REVIEW:

WRITER'S BLOCK: THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION

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Mike Rose's "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block" (CCC, December 1980) has become one of the most widely quoted articles in our field—and rightly so. It was the first substantial attempt to explain what had remained so puzzling: why some writers, even those bright and skilled, stare at a blank sheet of paper for hours. Rose's ground breaking explanation was that rigid rules and inflexible composing strategies do not allow writers to adapt to the demands of a particular writing task. Now, Rose has written a monograph on the topic, the first volume length study of either writer's block or writing anxiety. It is a historical event—and should be judged as one. Since it fills a historical vacuum, it will likely influence how we conceptualize, study and treat writer's blocks for some time. Because it emerges from a vacuum, it should be praised in spite of its imperfections. Rose should be congratulated where he advances the field, and his readers should be cautioned where the state of the profession has not allowed him to advance the field far enough.

One difficulty in researching writing dysfunctions is that the term writer's block and writing anxiety (or apprehension) are often used imprecisely or interchangeably. Rose's definitions, even though questionable at points, should encourage a more thoughtful use of the terms, which in itself is a significant contribution. He defines writer's block "as an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment." The two qualifications deserve some comment. The
first, "that blocking presupposes basic writing skills that, for some reason, cannot be exercised," seems to raise unnecessary complications. Can not a lack of skills cause writer's blocks? Are the writer's blocks caused by a lack of skills qualitatively different than those caused by "rigid rules"? How do the teacher and clinician—and Rose, for that matter—distinguish between those who have blocks and those who lack skills? When Rose describes how "strategies for complexity" cause writer's blocks, he says that "while a number of university students can produce a relatively error-free prose and can write description and narration well enough, higher-level exposition and argument often stump them." Are not these skills? If so, then Rose violates his own qualification. The second boundary is "that blocking presupposes some degree of alertness and of effort." If students are tired, bored, or unmotivated, they are not, according to Rose, experiencing a writer's block. Though this qualification is more sound, it needs to be placed in a broader context. Fatigue, boredom, and lack of motivation are often reactions to the stress that is associated with writer's block and writing anxiety. It is quite understandable that students who are "high-blockers" might lose their motivation. The lack of motivation may mask writer's blocks or even interact with them and should not be excluded from study.

But what is the boundary between writer's block and writing anxiety? Rose writes, "As defined here, writer's block is broader and subsumes writing apprehension as a possible cause of or a reaction to blocking." He adds, "Apprehensiveness, then, can lead to blocking (the anxiety being caused by prior negative evaluations or by more complex psychodynamics) or can result from the fix that writers find themselves in. But blocking and apprehensiveness (and low-blocking and apprehensiveness) are not synonymous, not necessarily coexistent, and not necessarily causally linked." The strength of Rose's definition of writer's block and its distinction from writing anxiety is that he, more than most researchers, appreciates—perhaps because he better understands—the complexity of writing dysfunctions; the weakness is that he sounds certain of, but vaguely explains, causality. For example, he seems to suggest that writing anxiety can develop independent of writer's blocks, that negative criticism of a specific work would create a general fear of writing. In five years of counseling over one hundred and fifty students with writing anxiety, I have never seen someone who had writing
anxiety but did not experience writer's blocks. Also, the theory of behavioral psychology might suggest that specific negative criticism would create specific blocks. The negative criticism would only cause writing anxiety when stimulus generalization occurs, when the specific criticism of a specific work (or several works) is generalized to all of one's writing. Of course, this is entirely conjectural. Any discussion of the causality of any event, no matter how well researched, is a fuzzy business, and the causality of writer's block and writing anxiety, so poorly researched, is obscure at best. We can not expect Rose to be lucid here, for he is attempting to define and discuss what is ill understood. We might expect more caution. We might also expect that Rose would draw more from bodies of research in the field of psychology, the studies on stress, personality theory, cognitive style, and decision making.

It should be stated that Rose's definitions work well enough for his study, perhaps because the study relies more on a questionnaire that he developed than on the definitions. "Writer's Block Questionnaire" spreads its twenty-four items over five scales: Blocking (a general scale to identify highblockers), and four subscales to diagnose causes of blocks (Lateness, Premature Editing, Strategies for Complexity, and Attitudes). Rose should be commended for developing a diagnostic instrument. Survey instruments, such as Miller and Daly's Test of Writing Apprehension, are useful for research but provide little information about why an individual writer is having difficulty and how he or she can be helped.

Rose makes a case for the reliability of his instrument, but some questions must be raised. The scales of the final version (Rose went through six), based on administration to a heterogeneous group of 294 undergraduates, have reliability coefficients ranging from .72 to .87, which are quite respectable, and the four diagnostic subscales seem fairly independent. Yet, since reliability is easier to establish with a heterogeneous than a homogeneous group, Rose's reliability may be a bit inflated.

Comments on the instrument may be premature, for it is not entirely clear whether or not it is in final form. Even though it is presented in a format that invites teachers and scholars to photocopy and administer it, Rose gives no instructions on how it should be scored or interpreted. If the instrument is not adequately refined, Rose should clearly advise his readers not to use it. If it is adequately refined, he should provide—at
the very least—scoring instructions, means, standard deviations, and the standard error of measurement.

If Rose is planning to refine the instrument, a few suggestions can be offered. First, more items need to be added to all of the scales. Lateness has only two items, and Premature Editing only three. Though the scales seem statistically sound, their clinical validity is highly questionable. The fewer items per scale, the higher the probability that one careless or ill-considered response will affect interpretation. For example, a student could miscode one answer on the Premature Editing scale and be diagnosed as a premature editor. To reduce the effect of such commonplace errors, psychometricians generally advise that subscales have at least eleven or twelve items. Second, the function and definition of the subscales may need to be reevaluated. The Attitudes subscale may actually be a measure of writing anxiety. Perhaps, this is why the data from Rose's study did not show a significant difference between the scores of high and low-blockers on this scale. Third, additional statistical analyses, such as a factor analysis, should be run. A factor analysis could provide some internal validity for the scales. Rose may be on the brink of developing a very valuable, and much needed diagnostic tool, but more work is in order.

For the study, which forms the core of Rose's monograph, he selected ten students, six of whom were designated high-blockers by his questionnaire and four of whom were low-blockers. The subjects were videotaped as they wrote an essay on a complicated topic, using a passage from Karl Jasper's *Man in the Modern Age* to interpret a three-page case history. Immediately after writing, students were asked to view and comment on the videotape, a methodology that Rose calls stimulated recall. Rose then analyzed the behaviors on the videotape (time spent planning, pausing, etc.), the kind of study that Ann Matsuhashi has made famous, and presents two comparative "case studies," the research design that Sondra Perl has used to compare mature and basic writers.

Rose yields some interesting information, develops a case for the validity of his questionnaire, and gains further credence for his hypotheses about the causes of writer's block. For the most part, Rose is extremely thorough and well-aware of the limitations of his study. Some additional limitations, however, should be touched upon, such as the effect of the topic itself. The topic's complexity no doubt produced some of the students'
blocks, which is acceptable—even desirable—as long as the blocks were associated with writing rather than about reading it. Rose says that he pretested the assignment with a few students and that they had no trouble reading and understanding it. But how does he know this? Did he use a cloze test, ask comprehension questions, or test for readability? Too often in composition studies, confounding variables—especially the effect of reading skills—are overlooked. Also, Rose uses only one writing sample. Since writer's block is a specific writing dysfunction, not a general reaction to writing like writing anxiety, can using only one sample be justified? These are, however, relatively minor criticisms of a generally thorough study.

Even though Rose’s research designs are widely accepted, they too must be cautiously evaluated. Quantitative analyses of writing behaviors, as Matsuhashi and others have illustrated, can provide interesting information, but too often qualitative conclusions are made from, but not justified by, the quantitative data. From timing prewriting behaviors, Rose concludes that "there is a highly individual point past which pausing can be detrimental." Without knowing what the writer is thinking during these pauses, how can Rose know that they are detrimental? Rose could have used data from the stimulated recalls to substantiate this statement, but he chose to separate the quantitative and qualitative data into two chapters. The result, it seems, is that his data are less meaningful and his conclusions more tenuous. Such poorly substantiated statements of causality, so frequently made from quantitative data, may lead to questionable treatments. Just because high-blockers pause more frequently, it does not necessarily follow that pausing less will relieve the block. The pausing may be the effect rather than the cause of the block. People with infections often have high temperatures, but reducing the temperature—say, by putting the patient in a tub of ice—will not cure the infection. Unless we are careful, we could find ourselves treating the symptoms, rather than the causes, of writer's block.

The comparative case study design is what I call the good-bad design. One compares a good writer to a poor writer, a high-apprehensive to a low-apprehensive, or, as in Rose's study, a high-blocker to a low-blocker. My major reservation about this design is that it overextends the validity of case studies. A case study is valuable because it takes one subject and discusses that subject's characteristics in great detail. It is valid because the re-
The researcher does not make broad inferences from a sample of one. The researchers say that this is how a complicated chain of events occurred in one person; it may occur in the same way with others, or it may not. With the good-bad design, however, the researcher takes a sample of two (usually a biased sample), compares them, and then makes broad inferences about what these two case studies mean about writers in general. Rose is, to his credit, cautious about making inferences from this comparison, but I feel it is unclear what he is measuring. Researchers who compare case studies seem to state that they are discovering the difference between mature and basic writers, high-blockers and low-blockers, but inevitably many of the differences between the good and the bad case study are merely differences in cognitive style. In general, the smaller the sample, the greater the probability that the study is measuring cognitive style. With a sample of two, that probability is quite high. Finally, there is a real question whether or not these "case studies" actually qualify as case studies. They usually make use, as Rose does, of only one piece of writing. A true case study would provide a broad and deep look into the individual writer, using more than one sample of writing.

A final comment should be made about Rose's model of the composing process, also presented in this volume. The model bears similarities to Flower and Hayes's model, for it has "executive operations" and "composing subprocesses," yet it has been adapted to reflect Rose's theory of writer's block. It may very well prove to be a good model for understanding and researching the kind of writing blocks that Rose's study investigates, but it is too early to say. The model has not yet been tested as extensively as that of Flower and Hayes, since Rose's study has a sample of ten. Further, Rose's study does not cover all aspects of the model, such as memory retrieval and composing styles.

As I stated in the introduction, Rose's work should be evaluated historically. He has advanced our understanding of writer's block even beyond his earlier article, but his findings, which evolve from the ground breaking research of a complex problem, should not be blindly accepted, nor should his methodology be mindlessly replicated. How we study writer's block (or writing anxiety) and how we conceptualize its causality both need refinement; as I have tried to suggest in my comments, Rose's study offers concerns and hopes. My greatest concern is
that readers will assume that Rose has established that rigid rules, inflexible plans, strategies for complexity, and other factors cause writer's block. Rose has established correlation, not causality. Rigid rules may very well be an effect of writer's block or writing anxiety, for people usually act more rigidly when under stress. If this is the case, the proper treatment may be to reduce the writer's stress rather than encourage a more flexible use of rules. This remains to be established. My greatest hope is that Rose and others will extend his work, that additional studies, as thorough as Rose's, but with alternate and refined methodologies, will be undertaken, that more diagnostic instruments will be developed, and that more models will be formulated.

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