Editorial: Composition in the English/literacy classroom

DEBRA MYHILL
School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter

TERRY LOCKE
School of Education, University of Waikato

> Around the world, from the cave paintings in Lascaux, France, which may be 25,000 years old, to the images left behind by the lost Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest, to the ancient aboriginal art of Australia, the most common pictograph found in rock paintings is the human hand. Coupled with pictures of animals, with human forms, with a starry night sky or other images that today we can only identify as abstract, we look at these men's and women's hands, along with smaller prints that perhaps belong to children, and cannot help but be deeply moved by the urge of our ancestors to leave some permanent imprint of themselves behind.
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> Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 1)

The epigraph to our editorial is the poetic, opening paragraph of Vartan Gregorian's Forward to *Writing next,* a report to the Carnegie Corporation of which he is current president. While the paragraph evokes humankind's commitment to print as vestige, the report it anticipates stems from a sense of nationwide failure to see that commitment realised in widespread, writing literacy. Indeed, as Gregorian tells us, "American students today are not meeting even basic writing standards, and their teachers are often at a loss for how to help them" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 2). In taking on this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique,* we saw this anxiety about "writing standards" as characterising a number of educational settings, including our own (the UK and New Zealand).

Nevertheless, the act of writing is a complex task. About that, there is almost complete agreement, whether you are a psychologist, a linguist, a socio-cultural theorist, a teacher, or a student battling with an assignment deadline and a blank page. For the emergent writer in the infant classroom, the challenge of communicating in writing is compounded by the sheer effort of transcription – remembering to put spaces between words, shaping upper and lower case letters, marking sentence boundaries with full stops, and representing words in your head as accurately spelled sequences of letters on the page. For the older writer, the complexity persists, though the challenges change. Although transcribing text onto paper or screen may be less effortful, understanding the expectations of the writing task and imagining the needs of the (implied) reader create different obstacles to effortless composition.

Curiously, research in composing processes is relatively immature, particularly when compared with the extensive research in oral language acquisition and the development of reading. Emig's (1971) study of the composing processes of eight twelfth-grade writers was seminal in stimulating interest in what happens when children write, and was particularly significant in shifting pedagogic attention from the writing product to the writing process. Hayes and Flower's (1980) model of the

writing process was the first systematic attempt to describe the cognitive activities involved in writing, drawing on think-aloud protocols. The work of both Emig and Hayes and Flower have been critiqued subsequently: Voss (1983) argued that Emig's "assertions about writing teachers and her investigative method" (p. 278) do not stand up to robust re-examination, and the numerous revisions of the Hayes and Flower model (Hayes 1996; Berninger and Swanson 1994) point to theoretical dissatisfaction with the original version. Psychological interpretations of the writing process focus predominantly on the cognitive and the individual – the lone writer. But alternative articulations of the writing process, drawing on sociocultural theory, position the act of writing as a situated process, in which even the lone writer is drawing on socio-historic resources and understandings. Writing is thus "a mode of social action, not simply a means of communication" (Prior, 2006, p. 58). The individual is always writing within a community of practice, or rather multiple and overlaying communities of practice, in which meanings are made and re-made within the conventions and practices of that discourse community.

The process of moving from thought to written word, or from communicative message to textual production is at the heart of the writing process, and whilst it is recognised that "turning verbal thought into text is a demanding task" (Hayes and Flower, 1980, p. 39), Alamargot and Chanquoy acknowledge that "writing models remain unclear concerning the formulation of sentences from a preverbal message" (2001, p. 76). Conceptualising the act of writing as a meaning-making activity in which the writer thinks through writing and in which the process of writing acts as a discovery mechanism, D'Arcy reminds us of Britton's notion of "shaping at the point of utterance" which enables thinking to be verbalised in writing. She argues that "a great deal of linguistic ordering is performed well before we hear what we say or see what we write, so that shaping at the point of utterance becomes possible" (2000, p. 38). In other words, D'Arcy suggests that the very act of converting ideas into text is generative, and that much authorial shaping occurs at this point as an unconscious activity. The creative potential of writing, as well as the reciprocal relationship between thinking and writing, is also outlined by Galbraith (1999) in his theory of discovery through writing. Most experienced writers know that what they plan to write is rarely what they actually do write, and the pleasure of discovering a new idea or thought while writing is one of the genuine surprises of the writing process.

But from the perspective of the classroom, we also know that our experiences as reasonably expert and mature writers are not simply reproduced as scaled-down versions in younger writers. In particular, learning how to write with the needs of the reader in mind is a tough task, especially when the reader is implied or imagined, rather than real. Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) distinction between knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming as a key developmental progression discriminates between the writer whose principal concern is with getting ideas onto paper and the writer who transforms the text with more understanding of the demands of the task and the needs of the reader. The knowledge-teller focuses on one idea, then the next, chaining ideas sequentially and often chronologically, whereas the knowledge-transformer is more able to conduct "a mental dialogue between content and rhetoric" (Sharples, 1999, p. 22). More recently, Kellogg (2006) has added "knowledge-crafting" to Bereiter and Scardamalia's distinction, and re-frames the developmental trajectory thus:

➢ Knowledge-telling is author focused;
➢ Knowledge-transforming is author and text focused;
➢ Knowledge-crafting is author, text and reader focused.

At the knowledge-crafting stage, the writer is able to revise the text "so that it corresponds to the reader's representation as imagined by the author" (Kellogg 2006: slide 5). Controversially, perhaps, Kellogg suggests that writers are in the knowledge-transforming stage between ages 14 and 24, and that knowledge-crafting is essentially an adult stage, between 22 and 42 years old. For writing pedagogy, this would mean that the majority of classroom teaching of writing would be with children still at a knowledge-telling stage, and none would achieve the knowledge-crafting stage. Is this a perspective that our professional and theoretical experiences would endorse? We doubt it.

The field of writing research can be mapped in a number of ways. A useful conceptual overview is provided by Hyland (2002) who distinguishes between three approaches. The first he describes as *text-oriented* and focuses on "the products of writing by examining *texts* in various ways, either though their formal surface elements or their discourse structures" (p. 5). The second is "writer-oriented" an includes attention to what is sometimes called expressive writing (or writing as personal expression), writing as a cognitive process, and writing a situated activity. Hyland's third approach is *reader-oriented,* and focuses on the "role that *readers* play in writing, adding a social dimension to writing research by elaborating how writers engage with an audience with an audience in creating coherent texts" (p. 5).

As Hyland himself acknowledges, such a system of categorisation takes liberties. That is because the words we customarily use to talk about writing – words such as writer, reader, text, cognition, meaning, language, technology and social context – are themselves constructed differently in discourse. Literacy, as a major curriculum dimension for primary-aged children, and English as a "subject" in high schools, are both constructed differently as different constructions are put on these and other words. One of us (Locke, 2005) has recently represented the range of possibilities as Table 1. Such a representation is offered as an heuristic, but it serves the purpose of showing the range of "writer identities" a student might be potentially be offered by

Cultural heritage	Personal growth
Writer orientation: • Appreciation and emulation • Deference • Acculturation	Writer orientation: • Self-realisation through meaning-making • Creative exploration • Personal integration
Skills acquisition	Critical literacy
Writer orientation: • Formal mastery of textual practices • Pragmatic competence • Social adeptness	Writer orientation: • Critical linguistic analysis • Detachment • Social transformation

Table 1: Versions of English and writer orientation

the education system. (It can also highlight the *narrowness* of the range of identities on offer in different settings, a point also made by Hyland.)

The articles in this edition represent a diverse set of perspectives on the writing process, including a diversity of theoretical orientations, from the socio-cultural emphasis of Nahechewsky's piece, to the more cognitive stance of Silver and Lee's consideration of feedback, and the socio-linguistic discourse analysis of Davidson's enquiries into young writers' talk during writing. They represent culturally and internationally diverse contexts for writing, from Canada, Australia and England to Vietnam, Singapore and Taiwan; and address compositional issues for both L1 and L2 writers. Common to all, however, is a concern to understand what it is that writers do when they write, and how teaching can better meet students' needs and interests.

Understanding what happens when emergent writers begin to write is at the heart of Davidson's analysis of young children's talk whilst composing, which focuses on writing as a situated act (Hyland, 2002, p 30). The role of talk in supporting writing has been well rehearsed elsewhere (Haas Dyson 2000; Geekie and Raban 1993) including Christie's (1986) important study showing how teacher-child interaction in early years writing classrooms was often limited and restricting. The teacher controlled the discourse giving children few opportunities to elaborate and extend their oral contributions as a precursor to writing. The teacher's role is evident, too, in Davidson's study, particularly in regulating the boundaries of independence: she illustrates how using words or phrases from the teacher's modelled writing is acceptably independent, but copying from a peer is not. What Davidson explores in depth, however, is not so much teacher-child conversations, but peer talk about writing during an "independent" writing time. Her analysis highlights the social and collaborative nature of writing, even when the activity is called independent writing. She reveals how these young writers negotiate independence and calls for a re-thinking of what is meant by independent writing: "descriptions of independent writing in current approaches to early writing instruction need to acknowledge peer interaction and the social activities that constitute independent writing" (p. 21).

Silver and Lee's investigation of how different types of feedback support students' revision chimes with the current emphasis on effective formative assessment (Black et al, 2003) in England and elsewhere. Central to their study is a concern to find feedback strategies which help writers to make effective changes. Their finding that feedback framed as advice tends to be most successful points to the importance of feedback which is learning-focused, rather than error-focused and which attempts to give some autonomy to the writer. The substance and tone of the feedback framed as criticism signals the authority of the teacher as possessor of the truth and arbiter of quality, and removes ownership from the writer. Though writer-oriented, the findings also underline the social role of language in negotiating teacher-learner relationships and creating constructive contexts for learning about writing: in the voices of Silver and Lee's students, the criticism "makes me feel bad and ashamed", whereas the advice "makes me want to give my best shot" (p. 39). What is implicit in much of this piece is that effective feedback can potentially develop metacognitive and metalinguistic understanding of revision processes, and yet the students' tendency to make only superficial corrections suggests that the drive to make the writing conform to externally-imposed criteria remains a powerful one.

A different form of feedback emerges in Nahechewsky and Ward's article, which provides an interesting take on the multimodality of writing. The bulletin board provides the teacher with multiple opportunities to respond to students' thinking and writing, and the teacher's comments are part of the process of establishing learning relationships in a 'cyberclassroom': his statement that "There's no such thing as a dumb question (well, there is, but I don't mind if you ask them)" (p. 56) encourages a particular kind of dialogue in which learning is more important than being right. Using the metaphor of musical counterpoint, Nahechewsky and Ward illustrate how these writers are negotiating identities as well as texts through online writing communication. As the only article in this edition which looks specifically at computer-based writing, it draws attention to the need for changing conceptualisations of what writing is and what processes generate it. But despite the new technologies and cyber-potentialities, traditional patterns of interaction remain. Indeed, as editors, we were not convinced that critical literacy was being enacted in this setting. Just as Silver and Lee's writers appeared to concentrate on superficial changes to their texts, so these writers seemed reluctant, despite encouragement, to challenge or question their teacher or the authority of texts. The authors note that there were few oppositional or questioning voices and observe that "the students' writing housed a set of contradictions – the fluid construction of meaning/identity within a well-established schooled approach" (p. 60) .

We hear more student voices in Morris's article on children's conceptualizations of the writing process. Like Nahechewsky, Morris takes as a starting-point a recognition of the multimodality of writing, and gives primacy to an exploration of student articulations of their understandings. Their concern for the presentational aspects of writing, its neatness and visual appearance, chimes with much earlier research (NWP 1990) but the students underline how a process-based pedagogy is undermined by a product-oriented, assessment-led curriculum: "they perceive teachers as viewing their efforts as objects to be assessed rather than as stages in a process" (p. 84). Students' dislike of drafting and editing appears to be less related to the processes themselves and more to the students' identities as writers. If developing writers believe that good writing is "an accident of fate rather than the result of conscious craft" (p. 88), there is little responsibility or control to be exercised through revision, and little motivation to make changes. It may be that similar thinking restricted Silver and Lee's writers from making changes beyond the superficial.

Like Morris, Jones is concerned to explore learner perspectives on their own writing processes, but in particular she explores differences in the way writers, boys and girls, approach the task of writing. Drawing on observational data which captured writer behaviour, she creates writing profiles which illuminate different writing patterns. Her interest is less in the generalised cognitive processes of planning, translating and reviewing and more in detailed portrayals of how these processes are realised in practice. Interviews with the writers elicit their recollections and understandings of their writing behaviours. Jones highlights that writers do indeed approach the writing task differently and exhibit different writing behaviours – just as Mozart and Beethoven composed great music in very different ways. But, she argues, there is little evidence in either the writing profiles or students' reflections to suggest any connection between the way boys write and their lack of success in writing examinations. Instead she argues for the importance of "contesting the notion of the

struggling boy writer, and refocusing attention on the varying needs of all those who struggle with writing" (p. 111).

Children's thinking about writing and about themselves as writers is, of course, shaped by their in-school and out-of-school encounters with writing, and not least by the messages communicated by their own teachers. In Yeo's article, with its socio-cultural orientation, it is the teachers' conceptualisations of writing which are the locus of investigation. She highlights how for many of the teachers, it is reading which forms the backbone of their literacy experiences: few of the teachers are keen writers and this, in turn, shapes their view of writing and composition. Only one of the teachers thought of reading as supporting the process of writing. Yeo signals these different conceptualisations in explaining that whereas one teacher "has her students read almost exclusively for understanding and the creation of personal meaning", another teacher "has her students read for the sake of learning about the craft of writing" (p. 127).

Two articles focus upon the organizational element of the writing process, and consider writers' management of text-level structures. Looking at composing in a second language classroom, Chien outlines how the conventional Chinese way of writing an argument text is very different from Anglo-American conventions: the one is characterized by indirection and an inductive approach, whereas the other is typically very specific and adopts a deductive approach. In this respect, she is drawing on theories of contrastive rhetoric which Hyland associates with a reader-oriented approach (2002, 37-39). Syrquin (2006) found that African-American writers "depend on and unconsciously use discourse patterns of style (eg indirection) that are pervasive in their native communication system but that are different from those typical of the educational establishment" (p. 86). Given that learning to write, therefore, is also about learning about cultural patterns and expectations, Chien seeks to explore whether first language experiences of text conventions influence writing experiences in a second language. In contrast to Syrquin's findings, Chien's students reveal considerable mastery of the Anglo-American style of expressing argument and concludes that "deductive patterns may not be difficult for Chinese students to learn to employ, especially in their English writing, and instruction can be effective in this respect" (p. 146).

A different, but complementary, reflection upon structural organization is evident in Faull's analysis of the challenges faced by the almost-adult writers in her English Literature classes. Not a piece of formal empirical research but an example of professional analysis of students' writing followed by teaching interventions to address the issues raised, this piece signals the importance of teachers reflecting on and investigating their own practice. Faull's realization of the tendency for lessons to be come "teacher-led as we strive to 'get through' the texts" (p. 174) and her conclusion that effective teaching of writing "necessitates them having time to try things out on their own and with others" (p. 174) has many resonances with other research studies.

Indeed, Faull's reminder of the ease with which curriculum demands can lead to teacher domination of the learning arena is echoed by Tran, writing about the Vietnamese context: "The way learners' needs are mainly decided by the teachers, the experts and the administrators is limited in the sense that need itself is also

subjective and should be bound to individual learners themselves as well" (p. 153). But Tran also highlights how in the Vietnamese cultural milieu, individual needs are often set aside in favour of perceived collective needs or goals, and learners are unaccustomed to voicing their own needs. Through seeking to give voice to these students, Tran uncovers motivational influences _ supportive feedback, topic choice, teacher enthusiasm, authentic audiences – which mirror the motivational influences of writers from more individualised cultures. But giving voice to these students also challenges the conventional wisdom that Vietnamese students are teacher-dependent and motivated by good marks; instead we see "an image of students who are able and ready to write with a sense of authorship in a foreign language" (p. 161).

Two themes emerge from this rich cross-section of perspectives on composition. The first is that teacher control of the writing process remains a dominant phenemenon, even when the pedagogic goal has been to give more ownership to writers. Teachers may not define the rules of the game, but they do police them: they determine that copying the teacher's model is acceptable but copying your peer's is not; they provide feedback which serves to align the efforts of the writer to the norms of the educational context; they act as arbiters of achievement, creating the view that writers are born, not made, and thus that drafting is futile process; and they are the agents of curricular or policy goals which remove agency from student-writers. Arguably, process approaches to writing have become linearised and fossilised into routines of planning, drafting, editing, revising, and presenting. Ironically, these still emphasise the product, not the process – the plan or outline, the first draft, the revision, the final product – and they emphasise the teacher as monitor, not the learner as knowledge-transformer or knowledge-crafter.

But lest this sounds unnecessarily gloomy or negative, the second theme emerging from these studies is the place of student voice and talk in empowering developing writers and making learning visible.   Talking with peers about writing, whether it be independent or collaborative writing, discussing how we approach a writing task, reflecting on how we create and revise text, articulating and justifying decisions made during writing are all powerful ways of fostering learner autonomy in writing, through strengthening metacognitive, metalinguistic and metasocial awareness.

Having concluded this editing project, we realise that the articles represented here are but a small sample on a big topic. Are bigger samples better? We began this editorial be referring to *Writing next*, an American report which offers to the public "the results of a large-scale statistical review of research in to the effects of specific types of writing insturcition on adolescents' writing proficiency" using meta-analytical methods (Graham and Perin, 2007, p. 4). The report's eleven elements of effective adolescent writing instruction make interesting reading. These are:

1. **Writing Strategies**, which involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions
2. **Summarisation**, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarise texts
3. **Collaborative Writing**, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions
4. **Specific Product Goals**, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete

5. **Word Processing**, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
6. **Sentence Combining**, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences
7. **Prewriting**, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organise ideas for their composition
8. **Inquiry Activities**, which engages students in analysing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
9. **Process Writing Approach**, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalised instruction, and cycles of writing
10. **Study of Models**, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyse, and emulate models of good writing
11. **Writing for Content Learning**, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material (Graham & Perin, 2007, pp. 4-5).

Of these eleven, two (4 and 11) appear to be about something other than writing instruction (a general learning strategy and general content mastery). Number five refers to word processing as an ICT affordance, but treats it neutrally as a technological means to an end that leaves that end unchanged. Of the remaining eight, six are writer-oriented, mostly with a focus on writing as a process with a subset of these (2, 7 and 8) related to aspects of inquiry as a means of generating content. In addition, one of these six (9) has a reader orientation as well. Numbers 10 and 6 appear to be text-related, with the first related to a cultural heritage model of English/literacy (with its focus on "models of good writing") and the second suggesting a skills model.

As we round off this editorial, we are left with a sense of challenges that persist for educational researchers and teachers. In respect of research, we are all too aware that the process of systematic review and meta-analysis has a habit of constructing "best evidence" in ways that are problematic to say the least (see MacLure, 2005). One of us (see Andrews et al, 2006), was involved in extensive research into the impact of grammar teacher on writing and was party to the writing of reports confirming point nine of *Writing next*, that sentence combining instruction can have a positive impact on writing. The trouble is that such an instruction can all too often be embedded in philosophies and practices of writing that can be positively deadening in respect of student motivation and "real world" relevance. And research rigour can easily be obtained at the price of measures of writing competence that are fatuous, to say the least. So there are methodological challenges, but also challenges of focus.

As we see it, there are gaps and silences, both in the selection of articles presented in this issue and in the list of strategies above. We wonder about a lack of attention to the reader? We wonder whether the hegemony of the expository essay continues unchallenged? We wonder, as Yeo suggests in this issue, whether reading continues to hold sway over writing, and whether teachers really believe that our students are potentially writers of literary texts as well as consumers of them? We wonder, indeed, just how many teachers write. We wonder about the role social context plays in the way units of work are designed? And we wonder about the extent to which old ideas of composing are decomposing in the face of a textual world that really is being digitally reconfigured.

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