

“I’ll keep going until it sounds right”: An assessment of students’ conceptualisations of composing processes

CLARE MORRIS

The English International College, Marbella, Málaga, Spain

ABSTRACT: Considering both current and historical perspectives, this article addresses conceptualisations of composing processes. Drawing on the findings of a recent research project, the article explores the significances of perspectives articulated by students in response to writing tasks and emphasises the multi-faceted nature of those perspectives. It argues that understandings of students’ conceptualisations of composing processes can offer useful insights into progression and development in students’ written work.

KEYWORDS: Conceptualisations, composing processes, writing strength, gender, design, strategies, control, value.

INTRODUCTION

In suggesting that speech and writing are “alternative forms of language”, Smith (1982) argues that, nonetheless, “writing can make thought more potent” (p.16). The term “writing” can apply to an array of conceptualisations, practices and outcomes: planning, producing, copying, redrafting, revising, transforming could all quite easily shelter under the vast umbrella of “writing”. In short, it means many things to many people. Furthermore, if our underlying conceptualisations of writing differ, then those differences may also become apparent both in written products and in the processes used to produce those outcomes. In this article, I discuss the findings of a research project which, through analysis of students’ interviews, explores the characteristics of their conceptualisations of composing processes and products. The term “composing processes” has been used in this article in order to draw the distinction between the process of creating the text and the critiquing of the written product. In reviewing the implications of the project’s findings, this article describes how it became clear that the students viewed certain features as being of greater importance or value than others. The appearance of the text, its design value, held particular significance for the students. The freedom they were afforded whilst engaged in composing processes emerged as a further area of concern. The implications of these characteristics have been explored in order to identify how understandings of these conceptualisations can aid development in students’ written work.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“A means more durable”: Historical perspectives

As the subsequent literature review highlights, differences in perspectives concerning composing processes and written products stem from a variety of factors. The notion that writing means “many things to many people” is nothing new. Perceived differences in the status of writing in comparison with speech have, for example,

contributed to differences in conceptualisations. Over four hundred years ago, in 1593, Bishop Hooker asserted that the purpose of writing was to create a “means more durable to preserve the laws of God from oblivion and corruption” (Hooker, 1969 [Volume 1], p. 212); in other words, writing was a way of giving permanence to speech. In considering the role of education, he subsequently drew a clear distinction between the skills involving speech and writing. In the first quarter of the last century, de Saussure (1916) employed the same, albeit secular, view: that writing’s sole purpose is to represent speech. Bloomfield (1935), likewise, suggested that writing is merely a means of recording speech using by visible marks which reduces it solely to the realm of spelling. This view of the primacy of speech is ironically something that is not endorsed by current examination syllabuses. In the United Kingdom, students take public examinations at the end of their compulsory schooling at 16. With regard to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in English Language, each student’s competence is largely determined by written outcome (apart from 20% for oral assignments). Indeed, its international equivalent, the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) in First Language English, determines competence wholly by written outcome (the oral examination being an optional extra).

Consideration of the characteristics of composing processes and products has, in turn, generated further perspectives. The way in which the underlying structures of written composition are perceived depends, to an extent, on one’s area of focus or specific bias. Despite de Saussure’s (1916) relegation of writing to a secretarial function, his consideration of language is a useful starting point in the exploration of writing structures. His view of language in terms of two dominant perspectives, the synchronic and the diachronic, to an extent “sets the tone” for subsequent theoretical study. In the same way, Chomsky (1990) offers a view of language that comprises a lexicon and a computational system. In describing the features of this computational system, he identifies three further sections: deep structure, phonetic form and logical form. Surface structure acts as the mediating system between these interfaces, accessing the computational system’s mechanisms in doing so. His argument is that its purpose is to find, in his terms, the “least costly” route or derivation (p.77). Similarly, constructs of deep and surface approaches to learning and written composition have become generic in the literature of college learning. Marton and Saljo (1976), in identifying the two, basic, deep-level and surface-level processes, in the course of their research, observed that college students employing a deep-level process focused on what was signified in the text whereas those employing a surface-level process focused on the sign or literal meaning. This essentially bipartite view of language, despite the number of subdivisions each section contains, has permeated the field of cognitive development further in terms of the characteristics and consequent value of written products.

From bipartite to multimodality: Current perspectives

Developing Marton and Saljo’s (1976) model further, Lavelle (1993, 1997, 2001, 2003) sees written composition as having surface structure and deep structure characteristics. Viewing deep writing as being of more intrinsic value, she sees it as transformational and hierarchical whereas surface writing is linear in nature and relates information within a given context. Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) suggest that the source of the principal distinction between the two approaches concerns

intention or attitude. Lavelle and Guarino (2003) suggest that deep learning involves a desire to understand and to create meaning whereas surface learning involves literal translation and the reproduction of information (p. 297). In suggesting that the former approach offers the writer the opportunity of "transforming" meaning by moving beyond the assignment, they reason that the latter approach is, by contrast, "rule bound" and therefore remains fixed with the given context (Lavelle & Guarino, 2003, p. 305).

Ideas similar to the deep and surface paradigms have been developed elsewhere. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) identified, as a result of their research, two general strategies (knowledge-telling and knowledge transforming) and the creation of two conceptual spaces (relating to content and rhetoric respectively). The reason for this design view, perhaps – to develop Berthoff's (1981) observation, concerning the dialectical character of language – is that all language (including written composition, therefore) has dialogue at its core, whether internally in the reflective process or externally in the reader-writer relationship. One potential pitfall with this approach is that, although it helps to clarify relationships by giving them clear visual (and, therefore, accessible and memorable) form, it can oversimplify what Lavelle and Guarino (2003) have termed "a complex phenomenon affected by beliefs, strategies and multiple dimensions of the writing situation" (p.303). Although still working within the deep/surface framework, the multidimensional nature of composing processes has characterised much of Lavelle's later work (2001, 2003). Similarly, Bereiter (1980) proposes a model in which six skills systems are accessed for five different types of written composition within the fields of reader, product and process. Gould (1980) suggests a model that assumes the multilevel nature of composition at both a micro and a global level. Smith (1982), using similar terminology, in considering a writer's objectives, distinguishes between global and focal intentions and proposes an interlayered, multifaceted model which deals with writing at the level of word, sentence, paragraph, chapter and book, in some ways a forerunner of the National Literacy Strategy's word/sentence/text framework (DfEE, 1998). Imagining the composing process as being a "cascade" from global to focal level, in Smith's view, what drives the written composition is its destination.

Whether that destination is seen as product or person is partly determined by one's personal interpretation of the composing process and the context within which it occurs. Kress (1994) argues for an integrated approach which does not seek to distinguish between form and meaning and which will help to prepare students more effectively for the specifics of constantly changing situations. In suggesting subsequently (Kress, 1997), that "all signs and messages are always multimodal", he adds that, in educational contexts, "the page is not considered as a meaningful or significant element in writing" (p.10). He (with Van Leeuwen, 2001) proposes a multimodal theory of communication, which focuses on the semiotic resources of communication and the communicative practices in which these resources are employed. Multilayered in format, these practices involve discursive, production, interpretive, design and distribution processes. (The implications of these practices are considered further in the "Discussion" section of this article.) This focus on the impact of the visual element has been explored by Sharples (1999), whose "writing as design" model shows, in its indication of the interactions between the three core areas of planning, composing and revising, that different skills are accessed at different times for different purposes. Similar to the model proposed by Hayes and Flower

(1980) where they suggested a planning-translating-reviewing central structure, Sharples' model emphasises how external representations help to cement the different elements of writing activities.

Attitudes towards writing: Trends and concerns

Research into attitudes towards composing processes and practices is often a development of previous research work into reading attitudes. Building on their previous work in *Boys and reading* (1998), for example, Barrs and Pidgeon, under the auspices of the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, turned their attention to the processes of written composition. In terms of attitudes towards composition, the *Boys and writing* project, although predominantly primary-orientated, also provides details of action research projects in secondary schools. With a time scale of Summer 2000 to Spring 2001, involving seven Local Education Authorities and 20 teachers from mainstream and special education settings, its chief objectives were to investigate attitudes to written composition and to explore the uses of oral and visual support for writing. The investigations relevant to the study of boys' writing at secondary schools comprised a case history of an individual student, an action research project involving six students and a questionnaire involving 30 students. Some useful insights can be gleaned from the report, which documents the project's progress and outcomes (Barrs and Pidgeon, 2002). Nonetheless, the nature of the project itself (the focus on primary, the small size of the sample of secondary students) reflects a trend towards research which investigates primary rather than secondary experiences.

Furthermore, that White's research into writing attitudes (1987) and assessment (1986), a cross-phase project investigating the responses of 11 and 15 year-olds, as part of a cycle of surveys undertaken in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by the Assessment of Performance Unit (1983-1987), was conducted over a quarter of a century ago in itself is indicative of the need for further research. Whereas studies into reading habits can be compared in order to infer changing patterns of behaviour (Whitehead, 1977; Hall & Coles, 1999), no recent large-scale exploration of attitudes towards composing processes and products is currently available. Harris, Nixon and Ruddock (1993) emphasise that difficulties in investigating attitudes to written composition are compounded by the fact that the same term can be interpreted differently by project participants, which may well mask the true nature of the results. In interviews of single gender pairs of students (conducted at three 11-18 secondary schools of between 600 and 1200 students on roll), although students cited freedom as an important factor in composition tasks, whereas the girls within the sample took this to mean self-expression, the boys interpreted it as writing about factors unrelated to schoolwork.

In addition to the previously mentioned concerns about the nature of research into students' attitudes, one further reservation is that it is often difficult to distinguish between the attitudes of teachers and students, because students' views will often be mediated by means of teachers' interpretations. Furthermore, as The National Writing Project's report concerning gender and writing (1990b) highlights, two key assumptions predominate discussions of gender and its relationship with the composition tasks students habitually engage in or come into contact with. The first assumption is that routine, frequent use of the same sub-genres limits students'

choices as writers. In other words, if students are permitted to work within the boundaries of the same types of written composition, they are never encouraged to move beyond those boundaries in order to investigate further ways of developing their compositional techniques. At the core of this concern is a tension between student choice and teacher intervention. The implication is that, without the teacher's direction, students will stay within the "safe" domains of regularly used sub-genres. Thus, one outcome of setting a composition task in which the students are able to choose both topic and sub-genre (generally referred to as a "free choice assignment") is the students' selection of ideas from a relatively small range of options.

The second assumption is that if students are allowed to work within a small range of options, this contributes to a general pattern of gendered behaviour. This second assumption implies that there are certain topics and types that each gender habitually chooses, if allowed to do so. In this light, the "free choice assignment", although appearing to offer students the freedom to write in any form they wish, by contrast, encourages them to select forms which are viewed as acceptable choices for those of their gender. In this way, the "free choice assignment" can create, to employ Marcuse's term (1972), a repressive desublimation: students express themselves freely within the restriction of what is considered permissible in terms of their gender. Whilst the report considers that "free choice" assignments often result in a polarisation in subjects that are traditionally viewed as "boys'" or "girls'" topics, they advocate reflection in some form as a way of encouraging greater variety. *Yes he can: Schools where boys write well* (OFSTED, 2003) suggests, instead, that freedom of subject matter within the context of a form specified by the teacher is an effective strategy in encouraging boys to write.

Furthermore, Newkirk's (2000, 2002) research into boys' attitudes to composition tasks and to popular culture (by means of a series of interviews) suggests that their relationship with visual narratives is characterised by transformation rather than imitation. In encouraging schools to consider what constitutes literacy within current educational, societal and technological contexts, he proposes the view that media texts should be seen as resources for literacy rather than enemies of it. Younger and Warrington (2003), in reporting on the third year of the *Raising boys' achievement* project (a four-year research and intervention project, sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills, a government department within the United Kingdom), similarly propose the use of visual inspiration as an example of an effective strategy for facilitating the composing process, together with writing for a range of purposes. They suggest that the secretarial demands of written composition are often perceived as problematic by boys. In liberating boys from this requirement, they contend that boys are enabled to engage more productively with written composition.

The dialectical nature of some elements of gender literature includes a tendency, in certain quarters, for achievement to be interpreted in terms of causality – the successes of one gender being viewed as at the expense of the other, for example. This view, to an extent popularised by the national press (Lydon, 1996; Hunt, 2003; Oaff, 2003), is one which Epstein (1998) warns against. Her identification of discourses emphasises the presence of different perspectives. Moreover, studies have indicated that it is not a question of simple relationships existing between variables (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Henderson, 2003; Riding & Rayner, 1998). The terminology used to investigate attitudes is similarly polysemic

(Harris, Nixon and Ruddock, 1993). Sociocultural, psychological and linguistic approaches all contribute to our understandings of composing processes (Morris, 2005). Furthermore, theorists have questioned current assumptions about what literacy (and composing processes as part of that) involves (Kress, 1994, 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Newkirk, 2000, 2002). The means of assessing writing products is equally varied if one considers the process-based approach advocated by D’Arcy (2000) in comparison with the linguistic analysis espoused by the Technical Accuracy Project (QCA, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Myhill, 2001). Thus, one could argue that research into gender and composing processes is characterised not by a single objective truth but by multiple perspectives, nuances and interpretations.

Although *Perceptions of Writing* (The National Writing Project, 1990a) advocates the use of written composition as an effective strategy for raising achievement in terms of metacognition, White (1990) in the concluding chapter to National Writing Project’s report on gender sounds a note of warning. Her concern is that because girls are adept at using written composition rather than other learning activities, they cease to compete in other fields of study. She concludes by suggesting that “literacy is a socially mediated process, in which girls and boys are differently positioned from the start” (p. 59).

METHODOLOGY: THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to understand the nature of that socially mediated process, I developed a network of iterative research methods that allowed theory to emerge from the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this way, the multi-faceted nature of composing processes could be investigated fully. As a result, I hoped to perceive the multiple truths existing within the classroom and to understand how individuals construct meanings and actions (Woods, 1983). The study incorporated three overlapping strands of perceptions, process and product. Each strand addressed a specific issue:

- The first research strand considered boys’ and girls’ attitudes to and understandings of writing (*conceptualisations*).
- The second research strand investigated the ways in which boys and girls approached composing processes (*composing processes*)
- The third research strand identified and explored the patterns and structures evident in boys’ and girls’ writing (*products*)

These three research strands led to a fuller understanding of the issues that affected the principal research focus: an exploration of characteristics of boys’ and girls’ composing processes in English.

The research project was located within the context of a purpose-designed scheme of work. Winter (1982) comments that the action research tradition has “a methodology for the *creation* of data, but not (as yet) for the interpretation of data” (p. 161). With this in mind, I devised various means of data collection which, whilst being discrete units, would retain “fidelity to the integrity of the whole” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000 5th edition, p. 148). A systematic, rigorous approach to the construction and review of the methodology was essential (Tesch, 1990; Kvale, 1996), given that, as sole teacher-researcher, I had ultimate control over the data

collected. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) contention that multiple methods of data collection promote greater objectivity offers one solution to the question of personal bias. *Figure 1: Research data* emphasises the ways in which data sets were marshalled and interpreted. *Figure 2: Web of relationships between research strands, data collection and instruments* reinforces visually how the research design reflects my epistemological stance. In considering how best to describe that stance, I would argue that the web rather than the ladder seems the more appropriate representation of knowledge. Whereas some might see knowledge as having a fixed, single goal, which

| RESEARCH STRAND | DATA COLLECTION | INSTRUMENT | SAMPLE SIZE | SAMPLE TYPE | DATA ANALYSIS |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Boys' and girls' attitudes to and understandings of writing | Interviews Classroom discussion Classroom observation | Semi-structured interview schedule (Dictaphones) Dictaphones Teacher's log | 18 students | Purposive (9 boys: 3 able, 3 competent, 3 weak) (9 girls: 3 able, 3 competent, 3 weak) | Grounded theory Iterative analysis of transcriptions Codes captured Comparative analysis by code, gender and writing strength Content analysis Content analysis |
| The ways in which boys and girls approach composing processes | Interviews Classroom discussion Writing behaviour Classroom observation Concept webs Group presentations | Semi-structured interview schedule (Dictaphones) Dictaphones Video recording Teacher's log Card sort activities Overhead projector transparencies | 18 students | Purposive - as above | Grounded theory Iterative analysis of transcriptions Codes captured Comparative analysis by code, gender and writing strength Content analysis Instantaneous sampling by means of a structured observation schedule Comparative analysis by gender and writing strength Content analysis Comparative analysis by code and gender Content analysis Comparative analysis by gender |
| The patterns and structures evident in boys' and girls' writing | Writing samples (Narrative and non-narrative) | Coding frames | 18 students | Purposive - as above | Comparative analysis by gender, writing strength, linguistic level, text type |

Figure 1. Research data

can be attained by ascending each rung in progression, I view understanding as being achieved through an examination of the interrelationships existing between different threads of the web. As an extension of Wittgenstein’s notion of the spinning thread (1972, 3rd edition), the web rather than in any individual strand. I consider that the multi-faceted, web-like nature of my research design provides an appropriate means of investigating composing processes whilst accounting simultaneously for the personal bias of the teacher-researcher.

The research project focused on a purposive sample comprising 18 students (9 male, 9 female). These students were 14 years old. In investigating this age group, I endeavoured to gain a more detailed understanding of the ways in which teenagers perceive composing processes. Given that I had been able to locate relatively little recent research with this specific age group, I hoped that any insights gleaned might be of use to the wider research community. The research group included the following subgroups:

- 6 able writers (3 female, 3 male)
- 6 competent writer (3 female, 3 male)
- 6 weak writers (3 female, 3 male)

A balance of genders and writing strengths was needed within the study group so that comparative work could be undertaken subsequently. In order to investigate students’ attitudes, understandings and approaches with regard to composing processes more fully, a schedule of interviews was devised in which each student was interviewed. The scheduled interviews encouraged students to reflect on the work they had covered in the lessons.

As I had located my research project within a purpose-designed scheme of work, I was able to focus on different features of composing processes in each teaching session as *Figure 3: Example of an initial lesson plan, highlighting relationship between classroom activity, data collection, analysis and research strand* illustrates.

Analysis of interview data

The scheduled interviews provided a rich vein of data in that the students were encouraged to articulate their conceptualisations in response to the composition tasks they had completed in class. As sole teacher-researcher, however, I was concerned that, having designed the scheme of work and the research strands embedded within it, I would, therefore, merely be inviting the students during these interviews to reinforce my conceptualisations of composing processes. In order to guard against this concern, the process of analysing the interview data was iterative and involved visiting and revisiting the data to ensure that the interpretations derived from the interviews were both rich and robust. Having espoused the principles of grounded theory in my methodological design, I sought to code the data, deriving concepts and categorisations until the data was saturated (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Mindful of Edwards and Westgate’s (1994) criticism of loose, albeit perceptive qualitative analysis which has no rigour and allows only one interpretation of a transcript, I developed a process of analysis for the interview data involving nine stages through which the characteristics, constitution and construction of students’ composing

processes were explored, culminating in the creation of an account of the principal characteristics of each research subgroup.

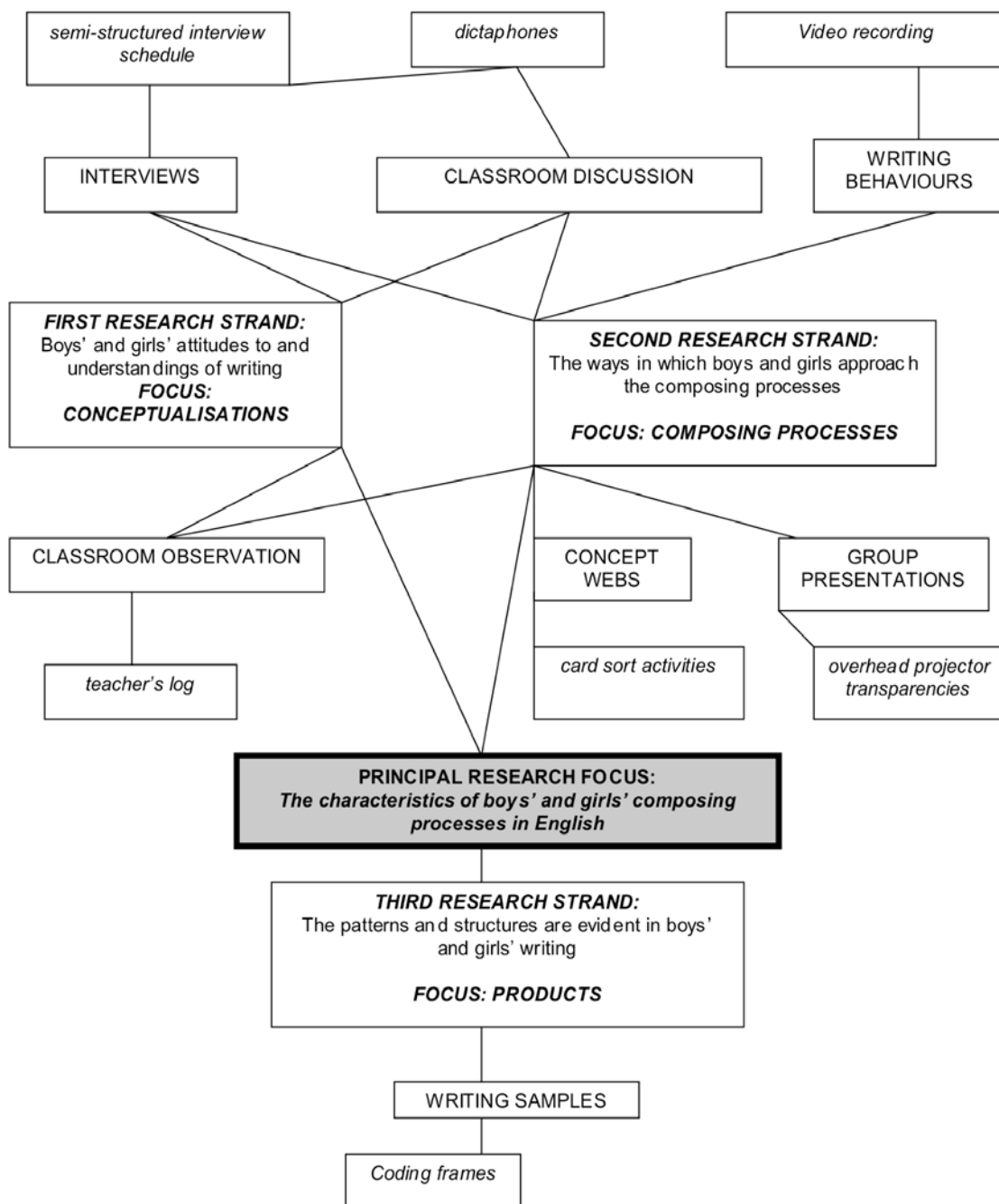


Figure 2 Web of relationships between research strands, data collection and instruments

Stage 1

In order to facilitate later comparisons and cross-referencing, each interview was transcribed and identified using the following system:

- Each interview was assigned a number in chronological order (range: *1 – 20*).

- If more than one person took part in the interview each student's contributions were identified further by means of a letter. These letters were assigned alphabetically, determined by the student who spoke first (range *a – c*).

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| <p>Session 2</p> <p>Narrative focus: openings/closure. Students will be given five narrative openings.</p> <p>In pairs, students discuss possibilities of five openings and how they might be developed. Which are preferred and why?</p> <p>Individually students choose one and write suitable ending. The writing partner reads, annotates and suggests further possibilities.</p> <p>In pairs, students read five closing paragraphs and discuss possible openings. They concentrate on the importance of links between opening and closing paragraphs (congruence). Individually, they write suitable opening. The writing partner again reads, annotates and suggests further possibilities</p> <p>Discussions are taped (using dictaphones) and preferences are "tracked" through the exchanges which occur. Preferences are, therefore, identified and categorised prior to analysis so that effective "tracking" can take place.</p> <p>This reveals the ways in which "talk" becomes "writing" – are there any similarities/differences in approach with regard to gender and ability? (DRAFTING PRACTICES)</p> <p>Homework: Building on one of the openings, students write a narrative piece (in black ink: as clear photocopies are needed for further analysis). These pieces are collected in during Session 3:</p> <p>Desk analysis of written outcomes; initial assessment using analysis sheet. Each written outcome is compared with the revised version. Written outcomes also provide focus for taped interviews.</p> <p>Through desk analysis, drafting processes are explored in terms of gender and ability. Individual interviews help to investigate differing responses in greater detail. What kinds of changes have been made? Are any trends emerging? (DRAFTING PRACTICES /PATTERNS EVIDENT IN WRITING)</p> | <p>KEY</p> <p>COMMENTS IN BLACK: Description of activities taking place during the lesson.</p> <p>COMMENTS IN BLUE: Description of type of data collected.</p> <p>COMMENTS IN RED: Description of analysis undertaken.</p> <p>COMMENTS IN GREEN: Description of research strand.</p> |
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Figure 3. Example of an initial lesson plan, highlighting relationship between classroom activity, data collection, analysis and research strand

- Each student was identified by writing strength (possible codes: *A* {able}, *C* {competent}, *W* {weak}).
- Each student was identified by gender (possible codes: *M* {male}, *F* {female}).

- Each student was identified by the nature of his/her group membership (possible codes: *G* {research group member}, *N* {not a research group member but invited by a member of the research group to take part}).
- Each interview was identified by type: whether it was part of the original schedule or whether it was an additional interview requested by the student (possible codes: *P* {purposive: part of the original schedule}, *O* {optional: requested by the student}).

A pertinent consideration with regard to the use of transcriptions in interview analysis is the question of data loss. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, 5th edition) have emphasised, a transcription "represents the translation from one set of rules systems (oral and interpersonal) to another very remote rule system (written language)" (p.281). In other words, the data has already been interpreted through the act of transcription. In order to preserve the dynamic, interactive nature of the interviews, having conducted the interviews, I also took sole responsibility for their subsequent transcription. I also supported the interview data by noting students' non-verbal behaviour in my teacher's log. I elected not to use video recordings at this stage as I considered that this might inhibit the students in the opinions they voiced.

Stage 2

Once the interviews were transcribed and identified using the system specified in *Stage 1*, I read through each one to familiarise myself with the data set and to begin to acquire a feel for the data I was working with.

Stage 3

I used a system of colour highlighting and annotation of the transcripts to capture codes and the interview quotations which exemplified that code. These codes and quotations were then stored on computer. For a number of reasons, I used the term *quotation* to describe data selected from the interview transcriptions. The term *utterance* was inappropriate as it implied discourse analysis, a form of analysis I had not used during the research project. Similarly, the term *statement* implied that I was investigating only those students' contributions that fulfilled an exclusively ideational function. I considered *quotations* to be the most appropriate term because they were selected from a lengthier text (the transcription) and would be referred to by me throughout the study, in the same way that one would select quotations from a literary work. My method of selecting these quotations from the original transcriptions was to read each word and phrase in order to decide what was being referenced concerning composing processes. A change in referencing signalled the start of a new quotation. If the student offered exemplification, provided that the same aspect was being referred to, I viewed it to be part of the same quotation. If the exemplification did not relate specifically to the previous phrase, I considered it to be the start of a new quotation. In this way the data was interrogated thoroughly in order to identify the units of data with which I would be working. At this stage, I identified six categories (perceptions, difficulties, strategies, familiarity, visualisation, control) present in the data. Below is an extract from one of the interviews showing how it was coded.

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| Derek: I think with that one "capture the reader's attention" (<i>pointing to one of the card sort choices</i>) should be more towards like the writing magnet thing. | |
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| <p>Q: Why?</p> <p>Derek: Well, because if you can't capture the reader's attention they're not gonna want to read on, there's just a waste of time writing the piece really.</p> <p>Q: Any others you'd arrange differently?</p> <p>Derek: Um, I think I'd change that "poetry – it is not fun to write"....I think that's just, like, a silly answer really. I find it hard to write poetry because I can never think of, like, the right words to go into it; I'm more used to writing stories and things.</p> <p>Q: It's easier to find the right words for stories?</p> <p>Derek: Yeah</p> <p>Q: What do you mean?</p> <p>Derek: Yeah, it's just um with poetry it's all gotta sort of like make fit in with each other and all follow a certain theme. Like I know it's the same with stories but they just well I find them easier to write really.</p> <p>Q: Whose idea was it to put it down about poetry?</p> <p>Derek : Nigel...Priest's</p> <p>Q: Which were your ideas?</p> <p>Derek: Um the expressing yourself and using your imagination on the....And having plenty of ideas as well and needing a good imagination to write.</p> <p>Q: So those are really important?</p> <p>Derek: Yeah</p> <p>Q: The group decided to put that (<i>the ones Derek had mentioned previously</i>) way out there – did they think about it?</p> <p>Derek: No we did discuss it but I think um a couple people like did their own thing really; they didn't quite consult us enough like they just put it down and then it was too late to take it up but a couple of us didn't agree with it.</p> <p>Q: Is there anything else you'd add?</p> <p>Derek: Um</p> <p>Q: I'm interested in this (<i>pointing to violence</i>)</p> <p>Derek: Robin Moon</p> <p>Q: Was that a group thing or a Robin thing?</p> <p>Derek: Um I think it was more Robin thing because like um we find it fairly easy to write about things like violence and guns and stuff cause like with this one here, computer games we play usually consist of that.</p> | <p>perception</p> <p>difficulty</p> <p>familiarity</p> <p>difficulty</p> <p>perception</p> <p>familiarity</p> |
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Figure 4. Stage 3 interview analysis

Stage 4

The data set was examined once more in order to identify further relationships. At this stage, moving beyond students' perceptions of the ease or difficulty with which composition tasks were completed, I examined the data set once more in order to consider the aspect of the composing process to which each comment referred. Employing the same system of colour highlighting and annotation with fresh copies of the transcripts, I identified six categories (understanding, skill, engagement, resources, value, control) present in the data. These codes and quotations were again stored on computer.

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| <p>Derek: I think with that one "capture the reader's attention" (<i>pointing to one of the card sort choices</i>) should be more towards like the writing magnet thing.</p> | |
| <p>Q: Why?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Well, because if you can't capture the reader's attention they're not gonna want to read on, there's just a waste of time writing the piece really.</p> | value |
| <p>Q: Any others you'd arrange differently?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um, I think I'd change that "poetry – it is not fun to write".....I think that's just, like, a silly answer really. I find it hard to write poetry because I can never think of, like, the right words to go into it; I'm more used to writing stories and things.</p> | skill understanding |
| <p>Q: It's easier to find the right words for stories?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Yeah</p> | |
| <p>Q: What do you mean?</p> | understanding |
| <p>Derek: Yeah, it's just um with poetry it's all gotta sort of like make fit in with each other and all follow a certain theme. Like I know it's the same with stories but they just well I find them easier to write really.</p> | |
| <p>Q: Whose idea was it to put it down about poetry?</p> | |
| <p>Derek : Nigel...Priest's</p> | |
| <p>Q: Which were your ideas?</p> | skill |
| <p>Derek: Um the expressing yourself and using your imagination on the....And having plenty of ideas as well and needing a good imagination to write.</p> | |
| <p>Q: So those are really important?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Yeah</p> | |
| <p>Q: The group decided to put that (<i>the ones Derek had mentioned previously</i>) way out there – did they think about it?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: No we did discuss it but I think um a couple people like did their own thing really; they didn't quite consult us enough like they just put it down and then it was too late to take it up but a couple of us didn't agree with it.</p> | |
| <p>Q: Is there anything else you'd add?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um</p> | |
| <p>Q: I'm interested in this (<i>pointing to violence</i>)</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Robin Moon</p> | understanding |
| <p>Q: Was that a group thing or a Robin thing?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um I think it was more Robin thing because like um we find it fairly easy to write about things like violence and guns and stuff 'cause like with this one here, computer games we play usually consist of that.</p> | |

Figure 5. Stage 4 interview analysis

Stage 5

The data set was examined once more. Having previously considered the ease or difficulty with which composition tasks were completed and having located each comment within a particular feature of the composing process, I examined the data set once more in order to consider how the students conceptualised the composing process itself. In this way, I endeavoured to look beyond attitudes towards written composition in order to explore the characteristics, constitution and construction of

students' composing practices. Employing the same system of colour highlighting and annotation, I identified six categories (communication, design, discourse, facilitation, potential, provenance) and stored the codes and quotations on computer.

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <p>Derek: I think with that one "capture the reader's attention" (<i>pointing to one of the card sort choices</i>) should be more towards like the writing magnet thing.</p> | |
| <p>Q: Why?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Well, because if you can't capture the reader's attention they're not gonna want to read on, there's just a waste of time writing the piece really.</p> | potential |
| <p>Q: Any others you'd arrange differently?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um, I think I'd change that "poetry – it is not fun to write"....I think that's just, like, a silly answer really. I find it hard to write poetry because I can never think of, like, the right words to go into it; I'm more used to writing stories and things.</p> | design |
| <p>Q: It's easier to find the right words for stories?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Yeah</p> | |
| <p>Q: What do you mean?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Yeah, it's just um with poetry it's all gotta sort of like make fit in with each other and all follow a certain theme. Like I know it's the same with stories but they just well I find them easier to write really.</p> | design |
| <p>Q: Whose idea was it to put it down about poetry?</p> | |
| <p>Derek : Nigel...Priest's</p> | |
| <p>Q: Which were your ideas?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um the expressing yourself and using your imagination on the....And having plenty of ideas as well and needing a good imagination to write.</p> | potential |
| <p>Q: So those are really important?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Yeah</p> | |
| <p>Q: The group decided to put that (<i>the ones Derek had mentioned previously</i>) way out there – did they think about it?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: No we did discuss it but I think um a couple people like did their own thing really; they didn't quite consult us enough like they just put it down and then it was too late to take it up but a couple of us didn't agree with it.</p> | |
| <p>Q: Is there anything else you'd add?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um</p> | |
| <p>Q: I'm interested in this (<i>pointing to violence</i>)</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Robin Moon</p> | |
| <p>Q: Was that a group thing or a Robin thing?</p> | |
| <p>Derek: Um I think it was more Robin thing because like um we find it fairly easy to write about things like violence and guns and stuff cause like with this one here, computer games we play usually consist of that.</p> | provenance |

Figure 6. Stage 5 interview analysis

Stage 6

Having coded the transcript in this way, I was then able to list each of the coded quotations under the appropriate code heading.

Stage 7

Using the lists created in *Stage 6*, I then sorted the quotations according to gender and writing strength. In this way I was able to explore the characteristics of the composing practices that had been constructed by the students.

Stage 8

Once the lists had been sorted according to gender and writing strength, I read through each one in order to identify the principal characteristics of each research subgroup (able boys, competent boys, weak boys, able girls, competent girls, weak girls).

Stage 9

An account of the principal characteristics of each research subgroup was produced.

FINDINGS**The importance of the text’s design value**

One of the principal objectives of the research project was to explore students’ conceptualisations of composing processes. The account of the principal characteristics of each research sub-group, generated as a result of the interview analysis, yielded useful insights. Considerations of design featured prominently with students involved in the research group. Students’ concerns over presentation had implications for the way in which the drafting process was regarded. Reviewing and redrafting work involved making alterations, which, students felt, lessened the value of the piece of work both in terms of production and reception. Similarly, time factors were important. The less able particularly wanted to complete the task quickly and therefore saw planning as an unnecessary obstacle to their objective of the quick completion of the task set. Written composition was perceived as time-consuming whether by hand or using ICT equipment. Nonetheless, there was agreement concerning the value of skills. If composition took time, then key skills needed to be in place to complete the task appropriately.

The fact that students viewed presentational factors as being of principal importance in some ways undermined the crafting process. Crafting and drafting inevitably involved revisions and corrections; these were, therefore, according to the students, processes to be avoided if the “design value” of the text was to remain intact. Although it was agreed that the use of ICT was one way of raising the presentational worth of the text, it was also viewed both as a distraction and an aid. Possessing a higher level of skill within this area did not necessarily imply that work would be completed quickly, merely that there were further programmes to access and design features to select. Indeed, difficulties with selection featured regularly in the students’ comments.

Although design was a prominent area of concern for all students, the range of responses described by each gender differed in certain ways. A strategy favoured by the boys within the group was to prioritise concerns, rather than tackling all problems as they emerged. Their assessment of the specific “value” of the particular composing process in which they were engaged involved an intricate set of decisions. They had to consider, for example, whether their actions would have an impact on the outcome;

whether the potential improvement in the final outcome would warrant the effort involved; whether they possessed the skills to negotiate the composition problem successfully. These considerations involved an assessment of the task's composing load. I believe this term to be a useful one in that it implies considerations of the cognitive effort involved in completing the task.

The impact of time on the design value

Time constraints (whether in terms of working to a set time limit or of spending further time on a written composition) were always viewed negatively by the boys in the study group. The girls in the group, by comparison, regarded the extra time needed in order to complete a neatly presented written outcome in a more positive light. They used the time to plan or to craft their next composition decision. Such an approach had gained them credit in their scholastic careers previously. The pressure of time in external examinations, however, meant that they had to think differently about an area of their composing processes in which they assumed they had a certain degree of expertise. This caused anxiety and such extreme measures as considering completing a neat as well as a draft version of their answers in an external examination. This might suggest that they perceive teachers as viewing their efforts as objects to be assessed rather than as stages in a process. Students' attitudes towards composing processes appeared to be particularly influenced by the final written outcome.

The impact of ICT usage on the design value

In considering the text's design value further, ICT usage has specific relevance with regard to the nature of the students' engagement with the text. In general terms, the type of engagement with the text at the design level involves the whole text because students are required to consider the visual elements of textual construction and presentation: they have to consider the arrangement of the text on the page. Many of the students' comments indicated that differences (whether real or perceived) between boys' and girls' handwriting continue to be an important issue for them. What, then, might the implications be for teaching and learning if there is no longer a need to write in a clear, cursive hand because word processed texts are permitted in all forms of assessment? One possibility is that the students will then be able to respond to the text on-screen and experiment with the design features available. Provided that sufficient training is given (particularly keyboard skills), it might be that an area of male anxiety is, therefore, removed.

There are further implications to consider, however. If ICT usage removes the need to produce text by hand, a process which can be time consuming, it also removes the luxury of pausing to reflect on writing choices as the text is composed. Such a decision could then marginalise the efforts and strategies of some of the girls particularly. Indeed, on-screen composition offers both advantages and disadvantages. It may be that the provision of laptops encourages a positive engagement with the deep writing characteristics of writing processes. Although coursework contributes to a percentage of the final mark, ultimately the student's written expertise is, according to current examination requirements, assessed through judgement of his/her handwritten output on a particular day. Although ICT usage helps the student to engage with the whole text, it could be argued that design

anxieties have been postponed rather than remedied. Given the range of attitudes towards ICT usage, that it can be a help and a hindrance (a factor emphasised in the students' interviews) it is important that the relationships between ICT usage, text design, gender and writing competence are explored further so that informed decisions concerning ICT use in schools and in examinations can be made.

Conceptualisations of difficulties and strategies in approaching composing processes

All students within the study group accepted that it was possible to write automatically – to disengage with composing processes in order to produce work that was quick, neat and correct. Further consideration of this response to written composition yields interesting perspectives. Having concentrated previously on the production of neat written texts (a surface consideration, to return to Lavelle's (1993) distinction), students are increasingly aware, as they progress through secondary school, that they will be examined through written composition that not only engages both with task and reader but also evaluates the writing of others. Suddenly, a critical distance has appeared between the writer and the text. For some students, the successful negotiation of that distance is a challenge that demotivates rather than inspires.

Exploration of the degrees of difficulty involved in composing processes offers further insight into the nature of the writing challenges facing students. The ease with which a task could be completed was a principal factor for the students. The less able students within the study group wanted to complete the work quickly, as has been mentioned previously. Planning and drafting were therefore viewed as unnecessary hindrances. In the study group as a whole, conventions of punctuation, spelling and structure were restrictions to be ignored or guessed at. There was a "knack" to writing which some had naturally. Composing processes are complex, involving the synthesis of different skills; these same skills are accessed in different ways and at different times depending on the demands of the task. Inevitably, therefore, the task's completion involves the selection of appropriate resources. Decisions have to be made with regard to the structure, content and style of the text. This requires considerable investment on the part of the student. Students were aware that various means of lessening the degree of difficulty were available: ideas could be imported from elsewhere; intuition could be used to solve emerging problems; and responsibility for the task could be assigned to another.

The importing of ideas appears in a number of guises. Information and presentational ideas could be taken from the internet or from ICT programs. One drawback with this form of importation was that selections had to be made with regard to data and format. This kind of decision-making took time and effort. Importing ideas from other forms of media was perhaps a more attractive option in that it often involved the act of remembering *prior* to the composition of the written text (thus reducing the cognitive load) rather than selection and decision-making *during* the process of composition. Incorporating ideas from films and television programmes into written work was popular with many within the study group although some were concerned that it would be seen as unfair and therefore preferred to use their own imagination. This could be regarded as another way in which value is assigned to a text, through its provenance and its potential. That boys seemed more prepared to use ideas from

sources other than their own imagination could be indicative of the thinking and composing processes involved. A possible interpretation could be that, whereas some of the processes of composition have been internalised at this stage by the girls (by engaging their imagination), boys continue to visualise composing processes as separate physical stages, including the use of external resources. It might, however, suggest that the boys within the group were more conscious of what constituted resources. The resources employed by both genders were similar; it may have been that this stimulus material had been transformed into memory by the girls but had remained as an external influence by the boys. This might account for the observation that boys were generally more able to articulate their preferred strategies confidently.

The use of one’s own intuition has been cited earlier as another means of lessening the degree of difficulty involved in completing the written task. The same students who were concerned that using ideas from films seemed like “cheating” because it made the task too easy, commented that they employed intuitive means to decide on the correct format to use in a piece of written work. There are two underlying considerations to this type of strategy. It could imply that the conventions of writing have been understood, appreciated and assimilated into the students’ long-term memory. The information exists at a subliminal level. Students’ phonological capabilities were often cited indirectly as being valuable resources. Holly, a student who was often intensely self-critical with regard to her skills in English, explained her approach to composing processes as,

Um, I sort of run through all of the words that might go through my head and I’ll just, I put each one, I’ll get a piece of rough paper, and I’ll put each one in the place of the word that I’m looking for and I’ll keep going until it sounds right. (Holly: competent writer)

The terms employed in the following comment, when discussing textual accuracy, are interesting,

I tend to guess really...Think what it sounds like really....Sometimes, look at which one looks right. (Emily: able writer)

Thinking about what something “sounds like” or whether it “looks right” are two ways of explaining the accessing of this information. Guessing at the appropriate spelling or punctuation of the written piece suggests engagement with the written text at the levels of sight and sound. The information exists at a deep-seated subconscious level; there is no need to employ lengthy decoding procedures. It already exists in an easily accessible format. Alternatively, another possible interpretation is that the information has, as yet, been acquired solely at the level of sight or sound; it is still located in the working memory. Although the reasons for the specific format have not been fully understood, its form (whether visual or audio) can be imitated in order to complete the written outcome. Whether the level of engagement is at a superficial or at a deeper level, consideration of the visual or audio form offers a rapid means of choosing an appropriate option without hindering the act of composition too much.

The impact of responsibility and control on composing processes

A third means of lessening the degree of difficulty when approaching the written composition involves responsibility and, thus, related considerations of control.

Central to this notion is the question of ownership: whose text is it? If the text is the responsibility of the student, then the student, many in the study group argued, should have control over its format. Similarly, there was agreement among the students that adherence to codes and conventions remained the choice of the writer. If the narrative was understood without the inclusion of appropriate punctuation marks, this was not perceived as a weakness on the part of the writer. The text had fulfilled its task; it had communicated. This implies that, to an extent, the students within the study group saw the text as a written form (or even extension) of spoken communication. Its function is to communicate its message. The writerly elements of prose were not of prime concern.

For communication to take place, however, that which has been articulated must also be interpreted. Students within the research group expressed anxiety with regard to potential interpretations of their written work. The fact that the students are also readers, often well versed in the interrogation of texts, highlights why interpretation is for them a very pertinent issue. Perhaps, it is this very appreciation of the potential for multiple meanings which makes students' concerns regarding the interpretation of their own work all the more acute. Many of the group seemed ill at ease with evaluating others' work, perhaps for this very reason. Holly, in discussing her concerns about assessing a fellow student's work, clearly understood the personal, psychological impact of criticism,

I don't find that very easy 'cause ... you're kind of criticising someone else's work when they've obviously tried their hardest to get it the way it is and then you're criticising it and saying, "Well, I don't like that word, I don't like this." You know...I'll agree with them if they don't like something, I'll say, "Well, yeah, that bit's not quite right and maybe do you want to change this word to that word?" and stuff, but I can't... really I'm not that critical. (Holly: competent writer)

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) suggest that "communication depends on some 'interpretive community' having decided that some aspect of the world has been articulated in order to be interpreted" (p. 8). The fact that in a classroom the "interpretive community" is real as well as imagined emphasises why any difference in interpretation should be of such concern to the students. Once the text has been composed, it becomes the subject of evaluation. Students are, therefore, aware that in completing the processes of composition, they are ultimately relinquishing control to readers who then assume the responsibility of interpretation.

Developing this notion of responsibility further, the relationship between novice and expert writers is a relevant issue. At 14 years of age, although students are still novice writers, some are beginning to acquire some of the qualities of expert writers. Perhaps an underlying reason for the nervousness of less able writers in reading their work to others or in articulating their concerns is that they see themselves as being surrounded by students who have moved beyond the levels of sight and sound (levels at which they all could experience some level of success) to a level of textual engagement they do not fully comprehend. A further aspect to consider is that, although there was general nervousness with this group of students as to their work's value, the boys generally seemed able to articulate their concerns more clearly than the girls, as was the case with the discussion of preferred strategies.

One drawback in being considered an expert is that, along with a level of expertise, the label assumes the possession of a body of knowledge. As an expert, you are therefore expected to be more aware of the skills you are accessing. As has been previously mentioned, many students within the study group referred to written composition as a "knack". This term implies not only the perception of composition as a skill that you are either lucky enough to possess or hope some day to inherit, but also that the responsibility for successful composition rests elsewhere. Good written composition is viewed as an accident of fate rather than the result of conscious craft. In this way the able writer can justify his/her skill as something s/he possesses but has little control over, almost like a physical characteristic. Such a view could be interpreted as a defence mechanism: a way of deflecting the unwelcome criticism that some kinds of scholastic success attract. If, as a student, one accepts the notion of the "knack", then other approaches can be seen as a logical extension of this. If good written composition is seen as one's lot, then it follows that there is little point to drafting and crafting: you cannot change fate. Regarded in this light, different forms of textual revision are unnecessary, ineffective interruptions to the completion of the text. One's writing strength, in this regard, is pre-ordained as is the final grade one is awarded.

A further response to the notion of responsibility, expressed by the students within the group, was that the responsibility for the text rests solely with the teacher. S/he has set the task and s/her will, consequently, grade the final outcome. If any alterations are to be made, the responsibility is his/hers. In this way the design value of the text has not been undermined by the student by having to make alterations that mar the text's overall appearance. If errors have been made, the teacher will identify them, corrections will be learned and the text will be free of them next time. Thus, the design value of subsequent texts is safeguarded too. Such an approach places emphasis on the final written outcome. To the students within the study group, the importance is not the process but the product.

Current models of reading and composition draw attention to the recursive nature of the processes involved. Employing recursive processes whilst completing a written assignment, however, was not a popular option for the students in the study group. It could be argued that, in choosing such alternatives, the students were consciously engaged in processes than otherwise might occur at a subconscious level. The general view of the study group, however, was that the process of composition is something to be completed; it has a given end. In their view, revision of ideas during the act of composition not only delayed completion of the task unnecessarily, it also interrupted the flow of ideas. Indeed, Derrida (1976) has commented on the threatening nature of writing, observing that it involves the disruption of the text. A book is viewed as a totality and is, therefore, "profoundly alien to the sense of writing" (p.18). Derrida here is drawing an important distinction between composing processes and the written outcome. He sees composition as a tool of criticism or of evaluation. In writing about writing, we are acknowledging the existence of further connotations. The more we write, the more we create fresh meanings which disrupt the totality of the written outcome.

Siobhan's explanation with regard to perceived differences in presentation between boys and girls offered a further perspective on composing processes. She commented that she wrote more slowly because

it gives you more time to think about what you’re going to write next as you’re writing what you’re writing. (Siobhan: competent female writer)

The key word within that comment is “next”. There was little evidence that students regarded composing processes in anything but a linear way. Once started, it had to be completed. It was logical to pause in order to consider the next development whilst writing. Pausing to consider what had been written was counterproductive, however – it led to alterations and eventual dissatisfaction with the written outcome.

Although students regarded the processes of planning and drafting as irrelevant to the eventual outcome, they viewed other aspects as being of central importance. They considered written accuracy to be of less importance in comparison with the more pressing concerns of clarity of expression and originality of ideas. The location of the writer within the text hinted at a possible difference in attitude between the gender groups, although the numbers are too small to be considered as evidence of a trend. Within the study group, the girls placed less emphasis on catering for their own needs within their writing whereas the boys’ responses pointed equally to the importance of their own needs and those of the reader. If we consider this in relation to the comments made by able and competent girls during the interviews, relationships between different features of composing processes become a little more complex.

Although these sub-groups of students stated a preference for using their imagination when composing narrative texts, they did not regard this as a form of self-expression. It may be that, in narrative texts at least, they did not regard this as self-expression because the narrative form permits the adoption of identities other than their own – perhaps slightly risky, rebellious, alienated ones. In embracing this opportunity to adopt other voices, the students were as a consequence able to experiment with other forms of discourse. This, for all students within the study group, captured the essence of the excitement of composition as the following comments indicate. One of the activities completed by the study group involved delivering a group presentation in which they were required to give advice on effective composition techniques to the rest of the group. Here single gender groups were used in order to investigate gendered attitudes. A key point of interest was in the similarities rather than the differences in the students’ comments. The advice to “*use your imagination to the max*” made by one of the boys’ groups could easily be seen as another way of advising the writer to “*take your story beyond reality*”, as advocated by one of the girls’ groups. Narrative writing offered a means of escape into a private world of alter egos and alternative discourses.

DISCUSSION

In reviewing this investigation of students’ conceptualisations of composing processes, one could argue that, in simple terms, they are concerned that their written products convince the reader in two key ways: by “[looking] right” (to adapt Emily’s phrase) and by “[sounding] right” (to adapt Holly’s). This suggests that students’ anxieties focus particularly on issues of sight and sound when composing or designing their written responses. With regard to textual composition and design, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) have suggested that whereas the invention of writing had consequences for what we write and how we present our ideas (which they term the

areas of content, discourse and design), the development of new technologies has had a major impact on the way we re-code and circulate those ideas to other readers and writers (which they term the areas of expression, production and distribution). Although this might seem to suggest areas of mutual exclusivity, it could be argued that design elements within the text can also be regarded as production elements. It is not just a question of McLuhan's "the medium is the message" (1964, p. 7) or that the means dictates the design, but that the overlap between design and production forms the all-important link between the two areas of content and expression as *Figure 7: Model of relationship between design and production (after Kress and Van Leeuwen {2001})* suggests. In this model, I have attempted to represent Kress and Van Leeuwen's ideas in visual form. The relationship existing between design and production is a powerful one. The model implies that the ideation function, or the meaning of the text, resides particularly within the left hand sphere. It is by means of the right hand sphere that this meaning is made accessible to others; in other words, through its agency the text has impact. The text is given shape within the central sphere. This is where textual crafting occurs.

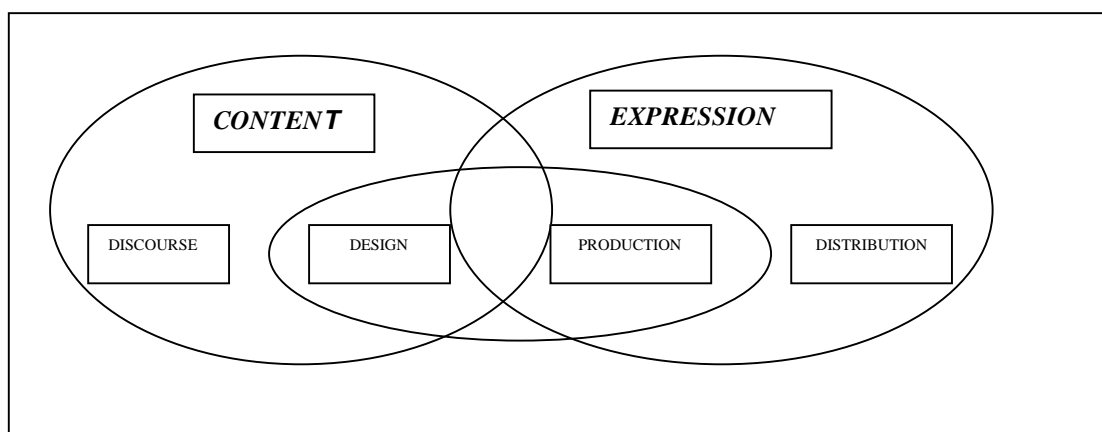


Figure 7. Model of relationship between design and production (after Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001)

For the students in the study group, however, composing processes were not merely a matter of textual production but of engaging the reader's interest. As has been discussed, the term "reader" encompasses the student him/herself, his/her peers or the teacher/examiner. The students endeavoured to write successful, meaningful texts by making them look and sound "right". Through considering the sight and sound of the text they were able to make meaning.

If we consider sight as the correct production of the letters of the text, this, in terms of difficulty, is the easiest aspect of composition for the students to achieve (particularly in the light of their comments concerning automatic writing discussed in "Conceptualisations of difficulties and strategies in approaching composing processes" above). If we consider the terms "sight", "sound" and "meaning" in relation to the spheres of production, design and discourse, employed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), interesting overlaps become apparent. This is particularly evident with regard to the stages or levels at which the text is accessed by the writer and engaged with potentially by the reader, as *Figure 8: Model of three-stage writing process including location of engagement* illustrates.

This model suggests that composing processes can be viewed as progressive in that skills from one phase can be subsumed into the next but also recursive in that skills learned in the initial production phase can be accessed when working at the discourse level, for example. As this model implies, it is not always easy to pinpoint the exact location of the level of engagement with the text. Sight is a consideration at all levels – a factor which, it could be argued, is reinforced by students’ comments relating to the way they conceptualise the text. Sight and sound are not just physical aspects of the text but strategies which the students use in order to determine the shape of the final outcome

| STAGES | LOCATION | ACCESS | DEFINITION |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. PRODUCTION | • SIGHT | ↑ ↑ ↑ | :the correct production of letters by means of writing implements |
| 2. DESIGN | • SIGHT • SOUND | ↓ ↑ ↓ | :the correct distribution and definition of letters and words by the application of linguistic conventions |
| 3. DISCOURSE | • MEANING including: - sight - sound | ↓ ↓ ↓ | :the appropriate use of a range of devices in order to craft a coherent outcome |

Figure 8. Model of three-stage writing process including location of engagement

Composing processes involve conscious decision-making in terms of what needs to be included and, furthermore, what should be left out. Although the needs of the reader can, to an extent, be catered for at the production and design stages in terms of neat, well-formed written outcomes, a more complex and stylistically satisfying relationship is established at the discourse stage. In terms of written outcome, the reader’s perceived needs differ between the different stages. Whereas, because of the importance of skill acquisition at the production stage, the emphasis is on the production of a well-presented script, at the design stage, linguistic conventions (and their appropriate use) emerge as a potent feature of the written outcome. The discourse stage, whilst assuming an easy access to the skills and knowledge needed for the previous stages, concentrates on the stylistic devices that give the written outcome coherence and impact. At the level of production, the text convinces the reader largely through its visual impact; by contrast, at the discourse level, the reader is offered a network of mutually supportive techniques that contribute to the text’s meanings.

It is perhaps this difference in textual impact that causes some students such difficulty. Having successfully met the reader’s (teacher’s) needs in one way by offering neat work, once students progress to the usage of the higher order skills needed at the design and discourse stages, they are faced with the prospect of undoing

the work for which they were previously praised. The selection and application of appropriate linguistic devices necessarily means the rejection of others; a consequence of this is that visually the text will now contain corrections and alterations. This is for many students an important consideration, particularly when they are faced with the prospect of targeting a new, powerful audience – the external examiner. Leah's anxiety concerning the appearance of her examination paper, in the subsequent comment, emphasises that, in some respects, success at the production and design stages could actually inhibit success at the discourse stage because of concern over the appearance of the written outcome. She thought her examination paper was

a complete mess. I would have written it out again but obviously you can't but it was a complete mess so I kept thinking, "Oh no, I could change that bit," sort of thing. So I ended up with all this stuff all over the page. (Leah: able writer)

Leah's use of the conditional verb is illuminating. It highlights a tension between a wish to produce the same neat work which had won her the teacher's praise in previous years and a wish to select effective techniques in order to target the reader successfully. The skills, understanding and techniques needed to convince the reader, from her perspective, have become even more complicated and, thus, more difficult to control.

If we express *Figure 8: Model of three-stage writing process including location of engagement* in a different way, by employing terms which describe the processes in which the students are engaged, we are able to avoid possible confusion over terms when discussing the production phase and the production of the written outcome. As Leah's comment highlighted, an overarching consideration for the students within the study group with regard to composing processes was that of control. This term suggests considerations of both accuracy and layout as well as textual responsibility. Within this arena, students focused their concerns on how to start their work (which involved the selection of appropriate strategies), how to create visually pleasing work (which incorporated considerations of the text's design value) and how this work would be viewed (which involved consideration of readers' needs). These three processes I have termed: "commencing", "creating" and "critiquing", as *Figure 9: Model of composing processes* indicates. Students within the study group generally viewed composing to be synonymous with creating. They reasoned that employing various planning strategies (or "commencing") impeded the completion of the task. Similarly, in their view, active involvement in the "critiquing" phase was to be avoided if possible. "Critiquing" or evaluating the text could undermine the work itself (particularly in terms of its design value), the self-esteem of one's peers and be deemed inappropriate as it was considered the responsibility of the teacher.

In considering composing processes, the notion of cyberspace perhaps offers a useful metaphor: web pages alter in location each time they are accessed by the user, different levels of graphics "float" above each other on the page and hyperlinks provide easy access to pages which overlap in terms of discourse areas. Lakoff's suggestion (1987) that there is a common, shared basis for human cognition (and, furthermore, that our physical interactions are at the root of any development of abstract thoughts through metaphor) reinforces this notion. Different ages create different metaphors as a way of visualising the world around us and the world within. Although it could be argued that this visualisation of the processes of composition a

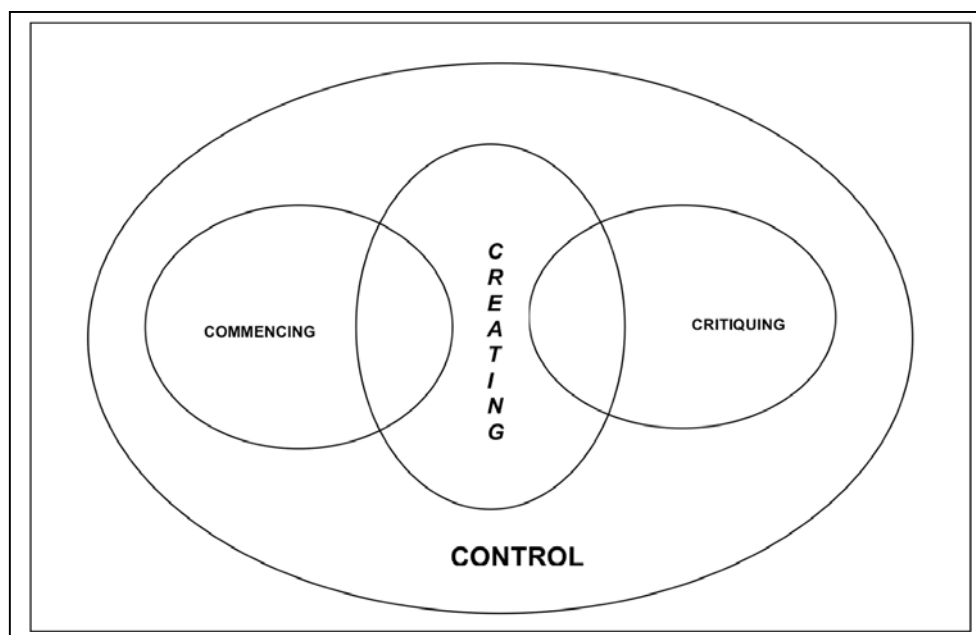


Figure 9. Model of composing processes

overlapping domains is merely a predictable reflection of the world within which I reside, the notion of shifting landscapes of audiences, skills and intentions is nonetheless a useful one. It suggests that composing processes involve a network of relationships, in which different factors become more prominent depending upon the needs and anxieties of the writer as well as the perceived nature of the task. Furthermore, it accounts for the decisions students make in attempting a written task, particularly with the strategies they employ. The risk of tackling a new subject, for example, can nonetheless be supported by a familiar framework; ignoring the demands of surface features can afford the student the opportunity to develop his/her “own story” more fully; an everyday situation can be made a little less ordinary by an unusual treatment.

CONCLUSION

This representation of composing processes emphasises that, as novice writers, some students have not engaged fully with all elements of the processes of composition, either because they are not perceived as their responsibility or because the task of total engagement is too daunting. Although one might assume that the more able writer is fully engaged in these processes, given the level of sophistication apparent in his/her writing, as comments made during the students’ interviews indicated, the “critiquing” phase was one which, for a variety of reasons, they would rather not be involved in – a reason why drafting and reviewing are rarely met with enthusiasm, perhaps.

As a result of the research project, I was able to explore the characteristics of the composing processes that had been constructed by the students. Spivey’s (1997) contention that each person’s ways of perceiving the world influences the knowledge produced highlights the importance of identifying the students’ conceptualisations of composing processes rather than the practices I had assumed were present. Using an

iterative process of analysis, I was able to move from my concerns as a teacher in order to make visible the features of the composing processes which the students had talked into being as a result of this schedule of interviews. It is apparent that multi-faceted characteristics of composing processes and practices are reflected in the complex nature of the anxieties expressed by the students. The challenge remains, however, to harness the understandings yielded by investigations of this sort in order to enable our students to engage fully with all aspects of the processes of composition and, thus, to empower them as writers. A starting point could be to consider how we explore the spheres of "commencing" and "critiquing" with the students we teach.

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