

The Nature of Developmental Writing: Cognition, Context, and Instruction, Linda Best, Kean College of New Jersey

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Abstract Twelve developmental and twelve at-level writers participated in this cognitively-oriented study. The data they generated when talking aloud during composing exposed the differences separating them as writers. Discussion includes insights on the nature of developmental writing, the interaction of cognition and context during composing, and instructional strategies.

The research reviewed here is a cognitively-oriented study I conducted to examine the differences separating at-level and developmental college writers. Twenty-four students, twelve from each group (as identified through admissions data and placement testing), participated in the study. After completing a series of standard warm-up tasks, the students talked aloud as they prepared three distinct rhetorical tasks in separate, individual writing sessions. The data collected consisted of complete audiotapes of the talk-aloud sessions and accompanying transcripts, the written work for each task, and notes I recorded while observing the students write. The study aimed to examine the nature of developmental writing, to analyze the differences separating developmental and expert writers, and to explore ways to facilitate students' developing skills in the classroom. Its findings were examined in light of three critical topics: cognition, what writers know and do; context, the external factors that shape composing; and the nature of instruction.

The study was designed to examine all the writers' verbalizations--not just those corresponding with the words they actually wrote in their essays. This procedure distinguishes my work from other research on writing that focuses solely on the cognitive activity tied to the translation of words on paper. In designing this feature, I reasoned that the verbalizations surrounding the actual writing of a text were likely to expose the decision-making and thinking processes that facilitate the production of text. The data did, indeed, show this to be true. During the times when writers were talking (and thinking) but not writing, they engaged in a range of mental activities. They evaluated

the tasks, tried different topics, recalled other writing experiences, searched for words, recited rules, and made decisions about topics, language, and structure.

Certain knowledge and skills supported the students' writing activity. The twenty-four writers possessed knowledge about writing and grammar. They spoke about thesis statements, focus, supporting details, punctuation, and patterns of sentence structure. They reminded themselves of the purposes introductory paragraphs serve and spoke about the use of transition words, as well as the importance of topic sentences. On the surface, all twenty-four writers appeared to possess the same knowledge about writing. A close examination of the data indicated, however, that the depth of their knowledge varied. The at-level writers exposed a substantial knowledge base. Their skills appeared to have developed through the study of knowledge in context, through the examination of multiple illustrations that captured the full range of knowledge on the topic, and through the study of the connections among different bodies of information within the domain. The developmental writers, in contrast, handled information about writing in a rote, decontextualized manner.

The most significant difference between the two types of writers was their approach to writing a whole essay. The at-level writers exhibited control and organization over their essays--the entire text, from beginning to end. They did much more thinking before putting pen to paper than the developmental writers did. The developmental writers appeared to be pushing themselves to complete their work. That is, they completed a section and then moved on to the next, rarely returning to the beginning of their work to direct their thinking. They tended to move forward only, whereas the at-level writers engaged in a recursive process. As a result, developmental writers' essays often lacked coherence and/or drifted from the topic.

Throughout the study, contextual, external factors, such as the content studied in other courses, experiences, and the rhetorical tasks interacted with cognitive factors to facilitate composing. That is, information from outside sources accessed and was shaped by information about writing skills to push along the composing process. Most noticeable were the effects on the study's three rhetorical tasks: writing a journal entry; completing a narrowing-the-topic exercise, whereby the students narrowed a single word, such as TRADITION or COMPETITION, to a topic suitable for an essay of approximately 250 words and worked on the essay through the final draft; and responding to a direct question (e.g., "Why is the study of art, music, or literature beneficial?" or "What were the effects--both local and national--of the Oklahoma City bombing?"). Each elicited distinct approaches to writing. The journal entry triggered the students' knowledge about format, the use of first person, and the freedom to write in a casual tone. Writing the journal was a linear process for all twenty-four writers. The narrowing-the-topic exercise, which did not elicit a particular structure or approach for writing, triggered intense planning activity. Its open-ended nature forced the writers to pull in knowledge about writing to manage the task. The number of verbalizations in preparing this particular task was much higher than those for the other tasks. The task was cognitively demanding, and the at-level writers were far more comfortable with it than the developmental writers were. The third task, the direct question, had a built-in format. The students found that it resembled typical academic assignments and they possessed strategies for completing it. The task was familiar, eliciting mechanical responses. In contrast to the narrowing-the-topic task, the direct

question offered students limited opportunities to practice and discover strategies and skills for writing.

The study's findings offer direct insights for instruction and implications for educational practice, particularly for the teaching of developmental writing. First and most important, the study exposed the strategies and skills developmental writing instruction must target. Many times, instructors are distracted by their students' errors and proceed to teach grammar directly. Over the long run, this direct instruction has little effect on the quality of the students' work, for it fails to guide them to understand grammar in context, to evaluate their own use of it, to develop personal strategies and skills for knowing and detecting errors they typically write, and to become monitors of their own thinking and writing. Instruction needs to focus on skills rather than information alone, process rather than product, and students rather than teachers. Suitable class activities include the teacher's modeling of the writing process and skills through his/her own participation in course assignments; writer-centered groups; opportunities to read papers aloud to "hear" grammar, presentation, and coherence; in-class student/teacher mini-conferences for students' text-specific questions; use of the students' work as text, which includes coded marking corresponding with in-class lessons and exercises for guiding students to review and mark their papers for any number of purposes--to check the use of transitions or to label sentence types, for example.

The research conducted offered the type of insights I sought. Although not providing a final, definitive description of writing, it provided specific information on strategies and skills for writing. Most importantly, with its focus on both at-level and developmental writers, the study exposed the strategies and skills developmental instruction must target. It stressed the nature of thinking during composing and the need to guide developmental students to respond critically to their work--to address grammar and more global issues regarding the quality of their writing.
