Chapter 3

The Wholetheme Window of Dynamic Motivation in Writing to Learn Critical Thinking: A Multiple – Source Perspective

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Writing is used extensively in academic settings either as a tool for assessing course content or for the purpose of learning how to write. Writing also has great potential in academic settings as a tool for the development of critical thinking. However, several fundamental challenges stand in the way of using writing to learn how to think. These challenges are particularly severe when it comes to the problem of figuring out the role, nature, and relationship of cognition and motivation in writing to learn critical thinking. Chief among these is the monumental challenge of grounding symbols and constructs in thinking, motivation, learning, and the manner in which these aspects tend to seamlessly integrate in some respects and defy integration in other respects. This chapter addresses the problem of integration of writing, thinking, motivation, and learning from the perspective of wholetheme education, and presents illustrative data bearing on the investigation of a multiple-phase window of wholetheme motivation for writing to learn critical thinking.

1 A Glance at the Wholetheme Education Perspective

We have coined and used the term wholetheme education to maintain (a) an integration and (b) a multiple-source disposition in exploring educational topics such as learning, motivation, and writing (Iran-Nejad, 1990, 1994; Iran-Nejad & Gregg, 2001). The bulk of the past research (see Iran-Nejad, 1986, 1987; Iran-Nejad, Ortony, & Rittenhouse, 1981), has been investigating individual constructs or the relationships among a focused few. However, concentration on individual educational constructs comes with a costly tradeoff. The more narrowly we zoom in, the more isolated the subject of our investigation becomes.
Construct-focused exploration may be an inevitable fact of life in human sciences; it is unlikely to cover the entire realm of human functioning. If so, wholetheme education is a useful reminder that there exists an organic, open-ground, and global coherence context of integration, organization, and reorganization in educational research and practice that deserves not to be overlooked. The wholetheme perspective offers a panoramic view in which we can, if we choose, zoom in for depth and zoom out for breadth at will.

The benefits of a wholetheme perspective are more than organizational. The wide expanse of a panoramic perspective is likely to make the most out of the diverse sources contributing to the educational enterprise. A construct-focused exploration elaborating on the meaning of the term learning, for example, is likely to leave out the non-obvious contributing sources to learning such as those responsible for the flash of an insight or awakening with one Bransford & Schwatz, 1999; Iran-Nejad & Chissena, 1992. The tendency to view the external world as the one and only source of learning is a case in point (see Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, & Berliner, 1990). Often internalizing information from the outside world is seen as the exclusive definition of learning. However, when it comes to complex human behaviors such as writing, many internal sources can contribute to learning even in the total absence of incoming information (Donchin, 1981).

The focusing capacity of the human mind can create the illusion of single-sourceness. For instance, in all likelihood, it is by no accident of nature that fundamentally different sensory modalities expose the nervous and bodily systems inside the skin to diverse facets of the outside world. Thus, a seamless panorama of vigilance is maintainable pervasively around the individual in all directions (Rosch, 2000). If single-sourceness is the rule, why more than one sensory modality? And the host of sensory systems are not all. There is also a multitude of other internal systems, making the individual a living system of systems of the most splendid kind (Bekey, 2005; Naderi, 2005; Tien, 2005; Iran-Nejad & Homaifar, 2005; Sage, 2005; Zadeh, 2005). If a uniform information processing system is all it takes to support the human mind and behavior, why such a kaleidoscopic diversity of human experiences?

As an illusion, single-sourceness can be explained by the consideration that the focusing capacity of the human mind can, by natural design, allow selective attention to only one sensory modality at a time. The wholetheme perspective holds that human learning can carry out, in vast proportion, its multiple-source agenda everywhere and more or less independently of the focusing activity. We may learn, not necessarily accurately, about a new acquaintance’s smile, voice, perfume, handshake, body physique, movements, wisdom, depth, sincerity, friendliness, trustworthiness, to name a few, all at the same time. A corollary assumption is that the wholetheme perspective can exploit such multiple-sourceness – in educational research and practice, in general, and in writing, in particular – through regulation of the zoom-in and the zoom-out capabilities of learners.

Another equally vital implication is that a person’s all-encompassing panorama of vigilance can sink in unnoticeable dimness in favor of single-modality-focused, or more broadly single-construct-focused, concentration. To go back to the example from the previous paragraph, if we focus on a single construct pertaining to a new acquaintance that we find unpleasant (such as an unpleasant smile, hair color, or one of a myriad of other