The great merit of the essays assembled by Thomas Kent in *Post-Process Theory* is that they offer various narratives of the history of the process movement, invite us to reconsider the adequacy of process theory, challenge us to align our pedagogies with our theories (perhaps to the point of abandoning pedagogy entirely), and question the extent to which writing research should rely on empirical methods. Out of a collection of thirteen essays, I found three to be particularly compelling: George Pullman’s rhetorical examination of the history of the process movement, including an insightful discussion of the relativity and fluidity of current traditional rhetoric; Joseph Petraglia’s rethinking of the role of empirical research, with a proposal for a writing studies disciplinary focus that does not have pedagogy as its raison d’être; and David Russell’s sensible remarks about the necessary reductiveness of composition textbooks and suggestions for improving the situation.

However, for a book articulating a set of theoretical approaches to writing that purportedly breaks with the “still-dominant process tradition in composition studies,” *Post-Process Theory* contains much that is (or should be) comfortably familiar to contemporary scholars in composition studies—for example, calls for radical critical pedagogies that confront the role of power in discourse, critiques of science and objectivity, and criticisms of overly reductive and ideologically conservative textbooks. This familiar content immediately raises the question of audience. Who is the intended reader of this volume? Who needs to be informed, persuaded, or simply reminded of these issues? Kent claims that “change is in the air,” but from my perspective that change started at least a decade ago. This sense of familiarity extends to the three main tenets—if I may use that term—of post-process theory that Kent outlines as follows: writing is public in that writing always already is a social process, an involvement with other language users; writing is an interpretive act, one that involves sense-making and a relation of understanding to others—a paralogic hermeneutic act that is not governed by any codifiable, universal rules; and writing is always already situated in that writers always begin from and operate within specific contexts (although they are never imprisoned within these contexts) that are dynamic and open to interpretation. As Kent puts it, “post-process theorists hold that the writing act is
public, thoroughly hermeneutic, and always situated and therefore cannot be reduced to a generalizable process.”

Much is made of this conclusion about the irreducibility of writing to generalizable processes and for good reason: the three tenets leading to that conclusion do not necessarily distinguish post-process theorists from process theorists. For example, Linda Flower and John Hayes’ classic conception of the rhetorical situation confronting writers (or Flower’s contrast between “reader-based” and “writer-based” prose) allows for considerations of audience as a central element of writing—even if we admit that the theorization of audience in early process theory lacks, often painfully, the sophistication we expect from contemporary research; such models also allow (if inadequately) for the situatedness of the writer in a specific context. And the constructionist nature of process theories emphasizes the sense-making role of writing.

The conclusion drawn from the three tenets, then, must carry the bulk of the weight in distancing post-process theory from process theory, which is repeatedly positioned as an empirical/scientific attempt to completely describe—and therefore control through therapeutic pedagogy—the (singular) writing process. For example, in his provocative contribution, Gary Olson writes that the process orientation is limited by its clinging to the illusion that the “writing process can be described in some way” or “that we can somehow make statements about the process that would apply to all or most writing situations.” Discussing research in professional communication, Nancy Blyler contends that “this concern with describing composing-process behavior has been [fueled by] not only the desire to understand workplace writing but also the desire to amass a body of information that can be used to guarantee effective pedagogy.” And tracing the influence of the social sciences on the process movement, Petraglia argues that “social scientism permitted specialists to make the very important claim that an individual’s writing process not only could be understood but also could be fixed,” a notion that has become increasingly untenable because of vigorous critiques of the alleged systematicity of writing.

I’d like to respond briefly to these characterizations of process theory. I don’t think that any contemporary researcher would dispute that writing does not occur only among isolated individuals crafting essays, or that individuals will differ in the ways in which they attempt to write in response to a particular prompt, or that the writing practices of organizations may be markedly different, or that cultural groups will use various genres not used by other cultural groups, and so forth. Nor do I think that
any of these positions—focused as they are on local contexts—is necessarily inimical to process theory, for we must recall the extremely high level of generality of the composing process models offered, for example, by Flower and Hayes. At such a high level of generality, it is conceivable to fold in all local, situated writing processes into a singular generalized writing process, but at the price of making this model almost completely vacuous, perilously ad hoc, and precariously nonexplanatory (as Patricia Bizzell argues in her well-known essay, “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing”). Almost, but not entirely—on all counts. The fact that we use the term writing to label all of these various practices is already an indication that such higher-level generalizations are operating and are perhaps warranted. The unwillingness to make that concession—“almost, but not entirely”—is, it seems to me, what most separates post-process theorists from process theorists.

Olson’s concerns—manifested as well in other contributors’ concerns about the possibility of theorizing writing—are related to this point about levels of generalization. I’m puzzled by Olson’s claim that it is illusory to believe that the writing process can be described, if he means that writing cannot be described at all—“in some way,” as he says. Why not? Certainly, no thorough description-to-end-all-descriptions exists. But surely we can partially describe writing processes and work harder to make those descriptions “thick.” Again, I see no reason why we cannot make generalizations that are applicable for most or even all writing situations—with the caveat that increasingly inclusive generalizations are most likely to be less informative, in a continuum that leads to the sterility of tautology (for example, “All writing situations involve writing”). This is a crucial point: no one ever learned to write by first learning Flower and Hayes’ model of the writing process, nor was that model ever designed to be such a complete pedagogical tool that it would “guarantee,” in Blyler’s words, “effective pedagogy.” The hope, of course, was that by learning more about how people actually write, increasingly accurate theoretical models of the composing process could be devised and more effective pedagogical strategies could be developed. I suggest that if you blunt the extreme rigidity of the charges leveled against process theory (as well as some of the more extreme claims made by early advocates of it), and say instead, for example, that process theory attempts to describe and understand writing as much as possible, and to apply these insights toward the development of more effective pedagogies, then these charges lose most of their excitement. (Of course, lots of stimulating questions remain about how one should go about describing and under-
standing writing as well as what the goals of effective pedagogies should be; the contributors to _Post-Process Theory_ also speak to these issues.)

Some contributors also seem overly worried about whether writing is a “predictable” process. For example, in his introduction, Kent draws on his fascinating and important work on paralogic hermeneutics—itself inspired in part by the philosophy of Donald Davidson—and contends that a person’s creation of utterances and participation in discourse “can never be reduced to a predictable process” but instead involves a kind of guessing. But how is prediction defined here? Kent appears to suggest that a predictable process would be one that is fully determinate and knowable, with every prediction a success. But this all-or-nothing position seems far too strong for anyone to maintain, even an early process theorist. After all, aren’t “guesses” predictions? And, in fact, aren’t some of these predictions accurate (enough)? Imagine the futility of writing if every single one of our guesses or predictions failed!

Clearly, the most productive attempts to differentiate process theory from post-process theory acknowledge not only the professional significance of the process movement—for example, in terms of its role in limiting composition class enrollments, developing graduate programs, and inspiring intellectually and professionally rewarding research projects—but also its productivity in advancing our understanding of written discourse. John Clifford acknowledges the exhaustion of the early, too exclusively cognitivist process movement—an exhaustion, it should be added, recognized even by many process theorists, such as Flower, who shifted toward socio-cognitive approaches to writing. In a coauthored essay with Elizabeth Ervin, Clifford concedes that “the process movement seemed necessary but finally insufficient in the progressive attempt to make reading and writing comparable ways of knowing, of discovering meaning, of being in the world.” In addition, Petraglia quite insightfully suggests that post-process theory is not a rejection but a surpassing of process theory: “we now have the theoretical and empirical sophistication to consider the mantra ‘writing is a process’ as the right answer to a really boring question. We have better questions now, and the notion of process no longer counts as much of an insight.”

Of course, the process movement’s many “commodifications” (a term Russell uses to describe the necessary reductions through which advanced research is disseminated to teachers and students by textbooks) have produced their share of monsters. Russell describes a classroom in which students “prewrite Monday, write Tuesday, revise Wednesday, edit Thursday, and . . . grade Friday to meet a district-imposed require-
ment for progress reporting”; Barbara Couture mentions a similar situation. But such monstrous practices are hardly something peculiar to process theory and certainly not something advocated by it.

While I recommend Post-Process Theory to my colleagues, I want to conclude by mentioning three areas of concern that troubled me as I read through the collection. First, I wish that some of the essays demonstrated a greater awareness either of our disciplinary past by citing key texts that have dealt with particular topics or of relevant work undertaken in other disciplines. An instance of the former is Nancy DeJoy’s critique of contemporary composition handbooks and rhetorics for, among other things, their insensitivity to politics, a critique that could have been made richer by mentioning, say, the detailed critique offered long ago and much more effectively by Richard Ohmann in English in America and repeated many times since. An instance of the latter is Sidney Dobrin’s call to “examine ways in which singular moments of communicative interaction account for moments of power and, in turn, establish prior theories that support triangulation/manipulation for the benefit of individual communicators.” If you remove Davidson’s and Kent’s terminology about prior theories and triangulation, you will find that the field of conversation analysis has been examining, for at least two decades, some of these “singular moments” of communicative interaction with an eye to the production and maintenance of social structure.

Second, I found the lack of engagement between essays in the collection to be rather disappointing. Such interaction would have sharpened both the agreements and disagreements among the contributors. It would have been useful to see, for example, Petraglia and Russell complicating their use of the term current traditional rhetoric in light of Pullman’s analysis of that term; Couture, who deconstructs the notion of writing as a tool, critically engaging both Debra Joumet’s notion of a “generic ‘toolkit’” and Russell’s claim that the “discipline’s motive is to provide tools (commodified knowledge) to other activity systems”; and Kent confronting Helen Ewald’s and Dobrin’s criticisms of the (apparent) apoliticism of Davidson’s—and, by extension, Kent’s own—theory of discourse.

Finally, in light of the current emphasis on inclusion and dialogue, I would have liked to see more interaction with opposing viewpoints. Why not include responses to the collection from, for example, Linda Flower or Peter Elbow, or even from some of the authors of those infamous textbooks? Excluding these (possibly opposing) voices simply makes the book feel at times like a polemic, and it certainly prevents us from
determining whether there are, in fact, any process theorists left or whether process theory has been adequately characterized by the contributors to *Post-Process Theory*. Perhaps such a dialogue would have led to the conclusion that our profession, at least as it is manifested in recent scholarship in composition studies, is already (or is, at the very least, "almost, but not entirely") "post-process."


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Academic conferences are strange events in which intellectuals debate esoteric ideas in cramped quarters and packed elevators. The result is sometimes a marvelous combination of minds that otherwise might not meet. At times, these events foreground further debate in specific fields of inquiry. At other times, they suggest that the work we do in our various disciplines is sadly divorced from the labor of a growing number of intellectuals who, out of necessity or choice, do not hold positions in university settings. Often issues raised at conferences are further removed from the economic and social interests of the culture at large, a culture divided over what constitutes a college education, how it should be administered, and who should fund it.

In many ways, the academic conference is a microcosm of what many in education find endemic to the field: isolation (from our peers, from scholars in other departments, from the administration, and even from our students). Here I mean to suggest that in conference settings we may experience alienation from the work of our colleagues, just as in the classroom we may often find ourselves isolated from the very students we teach. These students, despite their increasingly diverse backgrounds, too often lack the historical framework through which to conceptualize many intellectual discussions. Chief among these is feminism, a potential theoretical and political rallying force with which to combat isolation. Without an informed conceptual and historical background, students may view feminism as a dirty word. Especially suspect is the instructor who explicitly identifies her or himself as a feminist.

As an instructor of rhetoric and composition, and one of those feminists experiencing the growing gap between the historicity of my own