COMPOSITION THEORY MEETS PRACTICE AND THEY PRETTY WELL GET ALONG TWICE

Two Reviews

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Miles Myers and James Gray, ed. *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition: Processing, Distancing, and Modeling.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1983.

Eugene R. Hammond. *Teaching Writing.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983.

These are happy books for us, because they are good to steal from. And that is because both *T&P* (best for but not limited to secondary level stealing) and *TW* (college) come out of the Bay Area approach, teachers getting together with teachers and talking about what worked. *T&P* reprints major articles on composition theory — here comes the big guy guest lecturer at the workshop — following each with practical essays (reprints and new material), essays reporting on classroom use of the theory, college, secondary, or primary level. In other words, *T&P* is like a master teacher's annotated copy of Gary Tate's *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographic Essays. TW,* on the other hand, is like an annotated copy of William Irmscher's *Teaching Expository Writing* — a college level composition course framework drawing on sound theory (Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, William Zinsser, many others), but chock — well, for us, chalkful of specific classroom presentations, exercises, and assignments from the author's and colleagues's classes in Maryland, Virginia, Montana, and Louisiana. Good classes, too.

If only for its assemblage of theory, *T&P* is laudable. NCTE has often sponsored one person overviews of the field — some quite good ones, like Weaver (1979) — but how nice to hear again the actual, seminal, voices of James Britton et al. on stages young writers go through, Francis Christensen on sentence levels of generality, Walker Gibson on tough, sweet and stuffy style, Josephine Miles on writing and thinking, James Moffett on cognitive development and the curriculum, D. Gordon Rohman on pre-writing, and Robert Zoellner on talk-write. Nicer still to hear actual What-do-I-teach-Monday responses to the voices, roughly two classroom discussions to each article of theory, an emphasis rare in normal overviews. Not that *T&P* gives no overview. In fact, Miles Myers's introductory essay could pull most of us through an MA oral on composition theory, and gives the book focus. Each piece of theory is placed in a larger context, under one of those three awkward headings of the subtitle (*modeling* we all know as "imitation;" *processing* is the way Radio Shack might microchip away at "process of writing"; *distancing* deals with voice and audience). But at least the category discussions are good. (Here I take the concepts out of book order as, inexplicably, does Myers's essay).

For *modeling,* Myers cogently considers modern imitation theory, particularly its psychological and linguistic premises — behaviorism underlying pattern-drills and parts of speech exercises, Chomskyean mentalism behind sentence-combining material. His overview also sets forth practical problems, some based in theoretical controversies. In sentence-combining, for instance, there are textbook jargon, the method's deadly rote-drill aspect, and students' difficulties with it in paragraphs even after they've apparently mastered it in sentences. One may have forgotten that theory bore on these practical problems, Christensen on questioning the assumptions of sentence-combining. One may have; Myers doesn't, though his documentation muddies things — both books in fact thoroughly foul the Christensen bibliography.[1] Unfortunately, the overview doesn't always square theory with practice. Christensen himself was roundly attacked for overemphasizing the cumulative sentence (main clause followed by non-restrictive modifiers), a theoretical matter which might (but in *T&P* doesn't) illuminate Phyllis Brooks's practical problem, her plea and plan to correct her students' need to move beyond cumulative sentences (215); but the theoretical basis of her work isn't ever touched on in *T&P's* theoretical

discussion, which never questions that cumulative sentences are the most mature structures a writer ever produces (10-11).

Distancing, controlling the psychological space between writer and reader, includes perhaps the most exciting material, though with major omissions. Myers ably links theory from Moffett and Britton, as well as James Kinneavey, Jean Piaget, even Northrop Frye, isolating a general cognitive progression from early personal experience or fantasy prose written for a known audience, a progression moving (with some difficulty) to factual subject matter more remote from experience, written for a more remote audience. Among the most striking practical ways of encouraging that progression is Myers's own, anchoring a student half in fantasy, half in fact — for instance, an imaginary 1840 covered wagon trek journal that must use real towns, rivers, and tribes. Part of this section is, nonetheless, disappointing. I miss any reference to or application of Gibson's work on such distance, his *Persona,* contemporary with Moffett's work and much more readable (Gibson's work appears only in the modeling section). Even more, I expected a fuller treatment of linguistic speech act theory, Myers's strong suit — but only two disjoined paragraphs (35, 41) point to any link between this theory and voice-audience distance. And it is simply bad manners to give as the only bibliographic help his doctoral dissertation, relevant but unpublished. I suggest, as a supplement, the speech act and pragmatics sections from Traugott and Pratt, who speak English while talking linguistics.

The *processing* material is at once a solid and useful integrated presentation of standard theories and a highly unreadable speculation on matters peripheral to most readers of this journal. For the first: Myers gives perspective to the theoretical material, his essay demonstrating for instance how Rohman on pre-writing fits with Britton's transactional stages of development, or how either squares with theory not reprinted in *T&P.* But for the second: there is far too much memory theory. Granted its importance to development: I am glad now to have theoretical precedent for what I always hunched but couldn't prove, that mechanics are best treated as post-writing material. I am also gladdened and instructed by seeing how short-term memory is the writer's operating base and is more accessible in early self-expressive writing stages than in later expository stages. So there's reason to believe that memory theory speaks to the problems of the sixty-words-in-fifty-minutes student, who cannot convert

long-term into short-term. Granted all that, the theory presented still strays too far from composition, and Myers's dense summary overwhelms without clarifying — eighty-eight words present eleven researchers and seven cognitive theories from five decades. That is a topic outline, not a discussion.

And the included practical material has no bearing on what many of us do in our classrooms. Here I risk being utilitarian at the expense of narrow-mindedness, but despite fascination, I simply scratch my college-teacher head over what to DO with "Drawing as PreWriting in PreSchool." This is my problem throughout the processing section, which draws its applications from K-6; but it will be everyone's problem somewhere. The modeling applications are college-level, and a K-6 teacher won't gain more than tangential enlightenment from an exercise asking students for form-by-form imitation of "the opulent capital of Islam, this sprawl of mosques . . ." (211). Teacher listening Bay-Areally to teacher doesn't necessarily mean teacher taking notes. Thank goodness, no? We learn what life is like on the other side of the tracks — the AP track, or the disadvantaged-learner track. Still, in a book of essays, this means a good many pages remaining white — I think everyone will gray up the secondary level essays on distancing (I particularly liked Mary Healy's creation of meaningful audiences in the classroom, and everybody can steal from Vincent and Patricia Wixon's application of talk-write). The secondary level is a middle ground, and secondary school teachers can probably benefit more than others from the whole range of essays.

Still, I'm going to commit the reviewer's sin in triplicate. I don't just want *T&P* to be a different book. I want it to be three different books, one for each teaching level. But as it stands, it is fascinating and useful within the limits specified. You may not change your approach to composition from reading *T&P,* but you will certainly find ways to enrich the approach you have. If you have a Christensen-centered course, for instance, you're comfortable with imitation — so why not steal a bit from those who've stolen a bit from other (non-Christensen) theories — imitation of written voice, dictation, and paraphrase (15-17)?

Hammond's *TW* is close to the college-level *T&P* I just wished up. Its first part is theory, new and traditional, mixed with classroom-tempered comment on students' needs. These chapters are keyed to its last and thickest parts, good

and detailed class procedures and assignments, already tested by Hammond and his colleagues. As important, it's a hope-giving book, one showing that the 70's sensitivity to students in Elbow, Macrorie, and Zinsser can readily handle the mid-80's realism of diagnostic tests (74-77), class attendance (97), student apathy (79-80), even administration memos on grade-inflation (184-185). I like the book particularly for its tone, older grad student to (intelligent) new teachers in the TA lounge, theory read and digested, relevant textbooks — to crib from or avoid — known, student problems and attitudes foreseen because already encountered. True, *TW* doesn't mine theory comprehensively — its "Thinking" chapter for example is largely chat, and could learn from Josephine Miles in *T&P* (31), for example: it's predication, not noun lists, that links thought with essay topics; "Kansas *stinks*" automatically limits topic in ways that neither "Kansas" nor even "Kansas City" possibly could). But at its best, in *T&P's* distancing and processing, *TW* is the preferable book.

You'll find, for instance, an audience chapter, "Writing and the Reader," based on Moffett, modified by the presentation in Young, Becker, and Pike with quick useful excursions into both Aristotle and Flower-Hayes on writer- vs. reader-based prose. *TW* interweaves this with practical commentary on potential teaching disasters, informally identifying (27) three audience types that elude most freshmen (the imagined person, fellow students, and the teacher as "whole person"), and why (confusion with the teacher as teacher, for instance). Later *TW* nicely justifies its own audience assignments while flagging down some common textbook idiocies on the matter (the often repeated exercise about letters on the same subject to two audiences, mom and a girl-friend, is briefly and rationally destroyed, on the grounds that too often students stereotype the worst qualities of both (148).

Similarly, you'll find five college-level theories of the writing process (55-56), with supplements from other sources on specific stages a writer may go through, a satisfying twelve pages, with by the way no overlapping of the theoreticians found in *T&P*. There is a hard look at how the composition text of Brooks and Warren (1979) ignores pre-writing and invention in advising writers on the thesis, advice which *TW* nicely argues short-circuits other stages writers go through (57-58), and does not resemble the way any of us write. After that criticism, ample countering solutions: nine pre-writing possibilities. At the other end of the process, *TW* has fifteen things that

might happen in the penultimate editing/rewriting stage (65-66). And it is all handled with common sense, best represented in *TW's* conclusion on the last stage, publishing (student magazines and elsewhere): "The product *is* what finally matters; we study process in order to help, but students, once they leave the class, will be judged on what they produce" (66). There. Somebody finally said it. This practicality exists elsewhere too. In exercises and assignments, *TW* presents probable stages in writing a paper humanely, as suggestions students may be thankful for, not lock-steps to follow (162). The only matters of process universally built into *TW* assignments are an initial focus on raw material (not on topic or on mode-of-development), allowing pre-writing procedures to apply fully, and an "editing day" well before each assignment is due, a day on which students comment on each other's papers in writing, through a set of questions like "Are there enough facts here to make you glad you read this paper?" (99).

Unfortunately, *TW* doesn't sustain this level of excellence, particularly for grammar, sentence-combining, stylistic imitation, and paragraph structure. The grammar isn't the same old-badly-fashioned stuff, to be sure — the exercises based on error analysis certainly speak to the highly specialized problems each is designed for. Nor is it even boring stuff — one of the most entertaining, a parts of speech "drill," produces phrases like "just off the Great Grammatical railway" (141), though it doesn't derive from Steve Allen TV shows, as *TW* tentatively guesses, but from Roger Price's *Mad Libs* series. No, the problem is — the exercises are HERE. But space devoted to grammar doesn't make sense in a composition text, as *TW* itself knows, citing the research showing "no correlation between the study of grammar and improvement in writing" (50). So there's hardly reason to agree with the wildly hopeful assertion that, with *TW's* procedures, "even the least adept students, those who thought they could not learn grammar, can, when we stick to the 90 percent rules and waive away the rest, begin to make steady progress" (51). If nothing improves in student writing, exactly what is progressing — and why should a composition teacher care if it does progress?

The space used there is needed elsewhere, for the important aspects of modeling, in *T&P's* phrasing. Sixty-five words on sentence-combining don't do the job — nothing here even on structured and unstructured approaches to this method,

not even two sentences to combine (139). For stylistic imitation, *TW* mentions free modifiers and Christensen, but its page and a half there (139) doesn't define the first or footnote the second (so we'd have a shot at finding what the first meant.) *T&P* at least got that right. But poor Christensen overall. He doesn't get credit for an exercise type developed in the 1976 text, a block printed essay, students forced to fight out where the paragraphs should come (129-131) — I doubt *TW* knows it reinvented the wheel here. Christensen's version, at any rate, is fuller, and better — could have been at least a valuable supplement to *TW.* He doesn't even get cited for the phrase most associated with him, "levels of generality" (52). Possibly just as well, since it's unlikely he'd want in on a text that zips through paragraph theory in three pages, and argues mainly that "a paragraph, I believe, can *have* anything" (52). It sure can. But it usually doesn't. I'd think *TW's* "90% rule" for grammar might apply here — and what MOST paragraphs do have are those levels, which *TW* doesn't define or illustrate, and then tosses aside.

Yet despite its weaknesses, I recommend *TW* for its strengths, particularly the way it dances with practical applications. True, YOU won't always dance through your way in finding them — *TW's* format is heavy mud if you're after that super assignment you vaguely remember seeing two weeks ago: no index; no running chapter titles (hard to flip through to the relevant spot); and a Table of Contents that makes up for neither omission, ignoring the fifty-one subheadings of the practical chapters, not to mention the sub-subheadings (thirty-seven in one of them, and they look exactly like the twenty-nine simple subheadings of the previous chapter. Doncha dare get lost.). I find this problem far more off-putting than typos, though I have to mention that we finally have a composition text with *their* not only referring to *a student,* but doing so just before a sentence beginning "Careless proofreading" (44). A little more post-writing editing please in the next edition.

But don't you wait till then. *TW* even now is a good one for the active shelf.

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NOTE

[1]On Christensen bibliography: *T&P* lists his six essays (1967), but intends (12) the expanded collection (1978) — the sentence-combining material had not been written in 1967. *T&P* includes a note on paragraphing to "Christensen (1976)," an item not in its bibliography. Here, Christensen (1978) will serve, as would (1967); but a better paragraph discussion appears in Christensen and Christensen (1976), a writing textbook.

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