Chapter 14

Approaches to Writing

Ellen Lavelle

To advance understanding of writing processes at the university level, a series of investigations were conducted to define a model of writing, approaches-to-writing, and to fully validate a related questionnaire, Inventory of Processes in College Composition. Psychometric methods served to yield five factors, Elaborative, Low Self-Efficacy, Reflective-Revision, Spontaneous-Impulsive, and Procedural, as representative of the interrelationship between students’ beliefs and strategies in academic writing. Validity studies encompassed a full range of methodologies and demonstrated support for the model. The discussion concludes with consideration of current applications of the model and inventory and with suggestions for further research.

14.1. Introduction

While evidence suggests that writing is a valuable educational task demanding focus, expression, and rigor, what university students do when facing a writing assignment, or how they think about writing remains elusive. Writing is cognitively complex, involving multiple attentional demands, strategies, and processes, yet it is also affective involving intentionality and self-expression. It is, perhaps, both an art and a science, inspired yet routine, reflective yet directive. It is the mysterious and very personal nature of writing that has prompted me to conduct a series of investigations focused on how university students think about and engage in their craft. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the development of the approaches-to-writing model, discuss several applications, and offer some ideas for future directions.

14.1.1. Theoretical Background

In the area of university learning, researchers have described students’ approaches to learning as reflective of the relationship between the student and the task (cf. Biggs, 1999). The constructs of deep and surface approaches have become common in the literature based on...
both qualitative studies (Hounsell, 1997; Marton & Saljo, 1976; Van Rossum & Schenk, 1984) and on psychometric analyses (Biggs, 1987; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Kember & Leung, 1998; Schmeck, 1983; Schmeck, Geisler-Brenstien, & Cercy, 1991). In a landmark study, Marton and Saljo (1976) queried students regarding their processes when studying an expository text and concerning the meanings that they constructed in doing so, focusing on what is learned, or how it is that students structure and understand, rather than on how much is learned. Two basic categories of description evolved. Students using a deep-level process focused on what is “signified” by the text, or the implications and intentions, and those employing a surface level process focused on the “sign,” or literal meaning (cf. Marton, 1988). In extending the deep and surface paradigm, researchers used psychometric methods to analyze students’ responses to survey items, thus advancing the distinction between deep learning, involving the intention to understand or create a meaning, self-referencing, and surface learning as marked by literal translation and the intention to reproduce or memorize information (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Schmeck, 1983; Schmeck et al., 1991).

Deep and surface approaches represent a modifiable dimension reflective of the interaction between the student and the learning environment. Students’ intentions and strategies are “framed” by the situation of learning and its related cues. It is the cues and affordances that instructional climates provide which impact the approaches that students take (cf. Biggs, Lai, Tang, & Lavelle, 1999). The deep and surface model had been linked to specific academic tasks such as reading (Marton & Saljo, 1976), studying (Schmeck, 1983), computer programming (Marton & Booth, 1997), and writing (Biggs, 1988; Hounsell, 1997).

14.1.2. A Model and a Measure

There are parallels between writing assignments and other academic tasks such as reading, or presenting (e.g., vocabulary, genre or domain familiarity, and problem-solving skills), suggesting that the approaches framework might be well suited to adapt to writing. Also, there are differences but these too support the extension of the model. For one thing, in writing the interaction between learner and task is largely reciprocal because both editing and revising for meaning demand response to one’s own product, and to one’s own thinking. This is not to say that reading or studying are not reflective but rather to argue that reflection in writing is necessarily more self-referencing. In the revision process, it is as though writers continually grapple to refine and clarify their own creations as they move in successive iterations from the task. Perhaps no other instructional task mandates such dynamic and personal interaction. Along the same line writing is ill-defined with no right answers or specific rules for success, and genre often provides a very sketchy framework. Other tasks are likely to have procedures, rules, and specific desired outcomes. In writing, organization, skills, and following rules alone may be insufficient to create meaning in the deep sense. It is intentionality and beliefs that are integral (cf. Biggs, 1988; Lavelle & Zuercher, 2001). An approaches-to-writing framework takes beliefs and intentions into consideration as well as the strategic processes (cf. Biggs, 1988).

Deep writing goes beyond the literal or technical level. It is as though the meaning becomes greater than the sum of the parts (cf. Marton, 1988). Biggs and Collis (1982) refer