

Ask the Expert Video

Audio Transcript

Introduction

David Maynard:

The composition classroom is a conflicted space. Charged at once to facilitate students' self-actualization as well as condition them to write for a workplace in which self-actualization is not often valued, the writing instructor will find herself caught in a tug of war between a variety of pedagogical perspectives. My project will explore just a few of these perspectives as they unfold through the words of writing instructor, Rob Ryder.

Part One: Professional Background

Robert Ryder:

I've always enjoyed teaching others how to do things. I felt it was a very fulfilling thing to do, and in the process of ending up teaching college writing I tried a number of different things along the way. I worked as a textbook sales rep for a company which is now a division of Pierson textbooks, and I worked for a bank for several years. This might be true for many other college writing professors that in many ways we didn't necessarily choose the profession, but it kind of chose us. I grew up always interested in writing. It was one of my favorite subjects: English, creative writing. It makes me think a little bit. I'm looking on your bookshelf here, and you have a book titled *How to Make a Living as a Poet*, and it made me realize that in many ways making a living as a writer can be a very difficult task, and kind of the next best thing in many ways is to teach others how to perfect and strengthen their own writing skills.

David Maynard:

Success as a professional writer is often elusive even for the most talented and hardworking among us, and yet one of the key concerns of process theorists like Donald Murray is that writing be taught by teachers who actually write. According to Murray, “Most of us are trained as English teachers by studying a product: writing. Our critical skills are honed by examining literature, which is finished writing; language as it has been used by authors. And then, fully trained in the autopsy, we go out and are assigned to teach our students to write, to make language.” For Murray, only active writers can help students make their own writing come alive. As Rob finished speaking, I wondered if he considered it the instructor’s responsibility to remain an active writer even as they taught writing to their students.

Part Two: Writing Instructor as Writer

Robert Ryder:

I do some freelance writing for different magazines. I’ve submitted a couple articles to *Fate* magazine. *Fate* is true accounts of the unknown. It’s a small magazine published out of Lakeville, Minnesota. And I’ve written articles on different cryptids, or creatures which may or may not exist. I focus mostly on Ohio, but I’ve written about Ohio Bigfoot, Ohio’s Frogman, an alleged creature that supposedly crawled out of the Little Miami River about thirty years ago and was sighted by a number of individuals. I like to send letters to the editor, to different magazines and publications. I’ve gotten one published in *The Economist*. To do something well or teach something well, you have to be an active participant in that particular community. So, to teach writing well, I feel that we need to be active writers, or writing instructors need to be active writers because it’s just kind of a good continual reminder that writing is a skill and craft and activity that develops over the course of one’s life, and I think that when we write frequently, it gives us better perspective on the challenges and the difficulties that face writers. One thing that

one of my instructors at Ohio State taught me early on was never give an assignment that you can't yourself do. It's crucial that we're able to go through the same steps and processes that we're asking our students to do in the classroom, and when we're continually practicing that, as well, it makes us better teachers.

David Maynard:

Alexandria Peary writes that “Murray replaces conventional teacher authority with someone from outside academia—the professional creative writer. Murray’s ethical appeal is built more on a complex expertise rather than good will.” While Rob clearly maintains good will toward his students, he does emphasize the importance of writing instructors practicing what they preach. For Rob, regular writing is a vital prerequisite for effective writing instruction.

Part Three: Writing Process

David Maynard:

According to Ken Macrorie, too much emphasis upon grammar and style too early can intimidate students and turn them off to writing, altogether. Instead, Macrorie encourages instructors to “plant an uninhibited, examining attitude in their students, who suddenly find language alive and wiggling.” Rob seeks to foster student engagement with and ownership of their writing process by providing students with a large amount of freedom and time early in writing to brainstorm and prewrite.

Robert Ryder:

I would probably say it's about fifty/fifty: fifty percent starting to generate and formulate those ideas, maybe some light brainstorming, discussion and then fifty percent actually drafting and composing.

David Maynard:

And even though Rob does not devote the entire 85% of class time that Donald Murray believes should be devoted to prewriting, he does allot a large portion of the course to generating material prior to drafting.

Robert Ryder:

It would start with a lot of idea formation, discussion, brainstorming sessions, sharing ideas with others, often beginning to look at outside sources and see how other writers have approached a similar topic. I recently used a strategy where I gave students, basically, just a picture of a funnel, so it was a cross-section of a funnel, where it had a wide top, and it was narrowed down at the center, and I told students to kind of conceptualize taking all the ideas that they've been developing over the course of the past week, week and a half and pour 'em into that funnel and try to kind of filter out and only narrow down the key parts of that particular discussion you'd like to analyze and look at. Essentially, the next step is to take this wide range of ideas and narrow it down, focus it a bit. I'll then have the students spend some time doing some thesis writing, so kind of thinking about, even if they're not sure that it's going to be their final thesis statement or what they go with for the final draft of their papers, start thinking about what that main point or main argument's going to be in their writing. Usually after that, I'll move into an outline, so I'll have students start thinking about how they wanna organize their supporting paragraphs and broad ideas and topics, and then usually have them start drafting from there, so starting to develop topic sentences, body paragraphs that are going to support and reinforce what their thesis is.

David Maynard:

By emphasizing the importance of idea generation and prewriting, Rob's pedagogical views have much in common with those of process theorists. However, there are indications that Rob

questions the efficacy of the process approach to teaching, especially when it comes to its ability to produce texts that are free of stylistic errors.

Part Four: Current Traditional Rhetoric

Robert Ryder:

I have to say that, and I want to start changing this a bit, I don't really encourage them to spend as much time on editing, revising, as I do in the earlier stages of the writing process, the prewriting, idea formation, and that does show because I do feel as though sometimes I'll get work that just is not reflective of a very extensive editing and revision process, insofar as the student needed to take more time to look through some of those finishing touches just to make them.

David Maynard:

Rob's emphasis upon correctness suggests that his belief in process theories of writing is counterbalanced by adherence to Current-Traditional elements. As explained by James Berlin, "The [Current-Traditional] study of rhetoric . . . focuses on developing skill in arrangement and style." While Current Traditionalism's vision of writing as merely conforming to an institutionalized set of conventions has grown increasingly unpopular in recent decades, it continues to play a significant, if not dominant role in composition classrooms across the nation. Much of the controversy surrounding Current-Traditionalism is a response to its denial of the writer as creative agent. In the words of Berlin, "In Current-Traditional Rhetoric the writer must efface himself . . ." Just as Foucault's subject is made an object through adherence to a set of rapidly internalized social mandates, Current-Traditionalism feeds the writer as human being to the machinery of the conventional writing practices that form the arteries and organs of the composition classroom only to produce concise, sanitized prose bathed in the ammonia of

Standard American English. Yet, while the temptation to submit to the pressures of Current Traditionalism is likely great for any writing instructor, Rob actively resists the normalizing pressures that Current-Traditionalism represents, and even though Current-Traditional practices have a place in Rob's classroom, Rob's enacting of Expressivist Pedagogy helps to ensure that his first year writing classroom is not dominated by the tenets of Current-Traditionalism.

Part Five: Student Voice

David Maynard:

One of the most marked ways in which Rob departs from Current-Traditional pedagogy is in his view of student voice. In accordance with the views of Meyer Howard Abrams, Peter Elbow and other Expressivists, Rob encourages students to express themselves through their writing by cultivating a strong authorial voice.

Robert Ryder:

Student voice is very important. I would probably venture to guess that it's the most important skill for a writer to develop. It's really important for students to become comfortable with asserting their own voice and their own perspective in writing and then also be able to integrate and weave in outside sources which present other ideas. It can become problematic when it's difficult to really discern between the student's voice and the voice of sources in a piece of writing, and, as such, if we as instructors focus on the importance of developing and strengthening one's ability to express their perspectives and viewpoints, that could be a very good thing.

David Maynard:

By asserting the importance of students retaining their voice while participating in larger discourse communities, Rob has touched upon a primary tension between Expressivist theorists

and Social Epistemic thinkers like James Porter. However, prior to exploring Rob's position in relation to this debate, let's unpack the Expressivist attitudes implicit in his statements. While Rob does not go so far as to deny the significance of an external audience, his emphasis upon maintaining personal voice appears to echo, albeit moderately, Abrams' characterization of the poet. Abrams writes, "The poet's audience is reduced to a single member, consisting of the poet himself." While students may ultimately be obliged to adjust their tone to reflect the expectations of the formalized discourse community in which they write, Rob emphasizes the importance of the author's personal experience, feelings and beliefs being retained in their writing.

Robert Ryder:

I think it's important to see some personal voice, self-reflection in more advanced student writing because it basically just shows that there's an organic element to the writing. I'm frequently very happy when I see in a student's writing that they're drawing some type of connection to an experience they had or something else that they read or something that they've seen or a conversation that they had with somebody. Mind you, it should be limited. It shouldn't be extensive and throughout the entire paper, but it's just a good way, or it's a good reminder to me that, hey, this is something that the student has taken some time to consider, and we really shouldn't squelch or just immediately stamp out some of those examples of reflection that students bring into their writing.

David Maynard:

One recurring theme within Rob's discussion of student voice is that it should be encouraged as much as possible, as long as the piece of writing being created meets the expectations of the writing classroom itself, which is implied to be a space that, much in the manner of Current-Traditionalism, does not always allow for personal expression. Yet, Rob's emphasis upon

maximizing one's voice within the institutional context in which one writes reflects Peter Elbow's assertion that students should "[r]ealize that in the short run there is probably a conflict between developing real voice and producing successful, pragmatic writing—polished pieces that work for specific audiences and situations." The trick, it seems, for both Elbow and Rob, is to foster an atmosphere within the writing classroom in which students consciously navigate the expectations of the discourse communities in which they write. Thus, if a student decides that their particular audience does not favor personal pronouns, they will find a way to maintain their authorial voice using a device other than said personal pronouns. As previously indicated, Rob's discussion of student voice reflects an underlying tension between an Expressivist view of writing and one that is Social Epistemic. This conflict is perhaps best illustrated through Rob's statements about the relationship between the individual writer and the communities in which they write.

Part Six: Discourse Communities

Robert Ryder:

I would say that it's very important, to start with, that a student learn or that students learn how to maintain strong authorial voice. It's really at the core of what writing is. Porter, of course, will tell us that, basically, all ideas that float around within this grand intertext are all interrelated, connected to one another, and if we don't understand others' texts and others' sources that we are not going to be as effective at writing. However, on the same note, I think it's important that students know how to use outside sources and cite them correctly and weave them into their work because it really demonstrates that they can kind of enter a discourse community and have the ability to take part in a broader conversation rather than just sharing a few opinions and slapping their name on the paper and calling it some of their own ideas.

David Maynard:

Rob is correct in suggesting that James Porter works against the notion of the writer as a completely autonomous creative agent. Porter writes that “. . . authorial intention is less significant than social context; the writer is simply a part of a discourse tradition, a member of a team, and a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning.

Thus the intertext constrains writing.” While in some sense, Rob departs from Porter’s denial of the individual author, Rob also emphasizes the importance of composing discourse that will be read by the members of a living discourse community. Rob’s goal is not to foster a relationship to discourse in which students talk to themselves in an empty room.

Robert Ryder:

The goal is to reach many individuals. It’s not just their instructor for a grade. I, also, am trying to, kind of, warm up to the idea of encouraging students to think about writing for publication.

Even if students aren’t necessarily gonna take a written work to a magazine or journal for publication, they’re at least thinking of how what they’re writing isn’t just for their instructor and isn’t just for other individuals that might read their work in peer review, things like that, but it, ultimately, should be geared towards a wider audience that could get something out of that idea or that perspective.

David Maynard:

To some extent, the emphasis upon publication is a theme that Process and Social Epistemic theory have in common. For instance, Lad Tobin writes that, according to Process theorists, “. . . the writing classroom should be a workshop in which they are encouraged through the supportive response of teachers and peers to use writing as a way to figure out what they think and feel and eventually to ‘publish’ their work to be read and celebrated by the community of writers they

have become.” If we replace the term “classroom” with that of “discourse community,” we will arrive at a view of discourse production that is not completely incompatible with Social-Epistemic theory. For example, Porter writes, “A ‘discourse community’ is a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated. . . . The approved channels we can call ‘forums. . . .’ Examples of forums include professional publications . . .” Rob can be found at the intersect of both Process and Social Epistemic pedagogy in that he envisions the writing classroom as a space in which students learn to write for a real world audience. However, Rob warns against taking this line of thinking too far and positioning composition for discourse communities as the sole concern of the first-year writing student.

Robert Ryder:

I really think we need to move away from the idea of specific writing assignments and specific writing styles that are geared towards one particular application. Writers have to be exposed to the many nuances of and many different approaches to writing so that they can feel comfortable with the craft, itself, before they start to narrow down their skills to a specific application. For that reason I think that, especially for a first or second year composition course, there really shouldn't be a huge amount of orientation towards one type of writing, scientific or technical or writing for a particular career path, things along that line, but rather strengthen the general skill and skills, and then, at a later time, learn how to tailor some of those skills that have been learned in earlier courses towards a specific application.

Part Seven: Multimodality

David Maynard:

In the spirit of composing a variety of texts for a variety of discourse communities, Rob moves beyond a narrow view of composition as writing only alphabetic text, and he encourages his students to compose multimodally.

Robert Ryder:

I really like blogs for the reason that it gets them to think a little bit more about audience other than just writing to a specific instructor or to other specific individuals. I like how with blogs, especially on, like, Blogger and some other systems, there's the option of viewing, like, stats, whose viewing that particular blog. I think the students really enjoy seeing how there's a wider audience that they're writing for and writing to other than just their instructor or their classmates.

David Maynard:

Rob's emphasis upon multimodal composition reflects a growing concern within composition studies in which imbuing beginning writers with the ability to compose multimodally is viewed less as an option and more as an ethical imperative. Cynthia Selfe exemplifies this ideological shift when she writes, "The price we pay for ignoring this situation is the clear and shameful recognition that we have failed students, failed as humanists, and failed to establish an ethical foundation for future educational efforts in this country." Yet, Rob does not stop at encouraging his students to compose using a variety of available means. He also provides feedback to his students through multimodal means.

Robert Ryder:

I've been experimenting a little bit with trying to record video feedback for my students. I think sometimes that can convey a very positive tone for students if they're getting just a very brief video. I'm not talking any more than like two to three minutes. But just of you talking about the paper, it's almost like you're having that dialogue and discussion with them about what they're

doing right and what could be improved in their writing. I think a lot of those different strategies, both providing positive feedback as well as constructive criticism, providing feedback through a variety of different methods, those all can be things that help you maintain a good tone.

David Maynard:

By choosing to provide feedback to students through non-traditional means, Rob disrupts a tradition of writing instruction in which alphabetic text has been held up as the unquestioned vessel for meaning. For Selfe and other scholars of multimodal composition, this unquestioned privileging of alphabetic text is problematic. Selfe writes, “We are much more used to dealing with older technologies like print, a technology old enough that we don’t have to think so much about it, old enough that it doesn’t call such immediate attention to the social or material conditions associated with its use.” By choosing to emphasize multimodal composition in his classroom, Rob appeals to a wider variety of thinking and writing styles than would have been had only alphabetic text been used, thereby transforming his classroom into a more egalitarian space.

Final Thoughts:

David Maynard:

Like many writing instructors, Rob’s pedagogy does not reflect a single theory, but several. In one moment, Rob might bemoan, in typical Current-Traditionalist fashion, the lack of refined style in student writing, and in the next invoke the Expressivist view that students must retain their own authorial voice, regardless of assignment or context. Rob’s pedagogical system becomes even more diverse in that he defines the writing classroom, not in terms of alphabetic text alone, but through a variety of modalities. In forming this pastiche of pedagogical views, Rob embodies one of the most exciting aspects of composition studies: being okay with not

having a right answer. Though debates occur and sides are taken, the field itself is always transforming and, even more extraordinarily, scholars and practitioners of writing studies are often prepared to radically adjust both their work and their worldview to reflect an ethical approach to composition theory and practice. As a writing studies practitioner and scholar, Rob Ryder exemplifies the values of accountability, intellectual rigor and deep concern for the welfare of beginning writers that are so integral to the continued vitality of our field.