

COMPOSITION IN THREE KEYS: ART, NATURE, AND SCIENCE

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Imagine you are at a cocktail party hosted by your college and attended by people from a variety of academic disciplines. Eventually a colleague corners you and inquires: "So, what's your area?" And you unthinkingly reply, "Composition!" From some experience the very next question is usually, "Oh, 'composition.' What's that?" We'll let you imagine the tone and emphasis with which this last question might be asked. But whatever the tone, you feel obligated to respond.

Once you have obliged with some reference to the practice of writing, your astute inquirer will no doubt want to know what could conceivably make this a respectable discipline. You hedge a bit and then proclaim that composition is a discipline that is by nature interdisciplinary. You explain further that writing is such a complex act and so little understood that compositionists have had to draw upon knowledge and methodologies from other disciplines that seem to overlap in their concerns for language use, literacy, human development, cultural artifacts, teaching, and learning. Your colleague, nonplussed, inquires further but shares little interest in technical discussions about methodologies, current scholarship, or the histories of internecine warfare. This colleague of yours just wants a tangible description that can be taken home, distilled, and referenced when needed.

Having been in these social situations, we have been negotiating a shared understanding of composition with colleagues and friends for a number of years. Earlier, as graduate students at the University of Southern California, we often found occasion ourselves to ask “What is ‘composition’?” and “What is ‘rhetoric’?” In that intellectually rich climate, these terms seemed no less illusive than did hermeneutics, deconstruction, pragmatics, ethnography, and so on, ad nauseum, even though we had entered a PhD program with an explicit focus on rhetoric and composition.

In order to grasp some understanding of our field we have examined various attempts to analyze and characterize composition¹ and have worked on a set of keys that immediately reveals professional concerns without trivializing the subject matter’s richness and complexity. In what follows we will explain our keys and hope that they will serve both explanatory and heuristic purposes beyond extricating ourselves from the social exigencies occasionally thrust upon us at collegial gatherings.

Keys as Heuristics

There have been many classificatory schemes proposed for organizing and explaining composition. Probably the most well known (because it is the most fully elaborated and cited) is James Berlin’s categorization of composing process pedagogies.² Based on epistemology, Berlin’s taxonomy juxtaposes “current-traditional” pedagogy with three pedagogical stances labelled “objective,” “subjective,” and “transactional” (later revised and renamed). As it has been described by Berlin, Richard Young, and Maxine Hairston, current-traditional pedagogy favors an emphasis on final written products, on teaching grammar and style, on editing, and on writing to transmit information (as in the form of the research paper). Indeed, for Hairston, many alternatives to current-traditional views collectively suggest a “paradigm shift” in composition, i.e., a significant philosophical transformation in thinking about the field and about the practice of teaching writing. Berlin’s analysis lends some support to this claim in that it offers three approaches that differ fundamentally from the traditional focus on grammar, style, and evaluation of written products.

As an early attempt to chart the territory of composition, Berlin’s work was and is illuminating. However, a primary function of Berlin’s “analysis” has been to advance an argument for one particular perspective on composition and on the teaching of writing. This

perspective Berlin calls “transactional” epistemology and, later, “social-epistemic” rhetoric. In keeping with present intellectual trends, Berlin eventually subsumed rhetoric under ideology, thereby translating pedagogical concerns into ideological ones (“Rhetoric and Ideology”). While we are indebted to Berlin for his pioneering work in analyzing the field of composition, we are less inclined to argue so forcefully for one particular approach to the teaching of writing. Rather, we find that each of several views—art, nature, science—contributes substantially to our understanding of composition as a field.

Although these views, which we now translate as “keys,” do not form a true taxonomy, they provide an immediately recognizable classification system and a set of heuristics for generating further inquiry about writing practices. Just as the key of a musical composition constrains the selection and placing of individual notes in producing desired harmonies, so these keys of art, nature and science signal distinctive harmonies and reveal intelligible patterns in composition. The idea for this scheme came from Louise Wetherbee Phelps in the Composition and Rhetoric seminar she led at the University of Southern California in 1986. Some of the insights gained from that seminar were presented at the 1987 Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.³

Art

In this key, writing is viewed as a craft which can be consciously learned, developed, and taught to others. Composition as art draws heavily upon classical rhetoric, with particular stress placed on invention and its role in aiding composing. In a seminal essay Richard Young contrasts the “art” of writing as understood in classical rhetoric and the “art” of writing as intended by what Young (borrowing from Frank D’Angelo) labels the new romanticism (55). “Art” for the classicist “means the knowledge necessary for producing preconceived results by conscious, directed action” (56). This art results from identifying and elaborating principles believed to be at work when successful writing is produced.

By contrast, “art” in the new romanticism emphasizes different aspects of composing processes in our key of nature. In the new romanticism the art of writing is achieved through the mysterious and magical powers of the human mind. As Young says about this conception of art, “the composing process is, or should be, relatively free of deliberate control” and relies “on the primacy of the

imagination" (55). We'll elaborate further on this concept of "art" in the next section. For now, though, we want to develop this idea of art as a process subject to conscious control and, we will add, yielding a written product that satisfies the perceived requirements of a communicative situation.

One defining characteristic of composition as art is its reliance on rhetorical traditions. The triumvirate of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian provide a formidable intellectual orientation for composition.⁴ In addition, the alignment of writing instruction with classical rhetoric carries along with it the implicit assumption that the practice of writing in the university is also training for active participation as citizens in the wider society. A highly influential contribution to this alignment was Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, a now classic text in its own right and just recently reissued in a third edition. But W. Ross Winterowd and Wayne Booth, among notable others, have also been instrumental in demonstrating the relevance of classical rhetoric for writing instruction.

Instructors working out of this tradition, the key of art, favor such inventive heuristics as Burke's pentad, portions of Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic grid, and the topics (or places) as aids for students to invent possible arguments. Examples of such topics are definition, comparison and contrast, relationships of cause and effect, antecedent and consequence, contraries and contradictions, circumstances such as the possible and impossible, and past fact and future fact. Finally, other aids might be testimonies, the views of authorities, statistics, maxims, laws, and precedents, or examples (see Corbett 97).

Though writing is treated as a process in all three keys, for art the process culminates in a cultural artifact or product that is valuable in itself apart from the uniqueness of the writer. Because composition as art privileges general principles to guide composing, it will necessarily ignore a writer's idiosyncrasies and personal visions in favor of finding the best means to produce a text that will be judged effective for a particular audience in a specific context. Individual personality and voice is thus subordinated to inventing an ethos for the writer. The writer's ethos is a representative voice appropriate for the given occasion that serves best to achieve the writer's aims with a given community. For a student writer this means being able to adapt a "voice" effective for a letter to Dad asking for extra money or to present oneself appropriately when writing a letter of application to a potential employer.

Writing as art also means that writers must pay attention to genre conventions since all texts as cultural products must possess certain recognizable features in order to meet readers' expectations. So, for instance, readers expecting an argument will be confused if they get a narrative about a meaningful experience, even though a meaningful experience can still obviously be part of an argument. From the perspective of composition as art, a writer's effectiveness depends on an ability to use discourse conventions to cue readers (rather than, for instance, relying on a writer's talent for breaking conventions in creative ways or for otherwise establishing a unique style).

In viewing writing as craft or art, the teacher-student relationship resembles the master-apprentice partnership in which novices or beginners hone initially rudimentary skills as they continue to learn the principles of a craft for making a specific, culturally-valued object. Without necessarily putting a limit on the number or degree of skills to be learned and mastered, the goal of writing instruction is to help form an intelligent user of discourse who can consciously adapt and mold language to achieve desired effects in a fairly circumscribed context.

Nature

The last point—forming students into skilled language users to meet social needs—is a major criticism leveled against the view of writing as art. For those who understand composition in the key of nature, treating writing as craft risks encouraging students to become manipulators who use language strategically to achieve desired ends. Moreover, some instructors contend that teaching students to adapt one's voice to fit the communicative context simply enables them to acquire a repertoire of roles. Like an actor's disguises, they can assume these roles for the moment and then escape from them when the occasion for their role-playing ceases. At base, writing as art opens the doors to hypocrisy and deceit for nature advocates whose central focus is writing as the formation of character.

In the key of nature, students are believed to be naturally inquisitive and eager to learn—or they can be encouraged to develop these natural competencies if instructed under the proper pedagogical conditions. Writing as nature eschews deliberate interference in directing the composing process. Rather, instructors holding this view hope to set up certain desirable conditions in the classroom that will allow the individual's inherent ability as a language user to flourish. In the key of nature, writers are valued for their active minds and

encouraged to rely especially on intuition and imagination. Consequently, by allowing the natural tendency of one's mind to find its own meanings in understanding one's experience, the student uses writing to develop personal knowledge and, in the process, to mold character.

Honesty and sincerity are valued in this process; hence writers are encouraged to find an authentic voice, an individual voice that says what they believe to be true and want others to know. Ken Macrorie, an early compositionist in the key of nature, proclaimed "truth-telling" as the primary maxim of his pedagogy. Journal writing was a dominant practice in his classrooms because in the journal students could explore their individual experiences in their own way—without interference by authoritative teachers.

In contrast to composition as art where students are taught to make conventional products to meet communicative needs, within the key of nature the process of writing is valued not only for what it can teach the students about themselves and their worlds, but also for how it can help students exercise their latent abilities for transforming those worlds. Thus, while writing as an art emphasizes the making of an effective product, writing as nature values the doing of writing in part because the discipline of writing-as-action helps the individual develop inherent intellectual, aesthetic, and moral qualities.

The differences between the art and nature keys do not mean that writing as nature completely ignores the written product or that writing as art is not concerned with developing personal qualities. Rather, each key selects a subset of common elements to foreground while still acknowledging the relevance and importance of the backgrounded elements. Yet the contrasts are instructive, as each key prefers a distinctively different view of the person and his or her role in society. The citizen-orator of classical rhetoric informs writing-as-art with the student learning to fit into society by trying out various roles in different communicative contexts and, in the process, learning to negotiate change or reform with others. On the other hand, the writer developing competence in the key of nature seeks to find a self that can serve as a consistent anchor while still assuming socially necessary roles. In other words, an authentic self will be the steadying and unifying power working tacitly behind isolated scenes in which diverse social roles are filled. Social and political change for writers in the key of nature can only follow after the formation of character which itself is preceded by a change in consciousness. Hence, social and political actions are valuable only

if they proceed from a self-conscious individual acting with integrity, sincerity, and conviction.

Since those espousing the natural view stress the transformative powers of mind to develop the self and to reorder the world, pedagogical techniques such as freewriting, keeping a journal, and constant revising are privileged. These techniques force students to plunge into chaos—a favored descriptive term for what happens when students try to break out of habituated ways of seeing themselves and their worlds. Plunging into chaos will make it necessary to pattern their views in new ways, thus allowing the possibility for growth and for enriching one's experience by seeing it from different perspectives.

In *Forming/Thinking/Writing*, for instance, Ann Berthoff portrays

the work of the active mind...[as] seeing relationships, finding forms, making meanings: when we write, we are doing in a particular way what we are already doing when we make sense of the world. We are composers by virtue of being human. (11)

The active mind for Berthoff is synonymous with the imagination, and it is the imagination that provides each person the natural power to find and to create meaningful forms (2). Instead of heuristics as artificial guides directing composing, the imagination, an inherently natural human power, seeks its own meaningful relationship to reality. Berthoff says,

When we teach pre-writing as a phase of the composing process, what we are teaching is not how to get a thesis statement but the generation and uses of chaos; when we teach revision as a phase of the composing process, we are teaching just that—reseeing the ways out of chaos. (“Learning the Uses” 70)

Peter Elbow, probably the best known proponent of freewriting, calls this process of generating chaos “cooking”: “Cooking is the smallest unit of generative action, the smallest piece of anti-entropy whereby a person spends his energy to buy new perceptions and insights from himself” (40).

The non-directiveness of composing for those in the key of nature translates into directives to students to observe phenomena closely, to note significant details, and to look again and again at their

present meanings as further insights will present themselves if the students are diligent in paying attention. Consequently, revision is so important because it pushes students back into chaos and makes them draw further meanings from what they have composed so far. Since composing is natural and benefits most from the least interference by sources outside the students' internal ones, teachers are required to renounce their traditional authoritative role in directing the composing process. Instead, teachers facilitate this process by arranging appropriate classroom conditions to encourage and enable students to perform to their optimum natural abilities. Rather than the master-apprentice relationship in the writing-as-art classroom, in the teacher in the key-of-nature classroom functions like a Socratic midwife helping students to deliver their best writing.

The natural view has been a powerful force in composition, especially during the sixties and seventies, but since the mid-eighties advocates have shifted concerns in a different direction. In fact, the field in general has shifted toward a more social view of composing, downplaying the individual's power to manipulate language and, instead, emphasizing that all language use is embedded in discursive practices relative to particular communities. But more about this shift in the final section. The point here is that though the natural view has been criticized for being naive and extreme in its romantic views of composing, the emphasis on personal ownership of meanings harbors an implicit resistance to meanings imposed by outside sources, thus upholding the integrity of the self and a place for individual mind in creative processes.

Science

While composition in the keys of art and nature are concerned primarily with composing and instruction, the key of science focuses largely on inquiry about writing and instruction. If art centers on "making" texts, nature on the "doing" of composing, science seeks to build theoretical knowledge about this doing and making. However, science is not neutral about its project, for its selection of problems to study are often drawn from practical concerns. Furthermore, science is also motivated to discover knowledge that might eventually inform practice and thus be applied by practitioners as they see fit. These practical concerns are, admittedly, secondary, yet they surely exert pressure on science in determining what research problems are taken up and how funds are distributed.

Scientific inquiry is sometimes stereotypically understood to be empirical studies dealing with experimental treatments, the amassing of data, and statistical manipulation (“number-crunching”) of that data. There are, however, many modes of inquiry, and it is nearly impossible to establish, once and for all, what science really is, or even what the majority can agree on. What we believe is more productive for composition, therefore, is for members to develop an awareness of the various modes that can aid us in understanding our object of inquiry.

There are, for example, modes of inquiry used in composition which we do not necessarily associate with science because they do not entail the analysis of empirical data. Inquiry in these cases may involve the reading of texts or introspection. A recent and helpful account of explaining the sorts of inquiry conducted in composition is *Composition Research* by Janice Lauer and J. William Asher. It is noteworthy that Lauer and Asher do not use the term “science” in their discussion, but rather distinguish among historical, linguistic, rhetorical, hermeneutic, and empirical modes of investigation.

Bearing in mind that various modes of inquiry are available, and that there may be better ways to classify them than scientific and humanistic, we can still recognize a certain loosely related set of ideas about what counts as science in composition. Although this collective idea is still not well developed, nonetheless a rough consensus can be inferred from direct statements of compositionists, the types of studies published, and from journals’ calls for papers. At its core, this idea maintains that science deals with natural phenomena, available to the senses, objectively reported, potentially explicable in physical terms, and usefully researched by direct observation and frequently by quantification. To this we can add that science generally aims at prediction. However, this core is disintegrating as contextualist notions of science which emphasize the observer’s role in inquiry as well as the importance of local context. These notions focus on process and event to influence our understanding of scientific knowledge and to demonstrate the importance of matching the appropriate modes of inquiry with a specific object of investigation.

One of the earliest and best known books on composition research is Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer’s 1963 monograph which reviewed and evaluated forty years of previous research, identified a handful of exemplary studies, and recommended directions for future research. The view of these authors clearly reflects a traditional, stereotypical view of science associated with direct observation, statistical methods, and objective reporting. But

Robert Connors' 1983 critique of the empiricist-positivist research ideology makes it clear that this framework is limited and will not suffice for the kinds of research problems that writing and its practice require.

Statistical methods are certainly helpful in establishing probabilities, for making correlations, and for generalizing. They also are potentially valuable for analyzing texts and for studying groups of people—not only for comparison group studies, which have been controversial, but also for discovering commonalities concerning the language and literacy of cultural and social groups. But statistical methods are not appropriate for researchers studying individual human acts and thought processes. This change in the object of inquiry required new methods, and Janet Emig's case study of students' composing processes shifted attention from written products to the human acts involved in composing them. To study these acts of composing, Emig asked a few students to compose aloud and subsequently analyzed the transcripts or protocols of their comments to draw conclusions about the nature of the process itself. Other researchers have adopted and modified this technique including Sondra Perl and Linda Flower and John Hayes.

Although composing aloud as a research technique is not without its critics, formal inquiry into composing has made apparent the complexity of this human activity. Given its complexity, other modes of inquiry have been employed to capture more of the intricacies involved. Talking-aloud protocols have been complemented by videotaping, interviewing, and text analysis. In recognizing this complexity, researchers are now focusing on the ecological validity of studying individual composing processes in real situations and in natural settings. Toward this end, compositionists are borrowing ethnographic methods and adapting them to meet their particular needs.

In addition to expanding composition's repertoire of inquiry modes and widening the territory for investigation, the 1980s has also been marked by more critical and reflective discussions of past work. Examples of such work can be found in the 1984 anthology *Research in Composition and Rhetoric* by Michael Moran and Ronald Lunsford, and in George Hillocks Jr.'s 1984 meta-analysis of experimental studies that have been conducted since the Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer review. Another important development in the 1980s was the increasing interaction between researchers and teachers, with some individuals wearing two hats as "teacher-researchers" and some students becoming active participants in classroom investigations. As

for the art and nature perspectives, changing views of science signal a general transformation of composition's conception of itself. It is to this new key that we now turn in suggesting future directions for the field.

Composition in a Fourth Key?

We believe our three keys capture the dynamic tension inherent to composition since it began its own process of self-understanding and growth as a potential discipline in the early sixties. But since the mid-eighties, a new key has been gradually emerging that might very well transform the entire field. While it is premature to articulate fully this new key, we can attempt a cursory description that points out trends and areas of convergence.

In general, the current view is shifting toward the social and contextual aspects of composing. Indeed, continued scholarship in classical rhetoric, complemented by recent developments in literary theory, cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology, and the philosophy of language—all set within what is sometimes referred to as a “postmodern condition”—have stimulated a rethinking of disciplinary boundaries, methodologies, and the status of claims about knowledge.

The “sociality” of composing is provoked in part by a reaction against individualism as a version of capitalist ideology. Hence, the stress on individuals making their own meaning found in the key of nature is transformed into a focus on collaborative learning which substitutes cooperation for competition. Since knowledge is now typically perceived as social in its origins, Plato has been resurrected as a classical forebear of postmodern rhetoric due mainly to his Socratic dialogues which exemplify dialectic and dialogue in the pursuit of truth. In fact, the classical rhetorical tradition now includes at least three strands held in counterpoint to one another: Aristotelian rhetoric, different interpretations of Platonic rhetoric, and sophistic rhetoric.⁵ And, as described in the last section on science, research on humans and their interactions has taken on a decidedly ecological cast with concomitant changes in modes of inquiry. Investigations into the composing process now draw more on ethnographic methods and lean more toward case studies carried out in naturalistic settings.

Yet as this new key begins to sound more clearly, we can still hear the notes of past concerns. Composition as art retains a concern for codifying rhetorical strategies, except that now these strategies are expanded to include discursive practices within disciplines,

communities, and cultures in general. Individuals do not so much control isolated strategies but learn how to participate in a range of related discursive practices which are embedded in the communities within which they work and play. In composition as nature, elements of Romanticism are downplayed; however, concern for individual meaning still persists. The difference is that these meanings are not seen as individually created but as communally transacted. The previous emphasis on transforming consciousness, on personal growth, and on an implicit moral development is transformed into helping students become critically reflective about their language and the ways in which that language shapes their perceptions and world views. As a result of these shifts, someone like Ann Berthoff who stresses a continual revising of meaning can embrace Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, by claiming that "reading the world" and "reading the word" are analogous interpretative activities whose chief underlying metaphor "is seeing as a way of knowing and knowing as both insight and the power of envisagement" ("Reading the World" 119).

Perhaps we can tentatively suggest a new key and call it "dialogue."⁶ For if we understand composing as necessarily dialogic, we can organize diverse elements within a single dominant key, and yet a key that allows—indeed embraces—difference and conflict. Composition in the key of dialogue harmonizes seeming contraries of cooperation and competition in a dialectic of mutual activity toward the end of understanding. In its rhetorical aspects, dialogue assumes that all discourse is addressed to someone in specific contexts and aims for coherence. In dialogue the desire to communicate with others compels the writer to respect alternative views and to play those views off against one another in such a productive fashion that new possibilities can arise. In other words, by working together, two or more people who share views and disagree as well are more likely to gain insights or final solutions to problems than for an individual on his or her own.

The character of composition in the key of dialogue will become clearer with time. We may find, though, that other terms are more precise in articulating elements which are now only emerging and dimly perceived. Yet, since our three keys of art, nature, and science are heuristics for orienting and furthering inquiry, if dialogue proves to be less congenial to our intellectual and practical pursuits, then what replaces it may arrive only because we have played out the harmonies of this new key.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Lester Faigley, "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal"; Janice Lauer, "Composition Studies: Dappled Discipline"; Louise Wetherbee Phelps, "The Domain of Composition"; and Cy Knoblauch, "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment."
- 2 Berlin first introduced his categories in his 1982 article, "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." In 1987 he continued to elaborate and apply his scheme in greater detail in his monograph, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. Berlin has since grounded his categories in ideologies specific to each one. (See "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class [1988].) Several other classificatory schemes have been proposed in addition to Berlin's. Some of the more recent ones are Faigley, Arrington, and North.
- 3 The present authors each presented papers at the conference. Barbara Gleason explained the science perspective, Mark Wiley covered nature, and Larry Ferrario art. In that presentation, we used "ideology" instead of "key," but for this paper we have decided for reasons already stated to employ the latter term. In the end, we think "ideology" too readily provokes reactions slanted toward politics. And, although we certainly want to acknowledge the political aspects of all pedagogies, we do not want to reduce the complexities and subtleties of writing to a version of cultural politics. The use of keys is the present authors' decision, however, and does not necessarily reflect Professor Phelps' views nor the other participants in that seminar who have all, nevertheless, contributed in some measure to our present understanding. To Victoria Gordon, Faun Bernbach Evans, Lisa Bednar, Lynn Wright, Ana Boyd, Susan Reed-Jones, Kate Massey, Bob Reichle, W. Ross Winterowd, Dallas Willard, and, especially to Louise, we say "thank you"!
- 4 Certainly Plato is an important figure in the history of rhetoric, yet his influence is often associated with the new romantic rhetorics (Berlin's "expressivists/subjectivists"). As scholarly work continues, however, our understanding of Plato's relevance to rhetoric is evolving and will, no doubt, continue to evolve. We will remark this evolution of rhetoric at greater length in the final section of this paper.
- 5 See, for instance, Murphy's *The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing*; Connors, Ede, and Lunsford's, *Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse*; and Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*.
- 6 The concept of dialogue as an underlying metaphor configuring certain aspects of writing is certainly not a new idea. Louise Phelps has developed the concept extensively in her recent book, *Composition as a Human Science*. Phelps, though, takes "discourse" as her root metaphor with dialogue functioning as one of five qualities essential to discourse. Semiosis, transaction, holism, and dialectic are the others (see pp. 50-61). Our metaphoric use of "dialogue" as a new key is an adaptation stemming from Phelps' analysis, in which she draws from, among others, such theorists as Kenneth Burke and M.M. Bakhtin.

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