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K–12 Students as Writers

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We present this chapter in three sections: The Processes Writers Use, The Evaluation Processes Writers and Writing Instructors Use, and The Processes Writing Instructors Use. Initially, we present information about the processes writers use in classrooms, homes, and community centers when they are engaged in creating meaning of importance to them. Then we move into evaluation, an ongoing process used by writers and instructors as they review what they have done, are doing, and want to do next; they establish an ongoing evaluation loop driven by their determination to continuously improve. We end with views of instructors immersed in their craft, as they support and stretch the writers they teach.

The Processes Writers Use

What do writers do as they create texts? And how do their processes shift when they engage in online literacy? These questions undergird this section in which we examine The New Literacies and The Processing Demands of Writing. We see writers in the midst of what are fast becoming the common literacies. Then, we present the complicated nature of what writers do when they are in the process of writing, regardless of the task.

The Processes of New Literacies  Yancy (2009) challenges the process model of writing as representative of what student writers do in the 21st century—or certainly whether it is applicable as often as it was in the latter decades of the 20th century when it emerged. Currently, what students do when they write is often a one-step process. A quick, first draft is off and read by millions on the Internet within minutes or seconds. And, if the student-writer is putting forth a call to action, action happens, as when one AP student called for, via Facebook, the injection of a particular phrase of humor in the AP exam. Thousands of students complied.

Our younger generation is redefining who we are as literacy creators and users (Leu, 2002; Williams, 2008). Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace permit writers to create their identities and use them to connect to others. When writers create their own social networking page, they make continuous decisions about the identity they want to portray, redefining the notions of audience and voice.

Jacobs (2008) found this to be the case with Lisa, a 15-year-old girl who composed at home using Instant Messaging (IM). In doing so, Lisa adjusted her messages depending upon her audience and purposes. For conversational exchanges with friends, Lisa used abbreviations and alternative spelling patterns, and for more serious exchanges, she carefully modified her language.

In a 2-month study of Rosa, her 6-year-old daughter, Wollman-Bonilla (2003) didn’t document differences within digital messages, but she did find differences between digital and print messages. When the study began, Rosa was familiar with creating handwritten letters, and email was new, but she learned the genre features associated with it. Rosa’s emails were more telegraphic, and conversational. She largely ignored punctuation and capitalization in them, and learned to use type to express gestures.

The first-grade students of Brennan (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007) took email a step farther. Angered by the plight of a homeless woman, the children used digital literacy to raise their voices in support of her, and sent their writings to the local newspaper. They received response and, importantly, the children continued, without prompting by Brennan, to write emails to support the woman’s needs. This project marked a change in the writing processes of these children when they used computers. Previously, Brennan gave them programs designed for students, and the children were not in charge of the content. By deciding, on their own, to write about this real issue, the students were in control of the technology rather than being controlled by it.

Wanting to explore her students’ 21st-century writing habits Kajder (2007) asked her 10th graders to list the tools they used for writing. They began with pen, paper, comput-
ers, and then, one student said, “Weblog.” Another turned to Kajder and said, “That’s not writing. You asked us for tools we use as writers. That means stuff from in here. That can’t be on the list” (p. 150). As the conversation continued, the students listed many new literacies and Kajder was wise enough to change. The teens started to use their tools rather than hers in the classroom, and wrote, in part, via podcasts, wikis, and fan fiction, within the context of global, responsive communities. Importantly, Kajder realized they wanted to write well, and taught them within these new literacies.

Some students frequently immerse themselves in video games, which can be another source of inspiration. Raker (2006) studied an 8-year-old boy named Adrian who used videogames to inspire his writing topics and formats. Adrian developed plots, raising problems and quickly resolving them, only to develop other problems. These plot sequences in video games can parallel plot structures in chapters of narrative texts, but in videogames these sequences are often nonlinear and require the player to determine his/her own fate. This complicated structure worked for Adrian; for him this type of story is the one with which he is most familiar. To consider videogames as mentor texts is an option many students may value.

Zenkov and Harmon (2009) also capitalized on each of their diverse students with a camera, they took pictures for several months and, by mixing media, they documented their answers to these questions: What are the purposes of school? What helps me succeed in school? What gets in the way of my school success? Importantly, the students shared their creations with younger members of the community; they felt a responsibility to provide guidance to the youth. And they shared with their elders to show their appreciation to those who had inspired them.

Digital writing in which students express controversial views can raise concerns, however (Witte, 2007). Cassandra, a middle school student of Witte wrote essays and poems on a blog and when Witte asked about this Cassandra replied, “That’s online writing, not boring school writing.” Witte decided to blend blogging with school writing. Her students responded to novels via a blog and other students provided comments, but district administrators asked her to cease the project because of their concerns about privacy. Reluctantly, Witte stopped, much to the students’ dismay. They were incensed. They picked up their pens and wrote letters to the administration in protest.

In closing this section on New Literacies we see, overall, a change in the writing processes many K-12 students use. We began this section with Yancy (2009), who proposed plan, draft, revise, edit, publish as a writing process that must be reconsidered in this 21st century, and our review of students’ engagement in New Literacies appears to support that challenge.

**The Overall Processing Demands of Writing** Increasingly large numbers of diverse students and technologies led Torrance and Galbraith (2008) to look at the many simultaneous processes engaged in by 21st-century writers. They monitor the coherence of their texts; revise, search for, and retrieve relevant content; identify search terms; create syntactic structure; inflect words; consider their audience; plan and locate Web sites; use visuals in various ways; and submit their creation for immediate response. Torrance and Galbraith, recognizing the complexity of students’ writing tasks, hypothesize that part of their development involves developing writing-specific memory management strategies that involve the foregoing processes. This appears to tie in with the oft-held dictum that for students to become writers, they need to write frequently. As they gain fluency writers engage in dynamic writing processes that appear to be more true to what writers do, rather than engage in more simplified processes.

In studies of the writing processes of 15-year-olds, Rijaarsdam and van den Bergh (2008) documented the decisions the adolescents made when they wrote. Via analysis of think-aloud protocols the researchers documented the frequency of eleven cognitive processes and found that the processes changed in frequency as a writer progressed through the task. And, the processes changed in nature. Thus, it would be simplistic to say that their writing processes were recursive. Instead, revision occurred at different times, for various reasons. Given that the writers engaged in the various aspects of writing repeatedly, in an unpredictable order, the question about processing demands of writing becomes: How do writers decide when to strategically engage in which process? This research shows that writers consciously decide whether and when to engage in particular processes, such as when to restructure or reread, leading to the possibility that procedural knowledge must also be represented in models of writing.

Most learning processes are not linear. Lindfors (2008) explains this when she writes about the processes children use when they talk, read, and write. With intention, they question, demand, and cajole. Children communicate with purpose. Their ability to express themselves depends, to a large degree, on the others with whom they interact; the responses they receive lead them forward (or not) as language users. Parallel notions apply to writing. Children who understand the power of writing experience it as a way to create texts that matter to them; their ability to express themselves depends, to a large degree, on the responses they receive. These evaluations lead them forward (or not) as writers.

Dyson (2008) writes about the children in a first-grade classroom who tried, unsuccessfully, to write texts that mattered to them. Their teacher, required to teach personal narratives by modeling events from her own life, wrote about going to movies and going out to dinner, but her students didn’t identify with those ideas. During recess, the children created a world for themselves in which they used pine cones as weapons. When they returned to the classroom, their Pine Cone War became their personal narratives, despite their teacher’s expressions of unease. Eventually, she banned “war” from the classroom, telling students about the real war (Iraq) going on and how people are dying. One student
explained to Dyson that war was banned because Mrs. Kay was “thinking about real war, not fake war.” Overall, the response of these children to their assignment to write personal narratives shows the problematic nature of an adult requirement that does not help children experience writing as a way to create texts that matter to them.

Response from peers and its influence on text construction, was noted by Kissel (2009) in his ethnographic study of pre-kindergarten writers. As children wrote about ideas of their choice (via image, movement, talk and/or print), interactions with peers influenced what they decided to put on the page. The young writers allowed others’ suggestions and ideas to take their writing in surprising and unexpected directions. By listening to their conversations, watching interactions, and asking the children about their final products, their idiosyncratic, natural processes of creating meaning became clear.

Ray and Cleveland (2004) write about children as decision makers. Co-researchers in Cleveland’s K–1 classroom, they show what her young authors do as they write books. We see the decisions the children make as they decide what to write about, what to illustrate, what to put on which page, and how to arrange their pages. As did the children in the above examples, these children engage in dynamic processes when they write.

In Writing Now (2008) the National Council of Teachers of English states that students need to engage in the kinds of writing shown above, and they provide three descriptors of the processes writers should engage in: holistic, authentic, and variable. In order to engage in holistic writing processes, their writing experiences must be multidirectional and multifaceted. They will not, in other words, progress through linear stages of a writing process. When they engage in authentic writing processes, student writers will create a wide variety of genres; address real, diverse audiences; identify their own strengths and weaknesses; and intentionally work to improve. They will seek and receive response while they are in the process of writing. Given that writers vary, the writers in a class will be at different points of expertise on any given day. They will write across the curriculum (WAC), and they will not do so by following formulas.

This provides us with a dynamic view of writers that guides us as we consider evaluation—by students and their instructors.

The Evaluation Processes Writers and Writing Instructors Use

In what ways do teachers and students find value in writing? This question undergirds this section as we review the evaluation processes writers continuously engage in as they compose, and then the evaluation processes writing instructors continuously engage in as they teach.

The Evaluation Processes of Writers The importance of students evaluating themselves is often lost in K–12 writing instruction. In our teacher education classes we continue to hear tales of The Red Pen—told by parents whose children currently bring home bled-upon papers accompanied by, “Mom, I don’t know what to do!”

Student-writers can, however, be immersed in instruction that helps them figure out what to do. Their teachers learn about self-evaluation by writers in methods classes such as those taught by Delp (Freedman & Delp, 2007), based upon what she did with her eighth graders. The students played a large role in determining when, from whom, and what kind of assistance they needed. Through interactions with other students, the curriculum, and herself, her writers evaluated themselves and, in so doing, created opportunities for themselves. Delp supported them as they challenged themselves and, in accordance with what will become the theme of this section, the students’ and Delp’s evaluations drove instruction. Further evaluation informed additional instruction, and an evaluation-instruction loop became this classroom’s signature. This loop, as we will see, serves as the central feature of classrooms in which students engage in dynamic writing processes and teachers welcome, support, and advise those processes.

Students, such as those in the above classroom, who learn to self-evaluate—see value in themselves—can become agentic authors (Hull & Katz, 2006). A case study of a young teen showed: the process of self-evaluation underlies the degree to which a writer intentionally becomes better. This writer’s sense of self, her self-construction, was enhanced by supportive relationships and the opportunities for expression offered by a digital story. The young teen found it important, within the setting of this study in a community center, to negotiate what she wrote about and how she represented herself to the world. With these responsibilities, which she had seldom experienced in school, she worked hard. Hull and Katz close with a cry for teachers to support students “academically as learners, and socially as human beings…. And take seriously…their abilities to agentively engage in learning” (p. 73).

This research-based advice is, however, often not followed. In 2007, Pajaras, Johnson, and Usher studied the sources of students’ self-efficacy beliefs about themselves as writers. Their analyses showed that students, especially middle school students, believe they are good writers if their teachers think they master their assignments. To rephrase, the students did not study their writing to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses and intentionally work to improve—a necessary task if they are to become writers, as different from students who simply complete writing assignments.

If the above research paints a negative picture of students’ reliance on teachers, NCLB has led us to paint an even more negative picture of our profession (Pearson, 2007). Whereas one cornerstone of evaluation is to value individual differences, federal policies “Have decreed that individual differences will not exist, either in the outcomes of education or in the means by which we attempt to achieve those outcomes” (p. 146). Within effective writing
instruction, however, students send signals to their teachers about their strengths and needs, teachers read those signals, and provide feedback. This, however, is not possible within our current mandates that Pearson says are “hopelessly misguided and morally indefensible” (p. 158).

In order to shed light on evaluation within our culture of tests, Fu and Lamme (2002) studied two third graders and their portfolios. In each case, when the teacher, parent, and child sat down with the child’s portfolio, they saw clear improvement in the work, and everyone, especially the children, articulated their changes in quality, length, and level of enjoyment. Tests don’t provide as much information as the students’ work and the collective perceptions of it.

Extending work on portfolios, a group of teacher-researchers at a Michigan National Writing Project site conducted a study of digital portfolios (Hicks et al., 2007). Their goal was to engage their students in the creation of them as a way to intentionally foster their self-evaluation and growth. The students constructed their own portfolios, but the public nature of their postings led to questions by other teachers about the students’ evaluative decisions. One high school teacher noted spelling and editing issues raised by other faculty members, which left the teacher wondering whether she needed to pose standards on the students’ portfolio choices. On a positive note, a fifth-grade teacher appreciated the comments students wrote to each other about their portfolio entries; their responses showed that they became more effective at evaluation over time. Overall, the importance of the decisions student-writers make when posting texts online becomes a topic to be addressed in our 21st century.

**The Evaluation Processes of Teachers** Scott (2008) presents a brief history of assessment processes used by teachers, beginning with multiple-choice tests (1950s–1970s), holistically scored writing tests (1970s–mid-1980s), and portfolios (mid-1980s–90s). When writing teachers started to use portfolios, they used them as a means to honor their students’ evaluations, but as larger numbers of teachers found portfolios useful, states started to collect writing data in the form of portfolios and, unfortunately, created ways to standardize them—defeating their purpose. This practice is part of the current assessment process most frequently engaged in by teachers—standardization.

As a probable way to enable useful standardization, rubrics arrived. To argue caution in their use, Wilson (2007), a high school English teacher, suggests that rubrics cheapen the language we use to respond to student writing. They are a form of standardization and our use of them can devalue our writers’ work if feedback is prescriptive; writers need meaningful, specific, rich feedback. To support students’ growth, however, teachers must know how to provide meaningful feedback. In a study of urban middle school teachers’ written responses to students’ drafts, researchers Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, and Valdez (2004) found that an overwhelming majority of the responses focused on conventions rather than content. Further, even when the comments focused on content, the comments were not necessarily helpful in aiding the student to create a final product that would be more effective than the draft. In schools where students’ academic scores are low, it is especially important that teachers learn what to say when they provide written responses to drafts. The difficulties of evaluation stem, at least to some degree, from the complicated nature of the dynamic processes writers use. And, similarly, the oft-uncertain results of evaluation, can only lead to uncertainty within instruction.

**The Processes Writing Instructors Use**

What do instructors do when they focus on *The Processes Students Use*? And, how do their instructional processes differ when they focus on *The Texts Students Create*? In this section we address each of these emphases.

**Instructors Focus on the Processes Students Use** “Studies of how writers work show them shuffling through phases of planning, reflection, drafting, and revision, rarely in a linear fashion” (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003, p. 10). Teaching student-writers just what to do in order for their message to be compelling requires teachers who understand the idiosyncratic nature of the dynamic processes of writing.

Moher (2007), a high school English teacher-researcher, writes about what she does to accommodate her students’ diverse processes when she holds writing conferences with them. She begins her essay, however, with hesitation, “After 25 years of practicing writing conferences, I hesitate to define what it is I do or what a conference should be. To attempt to do so diminishes the possibilities and capacities we might bring to our students, and them to us, in the paradoxical space between silence and dialogue” (p. 27). Her students often come with resistance—resistance they have learned in a school where autocratic methods of teaching prevail, where students seldom make decisions. Moher (2007) closes with her student Mark, details the conferences she held with him, and how her questions brought him to reconsider what he could write. Ultimately, the task of writing instructors is to give students leeway, offer options, focus on what they are learning rather than what they refuse to do, and help them find purpose.

Lassonde (2006) also focuses on the processes of a reluctant writer. In his second year in fifth grade he resisted writing, so Lassonde involved him in an after-school writing group, and encouraged him to confront his beliefs about school—within his writing. Then, Lassonde encouraged him to share his writing with peers, and when he received positive feedback, he gradually formed a more positive identity for himself, a difficult process for a student who is all-too-aware of his weaknesses. Writing forces students to form identities for themselves and is one of the few subjects that require this task. Many resistant writers come to upper-elementary classrooms with harrowing writing experiences; this boy talked about previous teachers who
red-marked his papers, making him feel stupid. Lassonde (2006) found that he wrote when, most importantly, she made time to listen to him.

How to deeply engage writers is a common dilemma. Heffernan (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008) wanted to create the critical space in which her writers felt safe enough to use writing as a way to acquire agency in problematic social situations, a goal she hoped would engage them more deeply in writing than they appeared to be when they wrote personal narratives. To accomplish this, she immersed them in a study of bullying. She read books to them, they listened to each other’s experiences, and wrote 10-minute quick-writes about their own experiences. Then, with Heffernan’s encouragement to step out of their comfort zones—they wrote picture books. Everyone became committed.

Insights from the experienced writing teachers above become complicated in schools where literacy replaces reading and writing. Many literacy specialists are experienced in reading, and slight writing. To investigate the guidance literacy specialists need to provide in writing, McKinney and Giorgis (2009) studied several and found that those who had negative experiences as writers need extensive support in order to become literacy specialists—much more than they typically receive. In particular, when it comes to providing guidance in writing instruction, specialists “need to recognize the necessity of flexible approaches,” especially today when “schools are being pushed toward a narrowing of tasks” in a “world that is becoming more global, requiring flexible skills and the ability to communicate with multiple audiences” (p. 145).

Cutler and Graham (2008) focused on the knowledge base of primary grade writing instructors, and only 20% of the teachers in the survey said they were prepared to teach writing when they entered the classroom. Seventy-two percent, however, said they attend to students’ processes and skills when they teach, implying they try to create flexible skills and the ability to communicate with multiple audiences” (p. 145).

Instructors Focus on the Texts Students Create Teachers have not reached a consensus on how to teach writing, but a major point of agreement, documented by interviews (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003), is that students need to write more in all subjects. Many content-area teachers, however, do not provide these opportunities, and when they do, the writing they request usually consists of brief responses rather than compositions seen as authentic by writers. Thus, writing across the curriculum (WAC), is now emerging as a discipline designed to include writing across subject areas, with the underlying notion that this will give students more time to write than if they only write in language arts and English classes. WAC encourages writers/learners in various disciplines to use writing as a way to learn about and show their knowledge about what they have learned, and WAC is based on a belief that student writers, regardless of their preferred discipline and genre, can learn from each other.

High school teachers in non-English fields who know their textbooks are poorly written, have started to use other genres for their students to learn from and create. A U.S. history teacher (Hansen, 2009) used centuries-old poetry from the Internet and songs to bring compassionate content into the course. Plus, her students wrote their own versions of U.S. history in the form of letters and scrapbooks. They learned, were engaged, and 27 out of 28 of these “general track” students passed their state history exam—a much higher average than that for their school at large. Younger students also benefit from WAC. At the middle school level, Ricklin (2006) writes about social studies students who wrote poems for two voices, showing the use of this genre in a field where many voices often play a role. And, Whitin (2007) writes about kindergarten children who engage in, and write about, a year-long scientific study.

Romano (2000) created multi-genre papers, and they continue to thrive, used by teachers at various grade levels (Allen & Swistak, 2004; Kissel, Wood, & Kiser, 2008) and in various curriculum areas. For these papers, students explore a topic or idea by writing about it in many genres, using the strength of each genre to provide insights. A finished paper shows, in kaleidoscope form, the impact of each format and, together, the writer and audience experience the overall impact of multi-ways of expressing and hearing the author’s idea. Romano, in providing his students with this writing experience, repeatedly hears passion and compassion in their work. This format opens the doors to the world of writing for many of them.

Engaging their students in new literacies is, of course, what many teachers now try to do. Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, and Nierlich (2008) show the power of collaborative writing using Internet projects. In a fourth-grade classroom, students blogged about books with students miles away. The teacher noticed how the blogs encouraged her more reticent readers and writers, so she expanded their online experiences when she looped with her students to fifth grade, by having them co-create poems via Google Docs. Then, they uploaded them to another teacher’s blog where others could hear the poems read aloud. Whereas these various aspects of online writing appealed to students, they especially appreciated receiving instant response from peers.

Alvermann (2008) and Gee (2003, 2004) write about the social draw that brings adolescents into online composing. Young people create content online for audiences who share common interests and spend copious amounts of time discussing this content, revising, and searching for more in the virtual world. Alvermann, in particular, reports on her own research in which a high school student transformed his computer into a virtual recording studio, composing songs and teaching others how to do the same. Overall, 93% of adolescents between 12 and 17 use the Internet as a vehicle for social interactions, a factor teachers consider when they provide writing experiences for their students.

Leander (2007), however, found “dueling discourses” between students and teachers when all were connected
to laptops. In a school where every student had a laptop, teachers’ attempts to honor students’ online-created content challenged their centuries-old notions of the teacher as the authority. When students and teachers alike have access to a multitude of information and sort and blend it into their own coherent wholes, there is no top-down hierarchy; students are equal partners with teachers as they all construct knowledge together. Online literacies perpetuate a participatory culture in which students are active creators rather than passive learners.

Concluding Thoughts

In this information era, where the learner obtains and generates knowledge from multiple sources, while using multiple modalities, the teacher no longer bears all knowledge in the classroom. Through their engagement with online literacies, students access the many teachers who exist at their fingertips. And as they write across these literacies, authorship is neither a solitary, nor completely original enterprise (Alvermann, 2008). For teachers, instruction and evaluation of writers requires a pedagogical shift from “collection coded” to “connection coded” literacy acts (Luke, 2003).

In their evolutionary pedagogical processes, teachers may lose their status as all-knower, but gain by learning with, and from, their students. Teachers step out from behind their podiums into their classrooms. Amidst their writers, they notice, wonder, question, and challenge their students to think critically about online texts, the accuracy of the information, the possibilities of expression, and the potential pitfalls of creating online identities. All of these roles will become important as writing regains a foothold in schools.

Our profession, when we do teach writing, has one foot on the ground and the other in the Ethernet. The foot rests in a writing process grounded in paper and the hand gathers speed as dynamic processes race into the unknown. When writing reclaims its rightful place in our schools, the processes writers use, the evaluation processes used by students and teachers, and the instructional processes teachers use will gain a new life.

References


