REVIEW:

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION: PROCESSING, DISTANCING, AND MODELING

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Nearly 20 years ago, Virginia Burke threw down the glove with the challenge to construct a suitable theory of composition ["The Composition-Rhetoric Pyramid," CCC, 16 (February, 1965), 3-7]. Without the organizing principles that theories provide, she found the teaching of writing plagued by a chaos of arbitrary assignments, idiosyncratic evaluation practices, cavalier teacher preparation, uninformed and uninspired courses, and professional neglect. With a theory of composition, Burke predicted that composition teaching would become more informed and energetic, with improvements in course design, sequences of courses and assignments in those courses, textbooks, teacher preparation, and research. In essence, she was calling for a reconciliation between theory and practice in the teaching of writing.

Not until 1982 did the profession, through Maxine Hairston, announce that a new paradigm in teaching writing was finally beginning to make itself widely felt—even though hints of change had been cropping up almost from the time of Burke's essay in 1965. Hairston's essay, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," traces the evolution of the process paradigm out of the current-traditional paradigm that was in vogue when Burke's essay was written [CCC, 33 (February, 1982), 76-89]. More important, Hairston succinctly describes the features of this emerging
paradigm in enough detail to keep phrases like "the composing process," which is so near and dear to our hearts, from being turned prematurely into a meaningless cliché. The list of a dozen features in her description of the emerging paradigm suggests, too, that the marriage of theory and practice so vital for Virginia Burke has finally become central to thinking about composition instruction.

Taking the development of a suitable theory of composition one step further is Miles Myers and James Gray's 1983 anthology, Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition: Processing, Distancing, and Modeling. The title promises a lot, and in some intricate and effective ways, the collection makes good on its promise. On the surface, the book is a paean to the Bay Area Writing Project and its offspring, the National Writing Project. After 10 years and probably thousands of workshops and institutes, such a paean is well deserved; the collection would have justified itself if that were its only purpose. Its more deliberate goal, though, is to effect a rapprochement between theory and practice in teaching writing: "to show teachers how their approaches to the teaching of writing reflect a particular area of research and to show researchers how the intuitions of teachers reflect research findings." To achieve the synthesis the editors are aiming for, they juxtapose theoretical essays, several of them classics, with essays showing practical applications derived from the theory. For instance, Herbert Simon's "The Psychology of Thinking" serves as the backdrop for essays on mapping and drawing; excerpts from Robert Zoellner's "Talk-Write" provide the theoretical framework for applied essays on peer response groups.

However, to characterize the collection solely as a switching back and forth of theoretical and applied essays still does not do it justice. Such a description accounts for the Theory and Practice part of the title, but not the Processing, Distancing, and Modeling. In the introductory essay, Miles Myers takes up the problem that many of us probably feel quite acutely: that "the teaching of writing is often characterized these days as a hodgepodge of gimmicks without a foundation in theory and research and without systematic methods of evaluating student writing" (shades of Virginia Burke). To make sense of the hodgepodge, the editors (in this respect serving more as authors than editors) propose a three-part classification, processing, distancing, and modeling, which they believe accounts for much of the teaching and reasearch in composition today. Each approach, claims Myers, has its own governing assumptions and hence its special
province for research, its own teaching techniques, and its own way of diagnosing student writing.

Processing, drawing heavily on cognitive psychology, focuses on the stages and strategies writers use or must learn to use in writing. Distancing draws on the sociocultural research tradition to define the many relations between writers and their subjects, writers and their readers. The function categories of James Britton and the structural curriculum of James Moffett are examples of the distancing approach. Modeling, drawing on the behaviorist tradition, focuses primarily on the text by exposing students to any of a variety of drills and imitation activities, including sentence combining.

Any academic worth his or her salt feels the hackles begin to rise whenever someone proposes a neat three-part scheme to classify anything, especially something as messy and dynamic as contemporary composition. Charges of over-simplification and omission come inevitably to the force. Tempting, even justifiable as such a response might be, it seems useful primarily in a larger debate about the theoretical shape of the discipline. Within the context of this collection, charges of the sort I have mentioned diminish to nit-picking. The author/editors recognize that other approaches to theory and research can be identified. Moreover, they acknowledge that none of the three they have proposed is a "pure" approach, in fact, that good teachers use elements of all three since writing involves simultaneously features of processing, distancing, and modeling. What they try to do is set up a skeleton that does seem to work for the essays included in the collection, a framework that may or may not be the last word for subsequent research. As a theoretical proposition for an audience of teacher-scholars, PDM seems useful for the present and provocative for the future.

If there is a limitation to the collection, it has to do with audience. As the editors point out, the book will not satisfy the research purist, nor will it appeal to teachers "who only want a good idea for Monday." Neither does it focus on a single level of teaching or research. The essays span the school years from preschool through freshman comp. Readers may find that while there is something for everyone, there is not enough for anyone. However, for those of us in college writing programs who are regularly invited to serve us consultants and share our understanding of writing with elementary and secondary teachers, many of the essays (such as "Drawing as Pre-writing in Preschool" or "Stimulating and Receiving Children's Writ-
ing") provide those sound, concrete suggestions that classroom teachers desperately need and that we often have such difficulty supplying.

I found, moreover, that the collection admirably demonstrates its central thesis about the reciprocal relationship of theory and practice. Reading such carefully chosen selections that ask us to shift back and forth between research and application is a generative experience, constantly eliciting new insights and new applications. This, finally, is the message of the volume and of the Bay Area and National Writing Projects from which the collection is derived: that theory and practice occupy more common territory than either researchers or teachers are usually willing to concede, and that each activity can only benefit when it aligns itself more closely with the other.

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Note

'THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION: PROCESSING, DISTANCING, AND MODELING, Miles Myers and James Gray, eds. (Urbana: NCTE, 1983).