Worshipping False Gods

by

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For many critics and allies, The National Writing Project and “the writing process” have been joined from birth. In this article from 1987, Bob Niebuhr, then co-director of the Long Island Writing Project, reflects on the permutations of that perfectly useful word “process.” Niebuhr will retire this year after many years as an English teacher in the Patchogue-Medford School District, Long Island, New York.

For a while it seemed that Raymond Rodriguez (English Journal, September ‘85) was attacking the work of the National Writing Project and its worldwide affiliates. Mr. Rodriguez muttered something about converts who zealously set about to codify, over-simplify, and create a new religion replete with sacrosanct canon. His argument went something like this:

Missionaries, in their flaming zeal, allowed free writing to rage out of control. Skills training became the personification of the Devil. A patently superficial apostolic creed sprang up defiled by catchwords: peer review, journal writing, prewriting. Ultimately, as the informed reader would expect, the converts found they were in over their heads. “Process teachers wanted to understand! but they couldn’t. They didn’t have a pedagogy for teaching this (recursive) kind of process.”

Now I understand that Mr. Rodriguez is not, indeed, attacking the NWP. He is, instead, attacking those pseudo-converts who adopt, implement, and discard pedagogies, programs, texts, kits, curricula, etc. with the rapidity that would-be Jane Fonda/Sylvester Stallone look/act-alikes tramp through diets and exercise regimens.

Being a staunch advocate of the separation of church and state, I have no desire to be considered a “religious” in the classroom. I am apparently a wayward “process teacher” who has never received the calling. I am unabashedly committed to process writing and revel in the knowledge that process writing can never be made teacher-proof. It can never be trivialized by administrators or publishers into a checklist of skills or steps through which teachers can stumble along with their benumbed charges.

I am a “process teacher,” and, as such, I find it incomprehensible that anyone could become a convert to process writing. Conversion, especially when imbued with religious overtones, occurs when we accept a belief or a group of beliefs that we had previously consciously rejected. The process teacher does not convert: the process teacher reaffirms. The process teacher rejects the message: “Prewrite!” — a pause while the students do so — “Write!” — another pause for the same reason — “Revise!” — once more with feeling — “Edit!” — for the last time, the pause. For the sake of this discussion we’ll call this PROCESS I. Yet there are any number of other processes hanging around. Following are four alternative processes:

PROCESS II:
A. Teach the kids to draw letters.
B. Teach the kids to put letters together to form words.
C. Teach the kids to put words together to form sentences.
D. Teach the kids to put sentences together to form paragraphs.
E. Teach the kids to put paragraphs together to form themes, essays, or the ultimate: the long research paper.

I was made to endure "Process II." Strange, but until age 42, I wrote only what was required for a course or for my job.

"Process V" is the perennial favorite of textbook publishers and curriculum co-ordinators. It's so checklistable!

All five of the above are processes leading to a piece of writing. All five may be valid in part or in toto at various times. All five are indeed linear. So what's wrong with linearity? Process writing is as linear as driving an automobile:

**DRIVING AN AUTOMOBILE**

Step 1: Make sure the vehicle is in "Park."
Step 2: Turn the ignition key and depress the accelerator until the engine starts.
Step 3: Place the car in "Drive."
Step 4: Steer the car in such a way as to avoid having your car come into contact with any other object.
Step 5: When you have arrived at your destination and brought the car to a stop, place the car in "Park."
Step 6: Depress the brake pedal whenever you wish to stop.
Step 7: Shut off the ignition.

Could anything be more linear? Could anything be more codifiable?

**PROCESS III:**
A. Tell kids to read a model piece of writing.
B. Tell kids to imitate the model.

I've used "Process III" and it works beautifully with students who are good writers.

**PROCESS IV:**
A. Tell kids to know something.
B. Tell kids to write what they know.

I think this is the "environmental approach." Unfortunately, it is useful only for writing to demonstrate what has been learned. What about writing to learn?

**PROCESS V:**
A. Prepare and distribute a list of criteria for a particular writing assignment.
B. Give the assignment.
C. Collect the completed assignment.
Driving is a linear process?

The writing process is a linear process?

I might intend to start students off in a linear fashion. For example, we might start with prewriting. The only problem is that the prewriting itself isn’t linear. A lot of our prewriting activities don’t even involve pen and paper. We argue a lot. We daydream a lot. We read a lot. We dump gibberish onto paper a lot. We fill the trash can a lot. We go back digging like vagrants through the trash can to retrieve some misplaced gem. We draw a lot. We listen a lot. We talk a lot. We finally sense (never, ever simultaneously, I might add) that we have something we’re ready to say. My students may have some linear way of prewriting, but I can’t figure it out. We ask each other questions, call each other stupid, scribble, rip pages from notebooks, wad them up and leave them on the floor for me to pick up. We ask each other questions, tell each other I’m stupid, make lists and outlines and rough drafts and think to ourselves and to/with/at each other and heretically sneak into rough drafting, editing, revising, and God only knows what else.

Then we officially draft. We read what we write to others. We listen to our audiences’ responses. We lapse into non-linearity and re-prewrite, re-revise, and re-edit as we read aloud.

Now we officially revise, taking into consideration what responses we have received. The revision involves adding, dumping, re-arranging blocks of words or individual words. It may involve re-prewriting and re-drafting and re-revising and re-editing. Of course, the students will slip in and out of all and any of the stages without regard to any linear structure.

Finally, we officially edit. Well, it’s not pure editing because we sneak in some more re-prewriting and rewriting and re-revising and even re-editing some stuff that we had previously edited, prewritten, revised, or drafted: a clear violation of the decreed linearity.

Sometimes we’re displeased or frustrated at what we’ve done, or we perceive an entirely different approach to the task, so we just abandon the piece altogether.

There is one minor problem I have with some of my students some of the time: they just sit down and crank out a finalized (i.e. a pre-written, roughdrafted, revised, edited) version in one fell swoop. Then I get the kids who never venture beyond prewriting. Some of them never get a word on paper for me until the last week of school. Of course I also get kids who fizz out after a rough draft. They keep telling me it’s a final draft, but I know better. I guess that’s truncated linearity.

I must say I do get some terrific writing from the kids. I also get some real slop. Whenever the slop appears, I invariably conclude that a genetic defect or exposure to a string of lousy teachers before me “done ‘em in.” That’s what I say for publication anyway. Catch me at the right moment, though, and I’ll tell you what really brought about the slop.

Slop oozes forth when I lose track of what’s going on, when I don’t know where the students are in their process. As a “process teacher,” I must first discover the process the students are using. Then, should they encounter difficulty with a writing task, I’ll know how best to get them back on track. I can encourage, suggest, demonstrate, point, lend an ear. Or sometimes just be around. Most often, I just shut up and let them tell me when they need my interference (I really mean my guidance). Unless I stay aware of what’s going on, I am of no use to any of my students.

What Mr. Rodriguez seems to have missed as a confirmed non-participant in any NWP Writing Institute is what NWP “process teachers” are. NWP “process writing” teachers are teachers who keep current with literature in the area of writing theory and research. They are astute observers. They have at their disposal multiple strategies to guide their students through snags and blocks. They talk continually with their colleagues about their students’ attempts to deal with written expression. They take ideas from every source, mull them over, try them out, reject many, accept a few, and sometimes they want to quit because there’s always so much more to find out. They know that the practice of writing is the last place to expect linearity.

Finally, they pray that one day there will be revealed a way to write that is right for everyone. Until that day arrives, there is nothing to worship about process writing or any other kind of writing.

Or, as Mr. Rodriguez says: “... In fact, the Bay Area Writing Project and the National Writing Projects may have accomplished more good in a relatively short time than any other single effort in training teachers to teach composition.”
“Hey Mr. Niebhhur, how long does this have to be?”

“Eleven inches. Don’t use any paper longer than eleven inches.”

“No, I mean how many words? How many paragraphs, ya know? How many pages, typed?”

“Whatever it takes to get the job done.”

This dialogue occurs at the beginning of each year, whatever grade level, ability level or age level I teach. Within a few weeks, a new student entering the class may say, “Hey Mr. Niebhhur, how long does this...”

“Don’t bother, he won’t give you a straight answer. He’ll just tell you, ‘How am I supposed to know what you want to say ...’ Don’t be a herb”(see dexter, dweeb, nerd, et.al.).

As the year progresses questions related to form virtually vanish. The questions relating to meaning and substance increase. What is especially fascinating is that my refusal to give an answer to a format question results in students relying on each other for answers. Consequently, when they move on to dealing with the meaning of what they write, they have acquired a faith in their classmates’ ability to help them.


Since I was asked to look back at “Worshipping False Gods” (this must be like having your kids return home again after you thought you had successfully sent them forth), I am soon evident that my way of working with students as presented in this article is still valid. Sure I’ve acquired some new gimmicks, some new ways in, some new strategies, but the essentials don’t change.

Take a look at my desk, my home, me. Lots of clutter. I can live in a non-linear world, with a non-linear process, and so can my students. I still prefer teaching that which is non-checklistable. And it’s all based upon faith: the faith of the students who come to realize that they do have something to say and the ability to say it; the teachers’ faith that they can find ways into the students’ process so as to guide them to the next stage, knowing that a nudge is needed; faith on the part of the student and teacher that both are safe. Damnation and hell-fire don’t follow trial and error.

Given enough “flounder time” (Mim Baker), “So what? time” (Keith Caldwell), and a shot at “Eureka” (B. J. Wagner), students come through just as surely today as they did ten years ago. And I have faith that ten years from now they will still be finding the process that is right for them. Take it from me — on faith.