Situating Writing Processes

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What do you see, or experience or associate with, . . . writing process?

What does this idea, this hulking central concept, look like to you?

While I'm *pretty* sure that our associations differ but also have very much in *common*, I'm certain of one thing: that something and not nothing came to your mind. The reason is likely obvious—process is for us writing professionals, a familiar—a veritable known known. Process is "the 'Given' in our Conversations" (1); "that huge, brilliant, longest-running cocktail party ever in composition" (196). Process is what we've taught for decades, and as Yancey and her co-authors observed recently, process is something students *do* seem to transfer. Process, we might say, is just our automatic default.

But, what is it? To start, while it may be a known, process lives with us today in what I see as a contradictory place. On one hand, many years of postprocess and social constructionist questioning has made unsteady our focus on process. On another, continued disciplinary expansion has pushed our inquiries well beyond interest in just classroom writing, where process to this point has seemed most relevant. Said another way or maybe even on a different hand, compositionists have long observed how process has retreated as our central, active, operative term.

And yet, and on another hand still, as Chris Anson has written, the goals and methods of process pedagogy have stuck around, prominently. In his

words, process remains deep in the discipline's bones and as the "lifeblood of our praxis" (226). And though we engage our pedagogical attentions more today in political, civic, public or cultural terms (225), process remains.

But, again, what is the nature of this lifeblood? The many-handed positioning of process—vague disinterest but staid persistence, an uncertain relationship between process and our community and civic commitments—provokes me, us, to reexamine what it is we're doing when we're teaching with process today.

So, toward this reconsideration, I want to do two things: first, I go looking for what we think process is, and find it in recent position statements on the teaching of writing. From there, I make a simple claim and plea: that when we invoke, talk about, read about, reflect about, and study processes in our classrooms now, we must do so in ways that

> *physically situates*, and thereby differentiates, writing processes. By situating, I mean observing with our student writers how a given process is inescapably *entangled with* and *susceptible to* the spatial, embodied, material, community, social, rhetorical, cultural, and historical constraints of **WHERE** that writing act is located.

To illustrate how we can situate process in our teaching, I'll conclude by describing some reflective, visual inquiry methods in which student writers observe and report on themselves writing something.

Given that we know writing is a thoroughly contextualized art and no longer if ever a set of acquirable general skills, process cannot remain as *a priori* plans we teach to students for controlling composing. Rather, our process teaching must help writers see how ***where writing is*** determines ***how writing unfolds***.

II. How Recent Position Statements Position "Process"

Recent position statements that set over-arching goals for writing instruction, including the Framework for Success, the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0, and NCTE's Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing—each include "writing processes" in their small sets of outcomes

and assumptions. Process in these documents is valued right alongside rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking, making it clear again that process continues to form the foundation, or indeed "the lifeblood," of our essential pedagogical beliefs.

And across these documents, uniformly, process is *strategies.* NCTE's recently updated statement, "Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing," keeps as one of its 10 precepts simply that "Writing is a Process." In describing it, the document authors emphasize that processes are not singular and should not be taught as a "formulaic set of steps." Instead, processes should be seen as a set of "skills and strategies" that cannot be learned "once and for all" and that may vary in relation to different purposes. Process *strategies*: that we know well, that we can see. With our outlines, drafts, peer reviews, webs, freewriting, reflections, track changes; with our zero-drafts, says-does, portfolios, graphic organizers—we know well ways to imagine steps for writers to help them develop texts.

The notion that process is multiple—that there are proces***ses*** not ***the*** writing process—and that they change with rhetorical circumstance reflects, I think, years of healthy process critique. But that specificity gets muted in "Professional Knowledge" as the document sees process as *specific pre-set textual behaviors*—"a repertory of routines, skills, strategies, and practices, for generating, revising, and editing different kinds of texts." In short, process here remains abstracted in those familiar "process wheel" terms of, essentially, prewrite write revise edit publish.

That sounds familiar. But to me, outdated, out of step. This characterization, process as strategies, even if *varied* strategies, is simply and starkly dissonant with the ways our field continues to undermine general writing skills instruction on every other front. We situate writing today not just in rhetorical situations, but in workplaces, in activity systems, in disciplinary and community discourses, in home languages and dialects, in genres as social action. But process somehow seems to escape the impact of situation. Process remains in these statements a writer's *own* to control, to deploy as a sure guide.

I wonder about process not as a certain stable strategy, but as the situated *experiencing of composing*—as what is more unstable or conditional and still essential to process, but not expressly codifiable or repeatable. Process "strategies," after all, are never really stable in experience.

Processes, for one, are deeply contingent on material tools, the means of production, or on the specifics of their social situatedness—like discourse conventions, or the tension among language variety and the policing of 'appropriateness' or 'correctness.'

These statements, in other words, suggest still that process can somehow float above or *before* specific writing situations, as hermetically sealed, out of time, disembodied, acontextual, prefab, even if varied. This view misses a lot. It misses the physical environments, writing tools, affect, movement, modalities, conventions, reader interaction, cultural identities, communities of practice, disciplinary values, institutional systems, and so on, that each *differently* bear on a given process. So I wonder: how can our classroom work with process account for the shaping realities of any writing situation, those constraints that exceed the steady vision of writing epitomized in the process wheel?

III) Seeing Processes, Situating processes – *one* classroom method

Sidney Dobrin has observed that the process paradigm, or perhaps process ideology, has meant that even "in the most politically savvy classrooms" (138)—talking about and doing *processes* remains peculiarly *immune from* such locatedness. In Dobrin's words, in process classrooms "[s]tudents learn to repeat strategies rather than to manipulate discourse from communicative scenario to communicative scenario" (Dobrin 138-9). In other words, process can be pre-scripted and prescriptive, structured in advance for students by the teacher*,* as it is they who sets forth "what prewriting is, what editing is, what revising is. . . and so forth" (138).

So in lieu of continuing to practice process prescriptions, I ask in my classes: How can student writers critically engage and deconstruct their *own* preconceptions about "process"? What can student writers learn from observing and describing their and others' processes? What happens if we engage process pedagogy as a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, enterprise?

I have much to say about such methods and possibilities, but I have time to offer just a place to start—so I'll show you the first of what I call "experimental process reflections." The first prompt is simple: students choose a time when they are writing something, anything, not for my class.

They video record themselves (or use other options if needed) for some period of time, and after reviewing their recording and listing 15-20 things they noticed in detail, they answer reflective questions, which you can see here.

What happens when writers do this? Looking back on one set of student observations, I note first the great range of writing. Many focused on developing school-genres, like discussion board posts or lab reports. Others focused on how they wrote a professional genre, like a program application or newspaper article. Still others observed processes of personal or social writing several of which, surprisingly, were snail mail *letters*, or more to our expectation, synchronous chats or lists. Students wrote in ranging environments, including study rooms, bedrooms, common rooms, basements, libraries, couches, beds, other people's living rooms— locations that buzzed with activity that sustained and paused, halted and enabled their process: music of all kinds, movies or TV, texts for reference, phones, family members, pets, and more.

I note too and value how students described their surprises in watching themselves, some which you can see here. But too, while writers saw many specifics, they also glossed over activity: for example, many reported that they just "wrote" for a while and then, of course, dutifully "fixed their errors" at the end, no matter what and where their writing was. This is to say, many of these first observations were general, and no doubt shaped by their presumptions about process as code of conduct.

Though generalities remained, the clearest valuable outcome of this first observation exercise is deep *curiosity*, the start of seeing writing's situated differences.

Here are some provoking things students wondered about: differences between disciplines, between genres, between situational, environmental and ambient contexts. They want to know about *others'* writing behaviors, about what they're missing, can't yet see, or might never be able to see.

It's this curiosity and inquiry stance I value most, habits writers continue to exercise through other impromptu studies across my classes: process drawings, interviews with writers about process, observing writing in an unusual environment or with unusual tools, closely examining the physical

body engaged in writing, an ethnographic-style study of a writer or group of writer's processes, and so on.

IV) Conclusion – Situated Processes, Never *Fully* a Writer's *OWN*

As I mentioned at the open, in their compelling study of transfer, Yancey and her coauthors thoughtfully review research that suggests that "students do develop a writing process and they do use and adapt it as they move beyond FYC" (16). It's right and hopeful that process is something that sticks with those we instruct. But this particular tacit way of talking about process—that a writer develops *A, one single,* if adaptable process that is the writer's *own*--that strikes me as insufficient given the infinite range of ways writing process happens in and out of school.

It's not just that there is no one single process for everyone—we know this well. And it's not just, or never was, that it's processes plural because every single writer has their own distinct process. That too implies much too much sameness, repetition, for the ranging and situated ways writing comes to be.

Instead, situating processes shows us that any given writer doesn't *have* ***a*** process, or even several processes, that are just theirs alone. A situated writing process is never just what I or you as a writer *alone* does; it is also significantly what **where we are** does.