Why Distrust the Very Goals with Which You Began?

Gary A. Olson

All of us to some degree worry about change, especially if that change seems to affect practices that we have engaged in for a long time and thus are very comfortable with. That’s understandable, but it often is counter-productive in that such fear can prevent us from moving forward, from developing more productive ways of conceptualizing a practice. I do that to myself every time I balk at learning the next new development in computer technology, but I try to keep reminding myself that change, learning new ways to look at something, often provides huge dividends. That’s why it saddens me to hear all the resistance to and mischaracterization (unintentional, I am sure) of post-process theory. In fact, this was an issue in several of the presentations I attended at a recent conference, and it is an issue in practically every critique of post-process
that I've read recently. So I would like to take this opportunity to respond briefly to some of these misgivings as a way to set the record straight and to encourage people who may not have read much in the area not to dismiss post-process work simply because they have heard critiques of it.

A recent article in JAC, Lee-Ann Breuch's "Post-Process 'Pedagogy': A Philosophical Exercise," provides a more accurate sense of post-process than do most recent critiques—or, more accurately, it gets less wrong than other critiques do. Breuch correctly points out that post-process is simply a name for an anti-foundational take on composition theory and pedagogy. As such, she argues, post-process has much to offer contemporary theory and pedagogy, but, she contends, post-process proponents, myself included, have unfortunately become mired in an unnecessary critique of process and that this critique obscures the real insights that anti-foundationalist theory might have for composition. Thus, she is generally sympathetic to the aspirations of post-process proponents, but she wants to recuperate their critique, thereby preserving its philosophical insights, especially those available to or relevant for an improved understanding of pedagogy. In her article, she correctly outlines what she sees as the post-process position—that writing is public, interpretive, and situated—and she claims that these insights have much to offer pedagogy. Breuch does in fact get much of it right, but her elaborate effort to explain that post-process is really not a critique of process is misguided. It is in fact precisely a critique of process, as I will discuss in a moment. It is an argument that for several decades the business-as-usual work of composition has been to describe the writing act, to pin it down so that that description can then do some other work; but this, say post-process scholars, is an impossible feat.

Fears of or misunderstandings about post-process are common. At a recent conference (it really doesn't matter which one, since you'll find the same at practically every conference), one commentator said that unlike "process," the term "post-process is vague and doesn't refer to any readily identifiable configuration of commonly agreed-on assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that would constitute a paradigm." That's exactly right. Post-process does not refer to any readily identifiable configuration of commonly agreed-on assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that would constitute a paradigm. The point is that neither does "process"—it only seems to refer to something specific and identifiable to those caught in process's thrall. That is, when you mention "prewriting," say, you mean something very specific, but your notion of
prewriting—what it is, how it works, how to teach students to engage in it—will be different from someone else's notion (even though both of you may well agree on your own self-descriptions of the concept), and specific acts of prewriting will always vary from context to context. Nevertheless, we ignore this fact and treat aspects of writing as if they have a solidity and stability that they just do not have. Even when process theorists concede that there is not one process but multiple ones (a common gesture in response to post-process criticisms), they will in the next breath invariably talk about writing as if it had identifiable substance that is universally or generally recognizable and perspicuous. Despite attempts to deny that they are doing so, process theorists always return to a language that assumes that writing and the activities that comprise it can somehow be filled with a content, can somehow be specified and made stable; but this is an impossible goal, for it assumes that writing can be untethered from specific contexts, that somehow we can describe writing detached from specific acts of writing, specific attempts to communicate particular messages to particular audiences for particular reasons.

By calling an approach to writing pedagogy a “process” approach, we set it off over and against the current-traditional approach by signaling that in a general sense we are now going to pay attention to certain aspects of writing that we hadn’t previously. So in that sense, the term does some work. It signals, for example, that rather than lecturing to students about writing, we are going to encourage them to engage in the kinds of activities that writers typically engage in. But the fact that we now have a shorthand way of referring to the fact that we have abandoned lecturing and now promote activities should not confuse us into believing (1) that we now have a specific, readily identifiable, commonly agreed-on way to refer to the process of writing, or (2) that any one person’s description will, in the end, exactly match any other person’s. So to say that “post-process” doesn’t have a specific referent is to pay it a compliment. It’s to say that the message has gotten through that no such specificity is possible—and never was.

Also stated during the conference was the belief that “post-process theory, strictly applied, would make a composition class an oxymoron.” This conclusion is based on the fact that post-process theorists claim that writing (indeed, all communication) is radically contingent—that writing always arises from the specific, contingent contexts that give it birth. The fear is that if this is so, then we as compositionists have nothing to offer, no work to do. But that fear is simply unjustified. As far back as a
quarter of a century ago—in the early days of process and well before post-process—on the first day of the semester, I would open each writing class by saying, “I cannot teach you how to write, but I can help you learn how to write.” This is exactly what post-process says. It says that writing is a supremely rhetorical activity. It arises from the exact purpose of the writer in the exact context of the writing. No one taught you how to write; you learned how to write. And you did so precisely by writing, by learning how to negotiate different writing contexts and by addressing different audiences. And as you wrote and wrote and wrote, and as you practiced and practiced, you got better and better. And you and I are still practicing—and, we hope, getting better. It may well be that at some point in the past a skilled writing teacher taught you some tricks or habits that increased your facility as a writer, but this should not be confused with your having been taught to write by that teacher. Being taught some tricks of the trade is not coextensive with or identical to being taught to write. Learning some tricks of the trade (how to prewrite?) may facilitate the learning process, but it is not equivalent to being taught how to write.

Perhaps it’s the prefix post that upsets so many people. But there is no magic in the word “post-process.” The post-process argument is exactly the same argument that Stanley Fish made years ago in his article on anti-foundationalism and the teaching of writing. What he demonstrated, you’ll recall, is that despite the greatest hopes of many in composition, an appeal to theory—an attempt to construct a theory of writing, whether process or some other—is misguided, because theory simply does not guide or govern our practice. Practices arise instead out of the very specific, local conditions that generate them. Theory, he says, simply has no consequence. This is not to say, however (and as one conference commentator worried) that we can’t theorize about writing. It is important not to conflate two very different activities. It is important to distinguish between theory building, the attempt to arrive at generalizable explanations of how something works (that is, some kind of truth about writing) and the activity of theorizing, the act of engaging in critical, philosophical, hermeneutic speculation about a subject. Theory, the noun, is misguided from an anti-foundational or post-process perspective because it entices us into believing that we somehow have captured a truth, grasped the essence of something—in this case, writing. Theorizing, the verb, can be productive (so long as a Theory is not the objective) because it is a way to explore, challenge, question, reassess, speculate.
Those who seem to worry about the post-process movement fear that somehow post-process means that all of the techniques and strategies that we devised in the process days are obsolete or no longer useful—and, indeed, even some defenders of post-process have suggested as much. This is simply not the case. All of the strategies and techniques that you and I have been using all these years are still available. Post-process theory doesn’t dictate that you change any practice in your composition pedagogy. What does change is your understanding of what it is you’ve already been doing all along. It says that we should stop fooling ourselves into believing that there is “a process” of writing in the first place, one that can be pinned down and codified and then articulated in such a way that everyone can agree to the description. But to admit that there is no such thing as a writing process—one that can be pinned down and codified and then articulated in such a way that everyone can agree to the description—is not to say that we can’t help students engage in the kinds of activities that writers engage in. Of course we’ll show them ways to prewrite and organize and revise and copyedit and proofread and collaborate. Of course we’ll engage in group work and collaborative activities of various kinds. Nothing pedagogically has changed. What changes is your own understanding of what you are doing in the classroom.

Ironically, what changes when you are operating from the assumptions of post-process theory is that you are likely to conform even closer to the original goals and aspirations of the process approach because you will have come to terms with the thoroughly rhetorical—that is radically contextual—nature of writing and the teaching of writing. So with that in mind, perhaps we can say that in post-process theory, we have finally reached the level of rhetoricity that process theory had in mind from the beginning. Another way of saying this is that the insights of antifoundationalism bring into sharper relief the very rhetoricity that process theory promised but failed to produce.

As Breuch says, post-process theory is, at its very core, concerned with pedagogical practice: “In asserting this claim, I disagree with those scholars who suggest post-process theory should remain a theoretical enterprise, and I suggest that post-process theory is most decidedly connected to a how-centered approach to teaching” (145). Unfortunately, too few commentators understand this crucial point. If they had, they would have found themselves closer to achieving the very goals they have always been attempting to accomplish: helping students learn that writing is always already a public, interpretive, and situated activity.
Principled Pedagogy: A Reply to Lee-Ann M. Kastman Breuch

Thomas Kent

As Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch indicates in one of her footnotes, she kindly allowed me to read and to comment on her manuscript before it appeared in these pages ("Post-Process 'Pedagogy': A Philosophical Exercise," JAC 22 [2002]: 119–50). I admired her work then, and I like it even more now after having read the article in its final form. In this piece, Breuch grapples with large issues, and here I want to comment primarily on a few more or less mundane issues located at the circumference of her argument, and on one important issue located at the center of it.

As I understand her central position, Breuch argues that post-process theory is "at its very core, concerned with pedagogical practice," and most of her discussion constitutes a warrant for this assertion (145). I want to pick a bit at this claim, for I don't believe that post-process theory or any theory for that matter can help us very much with our pedagogical practices. Breuch does not define explicitly what she means by "pedagogy," but she seems to suggest that it concerns primarily "what we do with content" in our courses (145). This reasonable observation means, at least to me, that we possess a wide range of pedagogical alternatives that help us relate to students the content of our courses, and some of these alternatives, depending on our students' learning situations, will prove more efficacious than others. These pedagogical alternatives almost