The Logic of Question and Answer and the Hermeneutics of Writing

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For the past two decades, cognitivist theory has dominated composition studies. Its impact has become most pronounced as a result of the so-called paradigm shift in composition, which turned attention away from teaching by models and modes of exposition—in terms of products—toward reflecting on the process of writing. In broad strokes, cognitivism focuses on writing as an individual problem-solving activity, as a private or subjective process, and often presumes a universal model of thought. But because the activity of composing engages conscious and preconscious processes which vary from one writer to the next, cognitivism's uniform assumptions about the relationship of writing to thinking are dangerous for composition theory and potentially hazardous for composition pedagogy. In this essay, I will explore problems with the cognitivist paradigm and discuss other measures for teaching the composing process, methods which the subjectivism of the cognitivist paradigm obscures. If these proposals seem "social constructionist" in nature—or, perhaps, antithetical to the cognitive position—they are also meant to particularize a position within a social constructionist orientation rather than to opt simply for one side of the opposition.

Problems with Cognitivism

Frequently, cognitivist approaches to writing too readily prescribe uniformity among cognitive styles, based on a presumed theory of human development and imagination or an implicit belief in the singularity of thought processes. Speculation on cognitive style and development—along with "mentalist" approaches to invention—is particularly problematic insofar as it mutes or overlooks cultural differences. In contrast to the positions of Janice Lauer, Andrea Lunsford, and Linda Flower and John Hayes, among others, rhetorical competence may not, in fact, reflect development in intellectual or imaginative processes. Inferring a necessary relation between thinking and writing may even present unnecessary problems for the teaching of writing.

Further, the view that writing reflects cognition is ideologically problematic, leading, for example, to the assumption that basic or inexperienced writers are not as "bright" or intellectually adept as others more practiced or experienced as writers. To maintain, as Andrea Lunsford
has, that basic writers "have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions" (275) presupposes that learned syntactic operations and rhetorical maneuvers reflect cognition and intellectual capability. However, anyone who has worked with students whose native language is not English and who have yet to master the rhetorical conventions of English, or with non-traditional students who have yet to assimilate the idiolects of the academy, knows that this is not necessarily so. Equating "cognitive development" with rhetorical capability in a given language is ethnocentric in the extreme, because it implies that thinking in "abstractions or conceptions" occurs only in the more complex syntactic structures of that language and within a given academic context.

I do not mean to suggest that cognitivism has nothing to tell us about teaching writing—indeed, it may help in determining what kinds of writing need to be taught before others—but rather to suggest that, as with any other theoretical perspective, cognitivism's presuppositions can encumber the practices it would promote. In fact, it remains unclear just what implications can be properly drawn for the sake of teaching writing from any theory of imagination, psychological development, or intellect. One might argue, contrary to Frank D'Angelo, that speculation about thought processes does not directly bear on the pragmatics of composing texts. Representing cognitive operations as the proper starting point for producing better writing evades many problems which composition studies would purportedly solve, while it may even create artificial or irrelevant problems, both because of its intrinsically reductive tendency and its tenuous relation to the practice and occasions for writing. Research on thought processes often subsumes a wide range of cognitive, or socio-psychological, differences under a monolithic theoretical model, even though the actual connection between such theorizing and writing remains vague. There may well be an unbridgeable gap between thinking and writing, and that chasm should not be overlooked. Perhaps when composition theory more clearly demarcates its concerns, when it begins to take a critical view of its own evolution, we will see the degree to which discourse on mind, cognition, and imagination even misdirects research on writing. The degree to which any theory of expression—or any heuristic following from it—presumes a picture of the "ghost in the machine" is a problem area, one better dissolved, perhaps, than integrated into pedagogy.

Richard Rorty has surveyed and criticized theoretical positions in philosophy of "mind" which similarly try to construct a theory of knowledge based on models of cognition. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty discusses representations of mind and cognitive operations as "inventions" that generate only pseudo-problems for philosophy. Mind, for Rorty, is a metaphor that needs to be historicized and deconstructed. The dissolution of such metaphors is "therapeutic" in that it allows for the displacement or reorientation of the terms for asking the
fundamental questions of a discipline. In Rorty's case, this reorientation
turns us away from epistemology and speculation on the relation between
subject and object and cancels questions concerning standards for validating
knowledge. It then turns us toward a socio-historical contextualization
of knowledge, such that fields of research and spheres of knowing and
understanding are viewed as temporal and evolving linguistic practices.
Insofar as Rorty offers any alternative to epistemology, it is simply to
regard the modes of understanding cultivated in philosophy and the
human sciences as (in Wittgensteinian terms) so many "language-
games." Rorty lauds Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, and Gadamer for
doing away with the mind/body problem as well as the subject/object di-
chotomy, which for so long have structured the issues and problems of
epistemology: "They set aside the notion of 'the mind' common to Des-
cartes, Locke and Kant—as a special subject of study, located in inner
space, containing elements or processes which made knowledge possible"
(6). Rorty wants to "undermine the reader's confidence in the mind as
something about which one should have a 'philosophical view'" (7).

Other philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, extend the critique of
"mind" by "bracketing" the term thought, not only because of its indeter-
minate nature but also because it is often idealistically conceived as a
process going on "inside" the subject, somehow apart from "outward"
phenomena—because it appears, by many formulations, to be separated
from the general play of the world of signification. For Derrida, rather than
to investigate the content or process of "thought," it is "necessary to analyze
the way in which texts are made":

In a certain way, "thought" means nothing. "Thought" (quotation marks: the
words "thought" and what is called "thought") means nothing: it is the substan-
tified void of a highly derivative ideality, the effect of a difference of forces, the
illusory autonomy of a discourse or a consciousness whose hypostasis is to be de-
constructed, whose "causality" is to be analyzed. (49)

Analyzing "the way in which texts are made," and facilitating that process,
diffs from speculating on "thought." Teaching the uses of linguistic tools
and rhetorical devices as social conventions thus becomes the priority in
writing instruction. This priority gets lost, however, when extraneous
theoretical presuppositions are introduced.

Composition theory, preoccupied with "thought" processes
(D'Angelo) and "cognitive development" (Lunsford), follows the implica-
tions of a similar critique. In their reification of the "subject," cognitivists
often misconstrue the act of composing by isolating the subject and
"intentions" and "purposes" from the social world and signifying contexts
to which writing belongs. Even if "thought" could be defined in transcen-
dental terms as a function of the subject alone, apart from social relations
in the scenes of writing, it is not at all clear that producing a satisfactory text
would actually reflect thought processes. It might be better to dissolve that
problematic (as Wittgenstein does by remarking on "the conception of
thought as a gaseous medium”) and consider the relation of thought to writing as remaining undefinable if not irrelevant to the process of composing texts.

The positions associated with "cognitivism" originate in subjectivist approaches to the process of invention, themselves linked to the Romantic aesthetic of individualistic expression, which for years provided literary scholarship with an anthropology of the author-function. English, ideologically, is a discipline long modeled on notions of creative genius and the individual imagination; the migration of that paradigm into representations of the writing process is not at all surprising. Theories of invention based on such constructions speak of “purpose” and “intention” in discourse solely as functions of the subject, detached from the prolific interplay of factors contributing to text-building. Rethinking the scene of writing requires reconsidering the very notions of intention and purpose, reconceiving them less as properties of individual writers than as features which emerge in assembling a text in accord with discursive norms, rules, and conventions which are social rather than, or before being, psychological. Terms for constructing a satisfactory or acceptable text are already in place in practically every arena before a writer begins to build a text. Rhetorical conventions and discursive norms are social and institutional; they do not arise out of the head. Further, we must rethink our terminology, speaking of "assembling" or "building" a text rather than "expressing" a message as if it were some "inner" happening which the text represents. Rethinking the scene of writing with a view toward social contexts involves questioning the adequacy of idioms which characterize the composing process in subjective terms.

The Logic of Question and Answer in Language-Games

The logic of question and answer, derived from the hermeneutic of Hans-Georg Gadamer and complemented by the rhetoric of Paul Ricoeur, evades such egocentric limits for characterizing the composing process. It situates text production in the contexts of history and human action, a move which seems appropriate at a time when, increasingly, we hear of collaborative writing, the author as collective subject, the social contexts of text production, and "intertextuality" rather than "originality." The logic of question and answer, which is minimally systematic, begins from the assumption that producing a text often proceeds from the most rudimentary scraps and fragments generated through such practices as freewriting or in response to various and even unrelated questions and tasks. Thus, composing a text, assembling and connecting parts, is largely a process of revision—moving, rearranging, and extending initiating bits, chunks, and fragments. This process works on a principle that recognizes the historicity of writing—the temporality and flux intervening between the initial inscription of generative parts and the fulfillment in any sense of the text as a satisfactory whole. It also recognizes the historicality and sociality of the composing process and how both figure into a writer's
"purpose" and "intention." Purpose and intention are never realized as full-blown notions or goals which are a writer's own. They are functions of the scene of writing to which a writer conforms by necessity, in accord with rules and norms collectively mediated and already determined.

Insofar as a writer consciously or unconsciously conforms to the conventions of a given genre, or satisfies the demands of an occasion, we regard him or her as a player in a "language-game": as one using "tools" of language to fulfill a task. The term "language-game," writes Wittgenstein, "is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language"—and we must add writing—"is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (#23). Within every language-game, players—practicing—learn to follow rules. Writers learn by recognizing and assimilating norms, rules, and conventions; thus, teachers teach how to do things with words, how to make legitimate moves, rather than how to think. In contextualizing language-games in "forms of life"—the signifying contexts by which they are occasioned—Wittgenstein encourages us to "review the multiplicity of language-games" involved in such activities as giving and obeying orders, describing an object's appearance, reporting an event, and forming and testing a hypothesis (#23). The language-games of the world are multiple, variable, sprung from the "forms of life," or contexts, which occasion discourse, ranging beyond any attempt to classify them into so many modes of exposition, beyond the limits of any typology of problems to be solved. E.D. Hirsch describes genres as language-games, each with a grammar, conventionalized linguistic "tools," norms and rules, and its own boundary and horizon (Validity 92-111). Participating in a language-game means, for Wittgenstein, taking part in a form of life: practicing what the scene of writing prescribes as rules for playing the game.

Recovering the hermeneutic and dialectical dimensions of that scenario—bringing together writers and socialized codes for producing texts—means asking about strategies for transforming a text-in-progress from a "writer-based" to a "reader-based" artifact. These "cognitivist" terms I derive from Flower, of course, but with the aim of appropriating them in directions reaching beyond the subject framework of the cognitivist model. Moving from a writer-based to a reader-based text—one ready to be received by other players in the game under way—involves checking discourse against the rules and norms at work in the language-game to which the writer, intentionally or not, conforms. Forming a message involves interpolating the text-in-progress, and a writer produces a text adequate to the occasion by interpreting initiating chunks, parts, and fragments in view of the generic limits and social contexts of the language-game at play. Teaching involves showing how to recognize the rules and legitimate moves in a game. Due emphasis must be placed on teaching how to recognize rules and conventions, rather than on the mechanics of so many forms, since the multiplicity of language-games ranges beyond any formalist reduction to a set of modes of exposition.
The Dialectics of Inventing, Questioning, and Revising

Approaching invention and revision as interconnected processes, through perspectives supplied by hermeneutics, suggests that text-building is closely related to the act of interpretation. A writer decodes, extends, and elaborates parts of a writer-based text until it attains the status of a message-bearing text for other participants in the language-game. Composing, especially revising, can be taught as an interpretive process, yet only if interpretation is not construed as conforming to criteria for verification or validation but, in the manner of Heidegger, as part of our being-in-the-world, as something we are constantly doing and having done for us through both language and others (or through what Heidegger calls the "they" of the public world). Interpretation crosses over and becomes invention—building, assembling—when it allows for openness toward the world of which it is part, when meaning and sense are viewed as products of to-and-fro movements among the writer, the text at hand, and the horizon in which both exist—the full set of worldly, temporal, linguistic, and institutional conditions which permit reading, writing, and interpreting to occur. Such are the dimensions of the hermeneutic circle. Writer-based writing needs to be reinterpreted so that the text-in-progress conforms to the discourse of the "they"—to the linguistic habits of the public world—or, in Wittgensteinian terms, so that it functions according to the rules and conventions of the language-game by which the text is occasioned. Temporally, revising involves rewriting traces from a prior horizon. Certainly, such procedures seem to emphasize following rules over originality, but most writing demanded in public contexts is convention-bearing (though not necessarily in a pejorative sense), extending while revising a pre-given tradition.

What distinguishes Gadamer's hermeneutic in *Truth and Method* from Hirsch's in *Validity in Interpretation*—what disposes that hermeneutic toward invention—is that it acknowledges the temporality of understanding and the historicity of signifying operations. A writer comes to understand what he or she wants to say and what needs to be said through the process of writing. Confronting traces from the past, whether in time-honored texts or our own, we are never led back to an author's original intention or purpose; the author is effectively gone, never to be retrieved from traces left behind. The text at hand, becoming, is interpreted and applied, appropriated to an unfolding occasion within a new and emerging context.

Still, every sphere of discourse carries within it rules and conventions. Following Wittgenstein, these rules and conventions are what new players need to learn, along with how to recognize rules in new games they encounter. But how, given variability and change between horizons, do we deal with traces from the past, even our own, as they evolve from fragments and parts to message-bearing vehicles? Gadamer proposes the logic of question and answer. Understood as a temporally contingent dialectic for interpretation—in which meaning evolves in relation to
rules in emerging historical contexts—this "logic" can be incorporated into the composing process as a means for text-building. It is oriented toward producing a text's emerging message rather than toward an originating intention or purpose (at least as intention and purpose have been assumed in rhetorical theories where imagination, mind, or some cognitive faculty is central).

Traditionally, rhetorical theory operates by such categories as purpose, intention, and motive, as if they existed prior to or apart from the composing process and social context. Conversely, text-building—moving from phrases, chunks, and fragments—reinterprets and applies past traces, another’s and one’s own, toward some anticipated future. Minimal or fragmentary parts become catalysts for possible questions to which the writer responds independently or collaboratively with others, his or her message evolving through successive horizons. The logic of question and answer frames the text-in-progress as a set of signs calling for reinterpretation in terms of what can be anticipated. Revising earlier traces becomes invention, insofar as it involves rewriting notes, fragments, and minimal units into new contexts, both textual and worldly. Partial units pose necessary questions, which new and contextualizing parts must answer. Succeeding sentences are conceived and tested as responses to questions raised by foregoing statements. This hermeneutic measure, by which the writer interprets the text-in-progress, transforms into a heuristic principle which generates more writing where a question surfaces, thus opening the text onto another horizon.

The metaphorical function, as conceived by Ricoeur, operates at the level of predication rather than at the level of the word. Prescriptively, the logic of question and answer works as a means for seeking coherence and generating more to say about a topic. Predicates in statements (or kernels) which initiate a text pose questions to be answered by subsequent predicates. Sentences in a sequence displace, preserve, and extend the sense of one another by responding to one another. The writer’s work resides in this dialectically productive circle which finds units of discourse unfolding in the order of question/response. This "logic" cultivates coherence in an interrogative pursuit of the whole from the parts.

If I pressure the predicate of a sentence like "The threat of a nuclear accident is our worst nightmare"—allow questions to surface—its metaphorical coupling ("threat of a nuclear accident": "nightmare") appears as one to be explicated in subsequent statements. Questions, as they surface, generate new categories and open up yet simultaneously proscribe the contextualizing statements that follow. We may ask, "Why nightmare?" How is the spectre of an accident haunting? How do the subject and predicate—threat :: nightmare—belong to the category of events considered frightening? But the predicate and its analogical extension do not lead to that many questions. They do not directly lead, for example, to a question about why the United States has fallen behind in solar energy research; however, when such non sequiturs surface, they can be brack-
eted for the sake of rhetorical possibility and later development. Every predicate opens analogically related questions and responses which unfold across the text, while it simultaneously constrains what may follow. Teaching invention and revision involves showing writers how questions open out of discursive units and how what they have already said also limits the moves they can make. This process involves reinterpreting parts and fragments rather than inventing in any purely "originating" sense.

In virtually all language-games, the logic of question and answer can guide the search for order and coherence. Coherence emerges as a writer comes to understand what he or she wants and needs to say. "Understanding," writes Gadamer, "begins when something addresses us. This is the primary hermeneutical condition" (266). The hermeneutics of writing allows the text-in-progress to address us. Heuristically, the writer—wishing to generate more—opens the text onto a new horizon by allowing its kernels to pose questions to which subsequent parts will respond. "The essence of the question," Gadamer writes, "is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities." Gadamer further explains the dynamics of this dialectical interaction as "the development of knowledge through the question" (266) and the relation between logos and praxis in our historical horizon. Composing by the logic of question and answer turns writing into an epistemic process of coming-to-know and coming-to-understand, desirable aims if we do not place positivist stock in these terms. Thus, knowledge is something made rather than "something represented" or "something found." Knowledge and understanding are made, assembled, built by the turns of discourse.

"To ask a question," Gadamer states, "means to bring into the open .... The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. The sense of every question is realised in passing through this state of indeterminacy, in which it becomes an open question. Every true question achieves this openness" (Truth 326-27). Rhetorically, every question brings about another move which modifies the horizon of writing. But every question likewise imposes limits and provides direction for the evolving text. Every stroke imparts direction, opening and closing prospects; like assembling a puzzle, the selecting and inserting of one piece prescribes what comes next.

Interpreting and rewriting the scraps and fragments which initiate text-building—allowing questions to surface from predicates and answers to follow—funnels sequences of sentences into formal units that cohere. This logic works to help writers discover and produce "sense" in larger discursive units, and it works prospectively for any portion of the whole in relation to the historical horizon in which writing occurs. "Sense," Gadamer writes, "is always the direction of a possible question. The sense of what is correct must be in accordance with the direction of the question" (326). The logic of question and answer builds an internal dialectic into the text-in-progress. Coherence and resonance emerge in the analogical extension of predicates—an extension that finds its coordinates in the
language-games by which writing is occasioned in the social text. The point is that writers can learn to recognize how every part presents questions and answers, not only within the text but within the world (and its language-games) in which writing takes place. Within this context, cultivating "sense" becomes a function of parameters which unfold in the text and in the contexts in which writing is dialectically generated and installed. It is precisely this dialectical dynamic—as distinguished from "intention," "inner speech," or "private thought"—which needs to be recovered and integrated into the teaching of writing.2

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Notes

1Jean-Francois Lyotard extends this perspective on knowledge-fields as language-games to the physical sciences. He describes this Wittgensteinian notion as appropriate for a time marked by the thoroughgoing exteriorization of knowledge, both in the interaction which takes place in scientific communities and in the media that store it (computers, data banks, etc.), as distinguished from the interiority of the individualized mind (see Jones). Linguistic exchanges are conceived as activities in and of the "forms of life"—historical, social, institutional—by which they are occasioned.

2I would like to thank Michael Carter for his remarks on an earlier draft.

Works Cited


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