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## A Context for Revision: An Ethnographic Perspective

### Abstract

For more than a decade, the field of composition has been studying writing as a process. More specifically, process studies are expressed in terms of cognitive psychology, the social science most prepared in the early seventies to focus on individual writers as they wrote. On the one hand, studies of writers' cognitive processes have shown the value of attending not only to what people write, but also to how they go about doing so. Such research, for instance, has made it possible to imagine writing as a moment to moment affair, during which writers shift their attention from one cognitive activity to another, moving back and forth between what they've already written to what they're writing. On the other hand, exclusive attention to writers' cognitive activities ignores the fact that writing can also be thought about and studied as a social process. While an ethnographic perspective in no way discounts the importance of studying writing as cognition, it does raise questions about those studies of writers' cognitive processes which systematically decontextualize writers from the circumstances of writing. In fact, contextualized research argues that cognition cannot be isolated as autonomous activity, for what people think about and how they think is profoundly influenced by the situations in which they find themselves.

A CONTEXT FOR REVISION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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For more than a decade, the field of composition has been studying writing as a process. More specifically, process studies are expressed in terms of cognitive psychology, the social science most prepared in the early seventies to focus on individual writers as they wrote. On the one hand, studies of writers' cognitive processes have shown the value of attending not only to what people write, but also to how they go about doing so. Such research, for instance, has made it possible to imagine writing as a moment to moment affair, during which writers shift their attention from one cognitive activity to another, moving back and forth between what they've already written to what they're writing. On the other hand, exclusive attention to writers' cognitive activities ignores the fact that writing can also be thought about and studied as a social process. While an ethnographic perspective in no way discounts the importance of studying writing as cognition, it does raise questions about those studies of writers' cognitive processes which systematically decontextualize writers from the circumstances of writing. In fact, contextualized research argues that cognition cannot

be isolated as autonomous activity, for what people think about and how they think is profoundly influenced by the situations in which they find themselves.

### Cognitive Perspectives on Composing and Revising

A brief but intensive period of research on cognition and writing began with the publication of Emig's (1971) landmark monograph on composing which also introduced two primary research techniques: the case study and "writing aloud" or "thinking aloud" protocols. In nearly all research on composing that followed, individual writers were studied either by closely observing them as they wrote, by recording their articulated thoughts while writing, or, as Emig did, by combining case study method and protocol analysis (for example, Flower, 1979; Flower and Hayes, 1980 & 1981; Perl, 1979 & 1980). These studies of composing show skilled and unskilled writers alike engaged in complex cognitive activities which, to quote Flower and Hayes (1981), show that writing itself "is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing" (366). While all writers think as they write, it seems that some know the score better than others. Since Perl's (1979) article on unskilled college writers, in which she reports that revising often worsened rather than improved their prose, studies of revision processes have attempted to explain why. Such a fact, of course, contradicts one's own experience as a writer, not to mention one's

intuition as a teacher that many students could improve their essays by revising them. Their ideas, we say, need to be elaborated, illustrated, restated, or otherwise amended if readers are to understand what they mean. Perl's study, however, clearly finds that rewriting an essay does not, in the case of unskilled writers, necessarily constitute change for the better.

The most widely-known study on revision provides a partial explanation of why altering prose does not necessarily result in successful revision. Sommers (1980), in a case study of twenty relatively inexperienced college student writers and twenty relatively experienced professional writers, concludes that differences in revising strategies of the respective groups account for relative differences in success. Briefly, she reports that inexperienced writers see revision in terms of rules of wording and phrasing. Consequently, rather than reviewing what they have written and amending their prose to fit their intention, inexperienced writers all too often subject their own words and phrases to the kind of scrutiny one usually associates with handbooks, or "English teachers". Thus, instead of asking if the words mean what they want them to, they worry if it is correct to start a sentence with 'and' or 'but'!" Such overzealous attention to rules, Sommers contends, distracts them from problems specific to the prose they have actually written. In contrast to the student writers in her study, the professional writers "see their revision process as a recursive process--a process with significant recurring activities--with different levels of attention and different agenda for each style" (386). Sommers is not, of course, claiming that

the professional writers are unconcerned about "the rules", but that rules are only a part of what they attend to when they revise, and often something they leave until much of the work of organizing and writing down ideas is complete. Like Perl, however, Sommers concludes that inexperienced writers do not gain much by revising, a failure she attributes to their not knowing how "to reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and procedures" (383). In short, the changes they make rarely alter the course of an essay.

Additional research on high school students' revising processes (Bridwell 1980) and on the sources of writer's block (Rose 1980) confirms that inexperienced writers work from limited notions of revising, which keep them riveted on rules, insuring that their alterations will be superficial. In other words, student writers change words and phrases, but these surface-level revisions are done at the expense of larger units of written discourse.

In order to specify the effects of revisions, Faigley and Witte (1981) developed a taxonomy by which to distinguish changes that affect only the surface form from those that also affect meaning. In their classification system, "changes that do not bring new information to the text or remove old information" (402) are surface-level revisions, whereas meaning-changing revisions "involve the adding of new content or the deletion of existing content"(402). Their taxonomy is meant, then, to provide grounds for evaluating each instance of revision. In previous studies of revising, any lexical change was deemed surface-level or trivial because it was local. With the Faigley and Witte

system, however, the relative importance of an alteration of any kind would depend not only on its effect on the sentence in which it occurs, but also on surrounding discourse. Thus, substituting, adding, or deleting a word might be interpreted as a surface-level or text-level revision, depending on its effect on the written text. As in earlier studies, students in Faigley and Witte's research also concentrated on changes that neither added nor deleted information. Yet, in discussing what pedagogy might learn from studying the revising behaviors of professional writers, they also pointed out dramatic differences within this group. Some professional writers studied made few changes, and often those were superficial. Others wrote associative, stream of consciousness-like first drafts from which ideas for later drafts were culled.

So radical did they find these differences among the professional writers that Faigley and Witte concluded that research cannot make any general recommendations about teaching revising. Instead, they suggested that future research attend to "situational variables", which they believed affected both the number and types of revisions made by the professional writers. Their list of situational variables, which is not meant to be exhaustive, includes the following: "the reason why the text is being written, the format, the medium, the genre, the writer's familiarity with the writing task, the writer's familiarity with the audience, the projected level of formality, and the length of the task and the projected text" (410-411). Something of a mulligan stew, the list can also be seen as one of the first serious efforts to define the situations writers find themselves in. Such a list suggests

any number of directions for research. With respect to writers' revising practices in particular, one presumes that professional writers decide to revise, or not, according to their assessment of "variables" actually within their control. Length of projected text, for instance, is often as much in the hands of editors as writers. On an equally "prosaic" note, an experienced writer might also revise according to directions from an editor, whether or not he or she believes the revision to clarify intended meaning. Likewise, student writers are often motivated to revise according to the exigencies of their situations. For instance, many revise only because instructed to by their teachers.

#### Separating Response from Evaluation

It is common practice for composition teachers to call for drafts. When they do so, what they then write on them is presumably advice about revising. As distinguished from evaluation, which is generally meant to justify the grade assigned an essay, a response is understood by teacher and student alike as a set of directions for rewriting an essay. Given the disappointing conclusions drawn in studies of students' revising processes, it is not all that surprising that some researchers have already looked to teachers' responses to work-in-progress as the most likely source of students' meager knowledge of revision. Such research clearly identifies teachers as the purveyors of a variety of misinformation about revising. Sommers'



(1982) study of teachers' written comments found that teachers evaluate and respond in the same breath, as it were, sometimes going so far as telling students to revise the very sentence they have also recommended be deleted. This and similar kinds of contradictions, Sommers explains, indicate that their "commenting vocabularies have not been adapted to revision, and they comment on first drafts as if they were justifying a grade or as if the first draft were the last draft" (154). While her study may overstate the actual extent of the contradiction between evaluation and response (since students and teachers often understand each other in ways not revealed in written comments), her point is well taken. One would wish to separate remarks meant to encourage a student to rewrite from those meant to explain a grade.

In a related study, Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) warn practitioners against assuming that a student's intentions can be discovered by simply reading the draft. In lieu of written comments, they suggest a conference during which the teacher tries to elicit rather than posit intentions, by questioning the student writer. Following what might be seen as an informal protocol procedure, they recommend that teachers ask students to read aloud and explain problematic portions of their drafts. Brannon and Knoblauch, however, are quick to point out that they are not so much recommending their own method as arguing that teachers need to show students those places where a reader is likely to misapprehend "the relationship between intention and effect" (163). If Sommers' study is taken as a demonstration of ways in which teachers' written commentaries can

confound students, Brannon and Knoblauch's might be seen as an attempt to locate the source of teachers' confusion in the widely held presumption that reading necessarily lays bare a writer's intended meaning. Both studies, moreover, seek to rectify students' understanding of revision itself by expanding the teacher's notion of response to work-in-progress.

Neither study, however, directly broaches the kinds of issues raised by Faigley and Witte's situational variables. That is, like most research which views the process metaphor exclusively in terms of cognition, studies of responding pay no systematic attention either to the presence of context or its influence on writing. Just as Sommers ignores the possibility of understandings between teachers and their students not evident in written commentaries, Brannon and Knoblauch seem unaware of the many possible kinds of misunderstandings that might also arise in the course of conferences. Yet, so important do Faigley and Witte find situational variables with respect to revising, that they go so far as to conclude "that writing skills might be defined in part as the ability to respond to them" (411). Put another way, the differences between what experienced and inexperienced writers know about writing are more likely to be understood by studying writing in context than by continuing to study writers as if their cognitive processes were autonomous from the circumstances in which they write. While Faigley and Witte are inclined to fault the artificiality of protocol research for our uncertain knowledge about revision, Cooper and Holzman (1983) have since argued that the limitations of artificiality apply not only to the work on composing and cognition but

extend virtually "to all research concerning human thought and behavior" (290) that ignores or treats lightly the context.

It is important to remember that critiques of research on writers' cognitive processes are meant to mitigate conclusions drawn only from experimental studies, such as writing aloud protocols in which the setting, the task, and the length of task are determined by the researcher. They are not also intended to deny either the relative importance of cognition in writing or the possibility of studying writing by using either case studies or protocol analyses. Instead, such critiques question the wisdom of proclaiming, on the basis of decontextualized research alone, as Flower and Hayes have in the passage cited above, that writing itself "is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes" (emphasis mine). With writing as with other uses of language, the presence of context cautions prudence with respect to such generalizations.

#### Context in Experimental and Ethnographic Research

In the social sciences, context is conceptualized in two fundamentally different ways. In experimental research, where context is methodologically separable from individuals, it functions as a given: a task environment. At one end of the spectrum is the artificially controlled environment of a laboratory, at the other, the naturalistically controlled environment of, say, a home or classroom. The situational variables Faigley and Witte propose for research on

revising derive from the tradition of experimental research. As in previous research on composing and revising which specified laboratory-like task environments, Faigley and Witte are willing to treat aspects of "naturalistic" settings, such as classrooms, as variables whose effects on task performance can be observed and measured.

The view of context in ethnographic research is quite different. For most ethnographers, context is methodologically inseparable from individuals and does not, then, function as a given or task environment. Whether explicitly, as in Hymes (e.g., 1974), or implicitly, context includes both participants and settings. This difference has considerable consequences for research on writing. Whereas experimental research would treat the classroom as a task environment whose salient aspects could be seen as variables affecting writers' text production, it would be the goal of ethnographic research to establish the context for writing created by the participants in a given setting, such as a classroom.

#### Studying Revision in Context

Although there are many ethnographic studies of classrooms, and several of L2 classrooms (see Long 1980, for some examples), there are very few concerned with writing (Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz 1981), and only one I know of which explicitly focuses on writing in L2 (Edelsky 1982). The most widely known and used method for collecting data in and on context is participant-observation (Spradley 1980). There are, of

course, degrees of participation. In a sense, classroom teachers cannot but observe as they teach. A more thorough description of a class, however, can be obtained by inviting someone not actually engaged in the ongoing activities to observe and record what students and teacher say and do. The participant-observer who regularly attended the ESL writing class that I was teaching tape recorded what students and I said to each other in the classroom. My own observations and interpretations of what students and I did with respect to writing in general and revising and responding in particular are in large part based on transcripts she constructed from tapes and notes.<sup>2</sup> The value of making such records lies in their usefulness for recreating a version of events experienced. Before looking at portions of a transcript, however, it would be useful to consider some general background information about the students and the procedures followed in this class for assigning and completing essays.

Although freshman composition is not a required course at the University of Pennsylvania, more than eighty percent of the entering class elect to take "Craft of Prose", a few sections of which are designated for ESL students. The nine students enrolled in my section were advanced ESL students in their first semester of undergraduate study. None was younger than 17 nor older than 19. Of the seven men and two women in the class, four were native speakers of Spanish, two of Cantonese, one of Vietnamese, one of Greek, and one of German. All but the Vietnamese and Cantonese speakers had written extensively in their native language prior to coming to the university; none but the Vietnamese and Cantonese speakers had written much in English. All

students attended class regularly, missing only one or two classes during the semester. Like most native speakers I have taught writing to, these students entered the class hoping to improve their writing in terms of correctness. According to their self-reports, they wished to improve their grammar, spelling, and vocabulary--in that order.

All formal and informal writing assignments were based on a textbook called Doing Anthropology(Hunter and Foley 1976). The book is an introduction to cultural anthropology which sets up a number of assignments on observing, recording, describing, and analyzing a variety of social settings and scenes. I chose the book because I believed that it would give students an opportunity to study American college life. As newcomers both to the States and American universities, foreign students almost require the skills of an anthropologist in order to make sense of their experiences. Moreover, since very little they were to observe was likely to strike them as "natural", I hoped that in this class, at least, being a foreigner would actually be an advantage.

During the first few weeks of the course, students spent a good deal of time observing how their teachers began classes, a useful assignment on several grounds. It gave them a reason to get to class early and something to do while American students were milling around talking to each other. In order to describe the moment a class begins in earnest, it is necessary to be in the room before the teacher arrives, observe carefully what the teacher does, who the teacher talks to, and what is said. Ultimately, the value of such an assignment in a

writing class is to give students practical experience in collecting information, making claims, and backing them up--in this instance to make the kinds of claims and use the kinds of evidence a cultural anthropologist might. The students' "field notes" and reports were used to stimulate discussions of college classrooms as well as the procedures followed to make and substantiate their claims.

I see and present class discussions as planning sessions for essays.<sup>3</sup> Experience has taught me that students are understandably more receptive to advice to "revise" their thinking on a subject when not very much has been committed to paper. After students have spent a great deal of time formulating a draft, advice to revise often seems to strike them as gratuitous. Although not all students take to the idea of working sessions of this sort, those who do approach them as opportunities to check out their ideas with me, and with others in the class. These students appear to feel that in telling someone else the points they think are important or critical, they can sometimes see for themselves what is clear, and what is not, about their own position. Of course, if the interlocutor is also the teacher/reader, the discussion is a chance to see if that person values their ideas, understands them, or can help them find ways to express those ideas more effectively.

In the course of any conversation, many conversational gambits are in play. For instance, the teacher is inviting students to display information, students are competing for turns and talk time, and students are directing their remarks almost exclusively to the

teacher. See R.L. Allwright (1980) for an excellent example of how to record and analyze students' contributions to an in-class discussion. A transcript of in-class discussion is used here to show how one student in particular used his "turns" to state, explain, revise, and, finally, assert an idea. The transcript, then, is a record of talk, and my commentary interprets the student's talk in relation to the immediate purposes of the in-class discussion (planning an essay) and the ultimate goal (writing an essay). We might call the procedure the students followed "worrying a word". The phenomenon itself is familiar to us all. One has in mind an idea that is difficult to express and tries saying it several ways. In my own experience of worrying words, the conversation has been private, on the order of an interior dialogue in which I keep using a word or words in various phrases, all the while asking myself if it works. As a teacher, I have often noticed students formulating and reformulating ideas using the same key word(s) each time. The transcript documents the event so that one can more carefully examine paths the students took in the course of the discussion.

On the day in question, students were planning answers to a 1000 word essay question. Included in the Hunter and Foley text is an essay by Jean Briggs, "Kapluna Daughter", in which she discusses problems she never resolved while living among Eskimos as both an anthropologist and an adopted daughter. The transcript records a discussion of essay topics three students had written on the board as appropriate for the entire class. Carlos introduced his idea and the words that were to bother him in response to the topic offered by Carmen.<sup>4</sup>



Describe the things in the Eskimo family's behavior which led Jean to have doubts about the way she was looked upon by them.

Carlos, the second student to enter the discussion on Carmen's question, began by introducing a theme he called "speaking and silent moments". Asked to elaborate on the theme, he went on to say:

She point sometimes on the essay that there were times where they used to talk to her. For example, when they set up everybody meeting at Inuttiaq's house. (Then) they (began) to meet at Inuttiaq's father's house. So and then sometimes she was excluded from the conversation and very very rarely she was alluded to.

I asked Carlos to say more about what he meant by "alluded to". His response, however, seemed to elaborate only his first point about exclusion:

Very few times when they were on silent moments, they didn't speak to her. They just sometimes mention, and if she made a question, only one of them will answer, generally the wife.

In light of a conference we later had (in which Carlos spoke again about "alluded to") and the essay he eventually wrote (in which his understanding of silence turned on "alluded to"), I now see that even at the beginning of the discussion, Carlos was trying to distinguish two kinds of silence. One kind of silence, which he and others in the class were able to document in the course of the discussion, concerns ways in which the Eskimos gradually prevented the anthropologist from participating in everyday conversations. The other kind of silence, which Carlos is trying to explain in the passage above, concerns Carlos' sense that the Eskimos themselves ceased talking about Briggs in their own conversations. Hindsight suggests that when Carlos said

"They just sometimes mention", he is elaborating on his previous assertion, "They didn't speak about her," I might have seen, or others might have seen, that Carlos was, in fact, trying to tell us what he meant by "alluded to".

During the course of the discussion on exclusion, however, Carlos contributed several incidents, along with explanations of their relevance, which misled me into concluding that he had modified his original assertion--to mean only one kind of silence. Near the end of the hour, when I asked students to say what themes they thought they would pursue, Carlos, not all that surprisingly, said that he would work on "the silent and speaking moments". I took the precedence of "silent" in his expression as yet another piece of evidence that the discussion had both confirmed his theme and directed him to examine what he meant by silence. In fact, when I asked how people were going to coordinate their themes with the kinds of evidence available to them in Briggs' essay, Carlos offered this explanation:

You I at least I could explain each one of those incidents and then apply the talking, as the talking is general that goes all through the text. I could explain the talking through those incidents. (His emphasis)

Anyone would think that Carlos had once again modified his position, for it certainly looked as if he were going to deal with talk, not silence. One would not, for instance, have been surprised to learn that his essay dealt with ways in which the Eskimos excluded Briggs from their conversation. However, at the end of class he asked for an appointment, to explain to me what he had really meant by "alluded to". That's when I finally understood that he literally meant that

Briggs was not alluded to by the Eskimos when they talked among themselves.

Consider the concluding paragraph of the essay Carlos finally wrote on "Kapluna Daughter". Allusion, as it finally turned out, was the preface to an assertion that silence rather than speech expressed hostility for the Eskimos.

The most important issue was not which culture was right or wrong, but how "acceptance" was represented by the ability to continue a friendly relationship with people by respecting the beliefs and sentiments of members of another culture, even if those beliefs are opposed to their own.

Writers "worry words" because they believe certain words to be essential (will help, perhaps, to organize their ideas), and to check what they have already worked out against a nagging uncertainty that others will not understand.

When writing in a second language, there is, of course, the additional frustration of believing one could explain one's ideas if only one were able to use the first language. In her case studies on advanced ESL student writers, Zamel (1983) lists some of the frustrations students voiced about writing in a second language. One comment in particular illustrates the kind of situation Carlos found himself in when he tried to explain "alluded to": "I sometimes get stuck on one word because the Spanish word I have in mind is right, but I know the English word is not quite right" (179). The irony in Carlos' case is that he was certain about the word but uncertain about the idea. I more or less assumed that he must have misused the word. Had he not pursued his point, had he not stuck to it, I certainly would

not have revised my own conclusion and Carlos might have dropped the notion altogether.

To the extent that language interactions constitute a social reality, students and teachers create a context for learning--in this instance, for learning to write. Geertz (1973) writes: "Ethnographic findings are not privileged, just particular: another country heard from" (p. 23). From this particular transcript, one can see how perilously close I came to convincing myself, and possibly even Carlos, that he was a foreign student without a word to say for himself, rather than a foreign student writer. Dissatisfied with his explanation of "alluded to", I presumed he had really meant "excluded". More importantly, however, by discouraging further discussion of "allusion" and encouraging the one on "exclusion" instead, I was in effect suggesting that Carlos himself discount the idea of allusion and its many implications. Yet, I had invited Carlos and the others to a working session on writing, where they were literally asked to pose their own questions, select and elucidate evidence, and revise their own positions in light of discussion. Fortunately, Carlos took himself seriously as a writer, eventually insisting that I also listen to what he was trying to say.

With respect to research on writing, what Carlos was doing with vocabulary warns against mistaking the generalizations for the goals of research. No doubt, many writers who focus on lexicons do so at the expense of improving their written texts. And, it is certainly one of the functions of research to apprise practitioners of this

possibility. However, there often is a difference between what is likely to be the case and what, in fact, is the case. Simply put, Carlos is not most writers. There is no evidence that focusing on "alluded to" distracted him from writing, and some evidence that it assisted him to articulate his intentions. If the goal of composition research is to improve our understanding of writing as a preface to improving writing pedagogy, then it is imperative that teachers not only read research but verify findings in their classrooms.

In addition to reminding us of the need for practitioner research, the episode with Carlos points to the also obvious need to study writing in context. For were we to have looked at Carlos' revisions as a matter of observable changes in drafts, not only would we not have seen the role played by "alluded to", we would not have noticed "alluded to" at all. The simple fact is that by the time Carlos was writing drafts on paper, he had already determined, to his own satisfaction, what he could do with "allusion". Not surprisingly, then, the phrase is unaltered from draft to draft. We recovered Carlos' uncertainty about the uses of "alluded to" and uncovered its seeming function with respect to his claim by turning to the in-class discussion on planning and recalling the conference.

Contexts for writing are created in just such moments as Carlos and I experienced. They are much more difficult to document than recognize. The evidence given to show how Carlos and I negotiated "alluded to" is circumstantial. Difficult and problematic though research in context may be, research which ignores on principle the

value of lived experience acquires its generalizations at the expense of pedagogy. Although this essay has argued for context as an essential component of research on writing, the experience itself was probably best summarized by Carlos who, when he handed in his essay on "Kapluna Daughter", offered me an apology, of sorts: "I don't wish you to be mad, and I hope you understand. But I don't care if you don't like my essay. It is the best one I have ever written--in English or in Spanish." I would like to take Carlos at his word and, indeed, am inclined to do so. Nonetheless, the resources I bring to bear on statements made by students in my classes owe more to my experiences as a teacher than as a researcher, which is a polite way of saying that like all practitioners I interpret these interactions without knowing my method for doing so. Participant observation, at the very least, provides data from which to construct a method.

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2. I acknowledge here my debt to Cherie Francis, a doctoral student in Educational Linguistics, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. Since I was unable to participate and observe my own class, she volunteered to attend all classes, tape record and take notes, interview students, and share transcripts as well as reports with me.
3. That planning is often an extensive as well as recursive activity for professional writers is confirmed by Carol Berkenkotter and Donald Murray (1983). Based on protocols that Murray made while at work on his own writing projects, both conclude that virtually all his decisions (from style to revision) could be traced to plans.
4. As is customary, students are referred to by pseudonyms which, in this instance, preserve gender and ethnicity.
5. The procedures for transcribing classroom discourse follow Schenkein (1978), where items enclosed by parentheses indicate transcriptionist doubt.

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