"Personal" Writing through the Process Approach

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"Personal" vs "Academic" Writing

Through the course of their academic lives, students may be asked to produce "academic" writing as opposed to "personal" writing. Mlynarcyck (1991) argues that "personal" writing is tied to "academic" writing and that it functions as part of an academic class. Clearly the terms personal and academic appear to overlap. "Academic" writing is broadly seen as writing with "no use of first-person pronouns" or "any writing students do in schools or college". (Mlynarcyck 1991, p. 17). It is "referential language" as opposed to "expressive language" as suggested by Sapir. Britton (1970 in Mlynarcyck 1991) refers to "expressive language" as "the most private form of language". "Expressive language" is the form for "personal" writing.

In trying to assess curriculum materials and design for my two writing seminars this year, I felt that I had to address these issues at length. I wanted to fully understand the goals and writing skills that should be required of my students.

Journal Writing

Journal writing is one writing genre which can be seen as a way into the academic writing system. In my third year seminar, we began
to develop journals of free form writing to be continued every two weeks or so. The content for this writing is very accessible to the student as the topics deal with everyday reactions and thoughts. Students use their own life experiences to fill the journal pages. Vanett and Jurich in Kreeft Peyton (1990) suggest that personal journal writing is a viable way to enter the writing process and practice for other kinds of writing tasks.

However, journal writing is only one of the genres which we practice in class as it does have some limitations along with the benefits. While writing in a journal, students are often unaware of a sense of audience and thus become somewhat egocentric writers according to Vanett and Jurich. Another issue is whether or not the students want to write about themselves and if they may feel pressured to write on a personal level.

As a final remark for the positive aspect of journal writing, Vanett and Jurich state that it allows students to write about subjects in “which they are invested and from which the rhetorical form emerges out of the content”. I am not suggesting at this point that personal journal writing be the sole genre in a classroom writing course. We work on other modes of writing in my seminars such as description and narration. However, journal writing may be related through formal assignments to “academic” writing. Furthermore, journal writing may be integrated into a “process” writing course which eventually prepares the students for “academic” writing.

“Process” vs “Product” Approach

What do we mean by a “process” writing approach as opposed to a “product” writing approach? Richards (1990) defines the “product”
approach as the teaching of writing "which leads to practice in the structure and organization of different kinds of paragraphs and texts." (p. 106). The focus is on the ability to produce correct texts or products. These are the main assumptions which Richards includes in the product approach: "1) Learners have specific writing needs, either for institutional writing or personal writing. 2) The goal of a writing program is to teach students to be able to produce the kinds of written texts they will most frequently encounter in educational, institutional, and/or personal contexts. The writing program will focus on the patterns and forms of organization used in different kinds of written texts (e.g., differences between descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive writing; formats used to present information in an essay or report; different ways of organizing information in paragraphs). 3) The rhetorical patterns and grammatical rules used in different kinds of texts are presented in model compositions... 4) Correct sentence structure is an essential component of writing... 5) Errors in writing are avoided by providing learners with models to follow... 6) The mechanics of writing are also taught: handwriting, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling."

If we consider these assumptions, we understand the "product" approach as an emphasis on form rather than the process involved in the writing itself. In this approach, the end product is more important than the means.

The "process" approach however, is the focus of recent research in writing dealing with "different kinds of strategies and cognitive activities that a writer engages in when writing". (Richards 1990, p. 108). Raimes (1985: 229 in Richards 1990) discusses the process of experienced writers. "They consider purpose and audience. They consult their own background knowledge. They let ideas incubate. They plan. As they
write, they read back over what they have written... Contrary to what many textbooks advise, writers do not follow a neat sequence of planning, organizing, writing, and then revising. For while a writer's product— the finished essay, story, or novel is presented in lines, the process that produces it is not linear at all."

Murray (1980 in Richards 1990) mentions three steps in a process writing approach which are rehearsing, drafting and revising. Rehearsing or prewriting is the act of reflection, choosing the topic, thinking about it, organizing and developing ideas as well as thinking about audience and purpose. Drafting is the stage of the actual writing down of ideas in rough form. This will help develop further ideas and plans. In this sense, the process of writing is continually creating more ideas and hence meaning. Revising is the stage of evaluation and deletions or additions to the work. Raimes also notes that revising is not limited to a final stage, and can occur at any point in the process.

"Process-oriented" Approach Research

Zamel (1987 in Richards 1990, p. 109) has observed that "in process-focused classrooms there is a shift from language-focused activities to learner-centered tasks in which students assume greater control over what they write, how they write it, and the evaluation of their own writing." Zamel found that the students rather than the teachers were in control of learning. This active participation enabled the students to better prepare for academic work in English.

Hughey et al (1983 in Richards 1990, p. 111) provide a list of roles for the teacher in a writing program. They see the role of the teacher to simplify the writing task, teach the writing process, establish short-term and long-term goals for the students, introduce meaningful assign-
ments and provide an audience other than the teacher. And although they include the teaching of spelling, punctuation and capitalization, they urge the instruction in "the principles—rules, conventions, and guidelines of writing—as a means to develop thoughts, order ideas, and communicate these ideas in a significant way".

This is clearly the key to developing a "process" approach which can incorporate "personal" writing as a lead into "academic" writing. Different instructional activities are designed in a process-focused approach to writing. Writing methodologists such as Koch and Brazil, Lindenmann, and Proett and Gill have incorporated various activities into a process-focused approach. Examples of these activities are: journal writing, brainstorming, free association and information-gathering. Activities such as these can lead to summarizing which readies the students for the next phase in the writing process— a review of ideas and a clearer focus regarding their writing materials.

Activities related to the drafting/writing phase include "strategic questioning" (Richards 1990, p.113) wherein students examine the following set of questions: "What do you really want to write about? What is your attitude toward this task? Why? What have you learned about your topic? What do you still need to find out? What interests or surprises you about the topic? What ideas seem to fit together? What is the most important thing to know about the topic? Who might want to read what you are going to write?". Following the "strategic questioning", students are given exercises such as time-focused writing, elaboration, reduction, writing thesis statements and topic sentences and group drafting.

The revising phase includes editing and proofreading activities such as peer feedback, group-correction, rewriting, revising heuristics and
teacher feedback.

In evaluating the “process” approach methodology, Zamel (1987) feels that teachers have a less controlling role in process-oriented teaching and they have to abandon the idea that they “own” knowledge. The “process” approach may be threatening to the instructor, since the goals they are working towards are not clearly defined.

Diaz (in Zamel 1987, p. 706) describes a favorable classroom situation with the “process” approach. He “emphasized the critical nature of writing meaningfully for a real purpose and audience, established an encouraging and nonevaluative environment, and provided numerous opportunities for student collaboration and peer feedback. This classroom thus helped build in the student an awareness of herself as a writer, gave her a sense of confidence and self-worth...”.

Zamel 1987 indicates that trust is established in classes employing the “process” approach. Choice and authority are shared by teacher and students to foster writing as a “meaning-making event”. Thus students develop positive attitudes towards writing as well as growth in their writing performance.

Recent classroom research by Ammon (1985 in Zamel 1987; p. 709) suggests that students will perform better when they are given integrated experiences that enable them to comprehend the ways in which language makes meaning. However, many ESL teachers are still not ready to adapt a process approach for limited English proficiency students.

CONCLUSION

Zamel urges us to consider the adaptation of a pedagogy “that recognizes who our students are, a pedagogy that takes into consideration and acknowledges these students’ attempts at creating and negotiating
meaning." (1987, p. 709). We must be aware of the fact that writing in school is not only a question of learning basic skills or correcting errors. It should be a new approach to knowledge and a chance to become a member of a discourse community. We must take into account the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the students as we attempt to bring them into the academic world.

Freire (1985 in Zamel 1987) suggests that the teacher take on a "role of co-inquirer" to better understand the students' writing performance and the factors that influence it. Zamel adds that we should examine our own teaching and try to assign tasks which mirror our students' intentions and their background knowledge.

From my own experience in using process approach based texts (Keenan Segal and Pavlik 1990 a; b), I see that there is a need to incorporate many facets of writing into such an approach. These texts introduce grammatical sequences along with the experiences of journal "brainstorming", the use of pictures and questions to initiate descriptive writing and themes which are developed in each chapter. Students work on a single rhetorical focus such as narration, exposition, classification or summary. They follow the steps of getting ready to write, developing skills, writing and editing. These texts follow a modified version of the process approach which allows for ample self-correction and peer-correction techniques. There is a use of small group or pairwork to give feedback which lets the teacher take on the "co-inquirer" role which Freire proposes. We work together exploring ideas, organizing them and developing cohesion and style in this process.

The teacher must become a guide, reader, editor and expert in language forms, understanding meaning and cultural background, not merely someone who corrects errors. I look ahead to further research
in "personal" and "academic" writing through the process approach as I continue to explore and construct my own teaching methodology.

Bibliography


