizations and operational definitions that have resulted in confusing and limited progress in our understanding of affect or any . . . related or synonymous constructs" (Corsini 32). Indeed, at the 1981 Carnegie Symposium on Cognition, the subject of which was "Affect and Cognition," Herbert Simon called attention to the difficulty of discussing a concept which seemed to have a number of different meanings for those presenting papers at the meeting:

I have some impression, in moving from one paper to the next, that we are indeed the traditional blind men, now touching one part of the elephant, now another. Affect is a word of everyday language that is subject to the imprecision of all such words—perhaps to more imprecision than most. Its various meanings are connected—that's how they arose in the first place—but not synonymous. (334)

This essay will detail the meanings of various terms most commonly used by psychologists to describe affective phenomena, and, where appropriate, suggest areas for further research. I have followed, as much as possible, the ordinary use of these terms, intending not to give new stipulative definitions of familiar terms but to suggest more precise, focused meanings for these

terms. It should be understood that the concepts being defined are in fact hypothetical constructs; none of us has seen an emotion or an attitude, only responses that lead us to believe that such things exist. The definitions are intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. I offer them as possibilities for others interested in the affective domain to use and to improve upon as we further research into affect and the writing process.

Affect: The word “affect” embraces a variety of constructs and processes that do not fit neatly under the cognitive umbrella. Besides the varied use by psychologists noted above, educators have employed the term to describe attitudes, beliefs, tastes, appreciations, and preferences. The best-known use of the term in this even broader sense is outlined in the handbook by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia: *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Affective Domain*. I am guided by Simon to suggest that we use “affect” as a generic term to describe such phenomena as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, moods, and conation (335). With such a definition, affect is not a synonym for emotion; an emotion is an affective state, but not all affective states are emotions.

It is important to note that the affect/cognition opposition should not be equated with rationality/irrationality, as it often is in common usage. “Cognition” as it is used by most psychologists refers to the processing of information and invoking of knowledge, both conscious and unconscious, deliberate and automatic; it does not mean only rational, thought-like processes (Lazarus 252-53). An affective state, on the other hand, can be a very rational (in the sense of appropriate and reasonable) response to a situation. It should also be noted that the affective phenomena described below all have some cognitive component. As Piaget noted, “at no level, at no state, even in the adult, can we find a behavior or a state which is purely cognitive without affect nor a purely affective state without a cognitive element involved” (130). A useful overview of this entire domain may be found in Clark and Fiske’s *Affect and Cognition*.

Emotion: William James posed the scientific question, “What is an emotion?” in 1884, but there still is little agreement in the psychological community about the answer. Scientists have tried to identify and group various emotions, with contradictory results. Some researchers subscribe to a “palette” theory of fundamental emotions which can be blended, rather like primary colors, to make up secondary emotions; contempt, for example, is made up of two primary emotions: surprise and disgust (Tomkins; Izard; Plutchick). Others have discredited such a theory, pointing out that even those who believe in primary emotions cannot agree what those fundamental emotions are (Mandler 34-37), and that there is evidence of cultural variation among emotional systems (Harré 10). But whatever their particular stance on the number of and names for emotions, cognitive psychologists generally agree that emotions involve a bodily activation (arousal of the autonomic nervous system involving a visceral reaction—increased heartbeat, a knot in

the stomach, a heightened awareness of external stimuli) and a cognitive interpretation of that activation. Most also agree that emotions range from negative to positive. I suggest using “emotion” to refer to those “hot,” more intense affective states, either positive or negative, where the organism is aroused for a fairly short period of time. Using this definition, grief, joy, fear, and anger are all emotions. There is some research that speculates about the interaction of emotion and the writing process (Rose, *When A Writer Can't Write*; Brand, “The Why”; McLeod), but aside from a recent book (Brand) and a few case studies (Larson; Bloom; Selfe) there has been little more than speculation on the subject. Protocol analysis of emotional states as well as cognitive processes would seem in order if we wish to know more.

Using a narrow definition of emotion, less intense and more subtle affective states (such as depression, happiness, or sadness) would then be defined as **moods**. There are a number of studies that suggest a relationship between moods and information storage and retrieval—between mood and memory, as well as mood and learning (Bower; Bower and Cohen; Bastick). In other words, there is evidence that affect can direct and influence cognitive activities. There is, however, little research on the connection between writers' moods and how those moods might facilitate or inhibit writing.

Feelings: This term is often used in ordinary parlance as synonymous to “emotions,” and it has been used in that sense by some who write about affect (McLeod; Stein and Levine). Such usage creates difficulties, however, since some feelings are emotions but others are not: one can feel hungry as well as angry. It might be best, therefore, to use the noun “feelings” to refer to the bodily sensations that are part of the affective experience—the sweaty palms, constricted breath, dry mouth, and other symptoms of arousal of the autonomic nervous system, as well as the more diffuse sensations of moods (for example, the lassitude that accompanies certain moods). The verb “to feel” would then describe the bodily sensations associated with an emotion or a mood. Feelings, in other words, can be thought of as part of an emotional experience, but not synonymous with that experience.

Attitude: Social psychologist Gordon Allport, writing in 1935, defined this term as “a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (810). In other words, attitudes are psychological states acquired over a period of time as a result of our experiences; these attitudes influence us to act in certain ways and to respond to the world in a relatively consistent fashion. An attitude is not a response, but a readiness to respond in certain ways. Allport's definition is still the standard one, with some recent modifications. Those who write about attitudes often assume three components, based on a model proposed by Rosenberg and Hovland in 1960: affect, behavior, and cognition. An affective reaction is usually part of an attitude, a feeling which acts as an evaluative element (labeling the object of the attitude good or bad, positive

or negative). Behavior is the intentional element, indicating what we do as a result of our attitudes. Cognition refers to the beliefs we form as a result of our attitudes. (Verbal statements are considered, in this model, to be measurable variables in each of the three components.) We might view attitudes as similar to emotions, but less intense and more stable over time.

Most attitude theories emphasize individualistic, subjective phenomena; these theories neglect, however, the social aspect of acquiring and expressing attitudes. Richard Eiser points out that while attitudes may be private, the expression of attitude is a social act, and that attitude should be studied as a social product as well as a subjective experience. Eiser defines the term as “the meaning of a person’s expressive behavior,” arguing that the relationship between attitudes and behavior is not necessarily a causal one (as is often assumed), but a logical one, much like the relation between meaning and utterance (5). This view of attitudes’ being socially as well as privately constructed phenomena fits with the social constructionist view of knowledge. It also suggests that if our students’ negative attitudes toward writing are the result of social as well as individual factors, then we need to think about how to establish in the writing classroom collaborative activities aimed not only at cognitive, but also at attitudinal changes brought about by the group process. (Some researchers, most notably Rom Harré, argue for a social constructionist view of emotion as well as attitude, relying heavily on the identification of cultural differences in emotions.)

Anxiety: One of the most studied affective states, anxiety is usually characterized by tension (both physical and mental), worry, and feelings of uneasiness. A useful distinction can be made between two forms of this affective phenomenon: trait anxiety and state anxiety (Spielberger). Trait anxiety is for some persons a habitual response to the vicissitudes of life; such persons are mildly anxious under all circumstances. State anxiety, on the other hand, is a more intense reaction to a particular circumstance. There are many studies of writing anxiety (see Smith; Rose, *Writer’s Block*). Such studies, however, sometimes fail to take into account the fact that the phenomenon under study is usually state anxiety; students who are anxious about writing for a grade are sometimes quite comfortable with writing for self-expression (Bloom, “Composing Processes”) and therefore should be labeled as “anxious” or “high apprehensives” only in certain writing situations. Many such studies have also neglected the relationship between writing anxiety and other state anxiety situations. Test anxiety, for example, would seem to be related to writing anxiety in a way that further research might explore.

Beliefs and Belief Systems: Beliefs have been defined as judgments of the credibility of a conceptualization, “non-observable theoretical entities postulated to account for certain observable relations in human behavior” (Colby 253-54). Milton Rokeach, perhaps the best-known researcher on the subject, defines beliefs as “inferences made by an observer about underlying

states of expectancy” and a belief system as “having represented within it some organized psychological but not necessarily logical form, each and every one of a person’s countless beliefs about physical and social reality” (2). Rokeach has also examined **values**, which he considers to be central beliefs about how one ought or ought not behave, or about some state of existence which is worthwhile or not. Values are abstract representations of positive or negative ideals of conduct or goals (124). Other researchers suggest that the value we place upon a task is a function of three components: the attainment value of the task, its intrinsic interest, and its utility value for our future goals (Eccles et al.).

Although there are a number of general studies examining teacher beliefs about instruction (Nespor; Schoenfeld; Wehling and Charters), there has been little research on teacher and/or student beliefs about the nature and value of writing and the writing process. Such research would seem promising, with important implications for preparing writing teachers at all levels. Aside from a few writing anxiety studies based on attitude questionnaires, research having to do with student beliefs about themselves as writers is also sparse. These beliefs are no doubt related to such psychological constructs as self-concept and attributions of success and failure as well as to the specific subject of writing.

Motivation: While there is some question as to whether or not conative aspects of mental activity should be classified under affect or should be considered separately, it is clear that conation (or in common parlance, motivation) has an affective component. Motivation refers to the internal states that lead to “the instigation, persistence, energy, and direction of behavior”—in other words, to the setting of goals and the energizing of goal-directed behavior (Corsini 395). English and English declare that “impulse, desire, volition, purposive striving all emphasize the conative aspect” (104). Motivation can be physiological (thirst motivates me to find water) or psychological (anxiety about a deadline motivates me to finish my work). Psychologists often discuss two kinds of motivation: extrinsic (in a classroom setting, getting good grades, pleasing the teacher, working toward a career goal), or intrinsic (wanting to achieve success or avoid failure). Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have been researched widely by psychologists. There is evidence to suggest that while extrinsic motivation is important in learning situations, intrinsic motivation and self-direction are in fact more powerful (Deci; Nicholls).

More recently, psychologists have looked at motivation in the context of attribution theory, an area of research which examines what people perceive as the cause for certain outcomes (as, for example, success or failure at academic tasks). Carol Dweck has proposed that we think of motivational processes in terms of a framework: we all have certain motivational sets, which are made up of beliefs (views about the nature of competence, our own competence, and so on); inference rules (deciding the causes of outcomes, for

example); salient representations (for example, tendencies to focus on desirable or undesirable outcomes); and values and interests (personal hierarchies of what is important) (92-93). Dweck also proposes that when we look at achievement situations (like those involving competence, as many writing situations do), we can make a useful distinction between learning goals and performance goals. Learning goals aim at increasing one's competence—at mastering a new skill, figuring something out, understanding something. Performance goals, on the other hand, aim at validating one's competence—getting favorable judgments of one's competence, or avoiding unfavorable judgments (97). Writing researchers examining the question of what motivates students to write would do well to examine Dweck's theory. This theory would also be useful to those studying how to sequence challenging writing tasks and how to respond to student writing so as to encourage rather than discourage the writer. In addition, Dweck's research on the phenomenon of learned helplessness (Diener and Dweck) shows how children who felt they had no control over their success or failure at tasks given to them (that is, "helpless" children) simply abandoned problem-solving strategies in the face of failure, while their mastery-oriented counterparts (who were in fact no more proficient but who attributed failure to lack of effort rather than lack of ability) persisted and in some cases increased the sophistication of their strategies. This line of research could be extended profitably to composition by looking at student attributions of success or failure at writing tasks in naturalistic settings.

Dimensions of the Affective Domain

After defining, or at least describing, various components of the affective domain, the next logical step would seem to be arranging these components in some order to provide us with a map of sorts for the exploration of this new territory of affect. The *Taxonomy of the Affective Domain* is now limited in its usefulness for researchers and teachers, since it was written at a time (1964) when psychologists saw learners as passive recipients of knowledge and viewed learning in terms of teaching outcomes. Now that the learning process is viewed by the psychological and educational community as the active construction of meaning, is it not possible to assemble a new taxonomy of affect to guide us as we explore this new territory and think about its relationship to writing and learning?

Let's look for a moment at the *Taxonomy*, developed by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia after the success of the earlier (1956) handbook on the cognitive domain. The authors were not pleased with the second handbook; as they admit in the preface, they found the affective domain much more difficult to structure than the cognitive. Not only did they have difficulty with the terminology, but they also could not find a good ordering principle for affect. The difficulty was that they assumed that affect, like cognition, could be arranged hierarchically. But while it is clear that certain cognitive tasks

(like “knowledge of specific facts”) are necessary to master before others (“the ability to apply principles”), it is not at all clear that one must develop certain attitudes before one can develop beliefs. The organizing principle finally chosen, one of “internalizing,” was not a powerful one, and the resulting affective objectives (first “receiving or attending,” then “responding,” “valuing,” “organization of values,” and finally “characterizing by a value or value complex”) were not as clear or as useful as those in the earlier handbook on the cognitive domain.

If there is no hierarchy to the affective domain, it is clear that a hierarchical ordering principle is inappropriate. How, then, can we classify the various components of the affective domain in a useful way? Some have suggested a “facet approach,” drawing on domain-specific psychological theories, such as the research having to do with how mathematics is learned (Tittle et al.). Others have suggested a “component process model” which describes the process of affect as a sequence of “complex, multi-system micro-states” which are interrelated and interact with one another over time (Scherer 299). Both these approaches to a new taxonomy capture the dynamic nature of affect, but both seem overly complex for the study of the writing process. As Scherer says, it is possible to construct a number of different classification systems for affect. Rather than trying to find the ultimate classification, it would seem more useful to construct a system that is best suited for a particular purpose (305).

What I’d like to suggest is that we follow these theorists in thinking of the affective domain not as products or outcomes, as in the earlier taxonomy, but as dynamic states of being. We can, if we take this approach, view affective phenomena across two dimensions: intensity and stability. Given this view, emotions are intense but unstable (in the sense that they do not last long); attitudes are less intense than emotions but more stable; and beliefs are less intense and more stable than attitudes (attitudes can be changed, but beliefs are difficult to change). Motivational phenomena would, under this classification system, be considered separately—not as affective states, but as combinatory phenomena that link affect and cognition. Such a classification system would seem particularly useful for research on writing, since it helps to identify particular features of the affective domain in terms of process, an approach which is compatible with the present process-orientation to both research and teaching in composition.

To classify affective phenomena in this way does not provide us with the tidy hierarchical structure that Krathwohl and his colleagues were aiming for. But if this new classification scheme does not provide us with a map, it will at least give us descriptors for the basic features of the landscape, so that we all know the difference between what we call a hill and what we term a mountain as we explore the territory of the affective domain.¹

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Notes

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Southeastern Writing Centers Association

The 11th annual conference of the Southeastern Writing Centers Association will be held in Birmingham on April 11-13, 1991. The conference will be a celebration of the first decade of the SWCA, and the keynote speaker will be Elaine Maimon, Dean of Experimental Programs at Queens College, CUNY. The conference theme is "Writing Beyond the Curriculum: Approaching the 21st Century." The 1991 SWCA conference, co-hosted by Samford University and the University of Montevallo, will be held at the Embassy Suites in Birmingham. For additional conference information, contact one of the 1991 SWCA Conference Co-Directors: Loretta Cobb, Harbart Writing Center, University of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL 35115; or David Roberts, University Writing Programs, Samford University, Birmingham, AL 35229.