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## **Reflection's Place in the Writing Process**

### **Introduction**

Many sweeping claims are made about the “salutary” (Sommers) benefits of having students reflect upon their writing process and their learning, and these claims deserve close scrutiny to see if assumptions and theories about the affects of reflection are in fact borne out in students’ actual performance and writing development. A good example of the convictions behind reflective practice can be found in this handout prepared for a teacher training workshop on reflection. It typifies the alchemical qualities attributed to reflection:

It is important to engage in the metacognitive process of reflection if you want to change and grow. Metacognition is thinking about thinking. It empowers you to know what you know and know what you don’t know. Once you engage in this type of reflection about your own thinking you can be deliberate and focused in your planning. The metacognitive process helps us move toward evaluating what we currently think and move beyond it. ... It is an agent for deliberate and strategic change. (“Topic 7: Reflect on Learning”)

Reflection seems almost to be the magic bullet for learning. Composition scholars also refer to reflection in similar glowing terms, calling reflection a “critical component of learning and of writing specifically” (Yancey 7) and “the key [for students] to understanding their writing process” (English “Basis of Metacognition”). Similarly, I have claimed the “central, mediating role of reflection” in the writing and learning process (Irvin “Reflection in the Electronic Classroom”). The problem with these statements is they are too often grounded in theoretical assumptions about learning and anecdotal observations of students’ work. If we are to claim that reflection is an agent for change and incorporate it into our teaching practice, we must inquire more closely if this claim is true.

Typical examinations of reflection’s role in learning have used reflective writing pieces as the primary way to substantiate inferences about reflection. Sherry Swain, in her own study of reflection’s role in teacher development, explains this use of reflection to study reflection: “As a data source, reflection empowers the researcher to see beyond observable behavior to the depths of human transformation—to acquire a consciousness of and reverence for continuous growth.” Often, as in Swain’s case, the analysis of reflection includes qualitative interviews with the students or teachers doing the reflecting. Although qualitative research methods seem appropriate for studying reflection, each of these approaches mentioned is incomplete: measuring reflective writing is notoriously problematic (as Broad, Bolter, and Swain have noted) and qualitative analysis provides interesting but situated knowledge that is hard to generalize. This study proposes to go beyond this level of analysis to place reflection within a broader context of what Kathleen Yancey calls the “triangulated” writer (Yancey 168); in addition to reflective writing pieces and student interviews, this study will seek to corroborate evidence of reflection's

affect in the student's writing itself. Moreover, this study will examine the place of reflection and the evidence of its influence over time through multiple writing cycles.

### **Views on Reflection: Dewey, Mezirow, and Moon**

Jack Mezirow presents the clearest interpretation of reflection's place within the learning process. Mezirow builds his views of reflection's transformative power for learning from Dewey's view of reflection's connection to problems-solving. For Dewey, reflective thought is defined as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" (qtd. in Mezirow 100). Reducing this definition more, Mezirow says, "*Reflection means validity testing*. ... Reflection involves a review of the way we have consciously, coherently, and purposefully applied ideas in strategizing and implementing each phase of solving a problem" (101). Mezirow and Moon broaden the view of "problem" to include any "ill-structured" or uncertain situation. By applying reflection as validity testing to a problem, reflection can change or transform both "meaning schemes" (specific attitudes or beliefs) or "meaning perspectives" (sets of meaning schemes). Mezirow's terms "meaning schemes" and "meaning perspectives" are compelling and highlight his own emphasis on learning as "meaning making": meaning schemes are meaning on a more "micro" level, while meaning perspectives are more "macro" or global and correspond to Haswell's notion of reflection leading to "frame-changing."

Mezirow identifies three kinds of reflection: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Within any of these three focuses for reflection, reflective learning involves validity testing and the assessment of assumptions: "Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid" (6). Incorporating Popper's view of "negation" as a crucial part of learning, Mezirow claims, "Critique and reassessment of the adequacy of prior learning, leading potentially to its negation, are the hallmarks of reflection" (110). Reflection as critique and validity testing may result in transformation through negation if the premises are found to be problematic; however, the critique may result in confirmation of knowledge when the premises are not found to be problematic. Thus, for Mezirow, reflection leads to learning that is either "confirmative" or "transformative." He explains the dynamic of the three kinds of reflection as validity testing in this way:

The significance of differentiating content, process, and premise reflection becomes clear when we realize that content and process reflection are the dynamics by which our beliefs—meaning schemes—are changed, that is, become reinforced, elaborated, created, negated, confirmed, or identified as problems (problematized) and transformed. Premise reflection is the dynamic by which our belief systems—meaning perspectives—become transformed. Premise reflection leads to more fully developed meaning perspectives, that is, meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable (open) and integrative or experience. (111)

Mezirow stresses the importance of the "validation of knowledge" for learners, and he believes reflection plays a crucial role in this validation process.

Jennifer Moon in her 1999 book Reflection in Learning and Professional Development offers another important perspective on reflection and learning. She opens her discussion by bridging the cross-disciplinary meanings of reflection and offering what we might call a unifying

definition for the word. She notes reflection has been a term used by the fields of professional development, education, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and we might add composition and rhetoric. She bemoans the imprecise vocabulary surrounding the word: "the following words can apparently be synonymous with reflection--reasoning, thinking, reviewing, problem solving, inquiry, reflective judgment, reflective thinking, critical reflection, reflective practice" (Moon viii). Even a word like "critical thinking" can be hard to distinguish at times from reflection. Her definition of reflection is useful because it will help guide the focus of this inquiry:

reflection is a mental process with purpose and/or outcome. It is applied in situations where material is ill-structured or uncertain in that it has no obvious solutions, a mental process that seems to be related to thinking and to learning. It is suggested that the apparent differences in reflection are not due to different types of reflection--in other words, to differences in the process itself, but to the differences in the way that it is used, applied or guided. (5)

She goes on to use the word "framework" to mean the different ways that reflection is used, applied or guided. The mental process of reflection is the same no matter the context, but the framework guiding the reflection distinguishes one "type" of reflection from another (15).

The result of her comprehensive study of reflection is her "Map of Learning and Representation of Learning" (Figure 1.). Moon specifically presents reflection's role within a broad picture of how learning happens: "In effect, reflection makes deeper and better considered knowledge available to us" (155). She believes reflection enables the "upgrade" of learning from one stage of learning to the next.

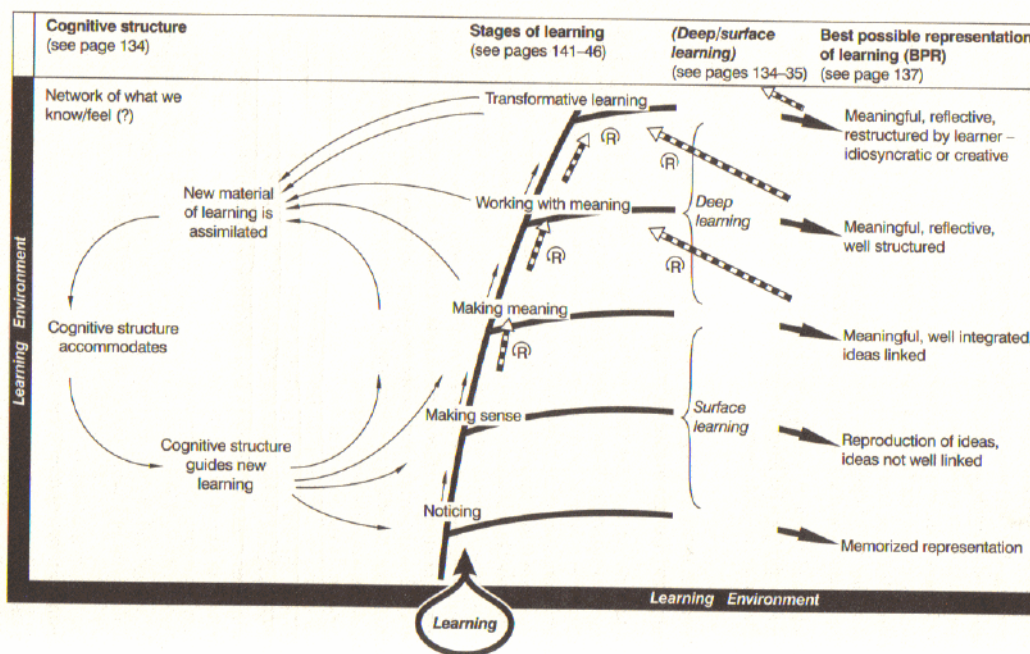


Figure 1: From Moon 154.

Within the map of learning there are three larger structures or dynamics at work: the cognitive structure, the stages of learning, and the best possible representation of learning (BPR). As a learner's cognitive structure takes in new learning and assimilates it and accommodates to it, the learner moves along five stages of learning. The lowest stage is Noticing. The learner then moves up from Making Sense to Making Meaning. The higher or deeper levels of thinking are

Working with Meaning and Transformational Learning. At any given stage of learning the learner is only able to represent their learning in a certain way. The arrows in the diagram represent places where the “upgrade” of learning occurs—when a learner rises from one stage of learning up to the next. The small “R” in a circle locates where reflection stimulates this upgrade in learning. Mezirow would add that it is reflection’s role of validity testing that triggers this upgrade in learning, or as he would say “transformation.”

## Reflection and Experiential Learning

Reflection has also held a special place within theories of “experiential learning.” Notions of reflection’s place within the experiential learning cycle are particularly relevant to this study because the writing process is an experiential learning process. Moon points out that Dewey also saw reflection within a sequence of action. Presenting a view of reflection similar to Mezirow’s, she summarizes Dewey’s belief in a state of doubt as what initiates reflection and “the need to ‘solve’ the perplexity” as what guides the process (12). However, Dewey was not just concerned with what happened within the act of reflection, but what happened after it: “[He believed] that a form of testing through action on the basis of the idea appropriately concludes reflective activity” (12). He believed that knowledge about an experience gained through reflection should be tested by another action. Sherry Swain describes Dewey’s view of reflection’s place related to experience as a “Learning Triad”: “According to John Dewey, the most effective student learning is based on a three-pronged approach: doing, observing the doing, and reflection on the observations” (“Reflection and Transformation”). We should then test the knowledge gained from reflection by another act of “doing,” which starts the cycle over again.

Donald Schon's reveals similar views about reflection’s importance in a continuum of action. Schon's ideas about reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action have been seminal in creating a revolution in the use of reflection for professional development. Yancey, English, and others have brought his notions into the understanding of reflection's use within the field of composition. Schon's term "reflection-on-action" perfectly describes the common reflective writing act when students write a reflective piece after completing a draft of an essay. Yancey in her book Reflection in the Writing Classroom defines three main types of reflection, and it is her second type--"constructive reflection"--that most relates to Schon's notion of reflection-on-action. She describes constructive reflection as coming "between and among the drafts" (51). Similar to Dewey, Schon sees the importance of reflection within the context of the next action. Schon believes that "causal inquiry" (what we can interpret as reflection) yields "prototypes that depend, for their validity, on modification and testing in 'the next situation.' 'Reflective transfer' seems to me a good label for this kind of generalization" (qtd. in Yancey 50). Yancey points to this quote from Schon to define the central characteristic of constructive reflection:

through reflective transfer--or what I will call constructive reflection--we create the specific practice from which we may derive principles toward *prototypical models*. In composing a text, a writer invents practice that may have within it certain understandings and strategies that accommodate themselves to another rhetorical situation. (50)

Schon's and Yancey both highlight the capacity for reflection to help generate prototypes that affect subsequent action--that are tested and transferred into the next experience. Reflection, then, helps us learn from experience, so that we improve our performance for the next similar experience.

The ideas of reflection's place within a continuum of experience and its capacity to transfer knowledge from one experience to the next are best described by David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Pulling together ideas from Lewin's model of Action Research, Kolb presents a four-stage learning cycle where reflection is prominently featured: "Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a 'theory' from which new hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences" (Kolb 21).

### Lewin's Cycle

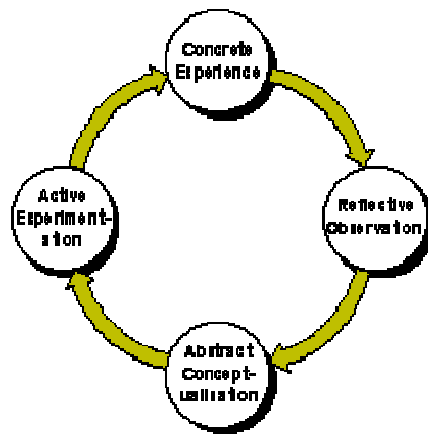


Figure 2. The Lewin Experiential Learning Cycle. Graphic taken from (Atherton "The Experiential Learning Cycle").

Moon provides another summary of Kolb's cycle of experiential learning:

Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, as originally drawn, is a circle in which "reflective observation" is the process of bringing the "concrete experiencing" of events or experiences to the state of "abstract conceptualization." Abstract concepts, thus formed, guide a further stage of "active experimentation" and, thence, more "concrete experiencing" (24-25).

Reflective observation is the means by which we "assimilate" knowledge derived from and experience that then leads us to make "accommodations" that guide our next attempt at experience. In particular, abstract conceptualization contains Schon's notions of the formation of prototypical models. Kolb's model might be simplified this way: experience, reflection, re-experience and repeat. Reflection comes between attempts at action helping the person acting improve their performance in each attempt at the action.

Integrating theories of experiential learning with her own Map of Learning (see Figure 1), Moon reasons why effective learning is facilitated by the experiential learning cycle. Crucial to experiential learning is the notion of doing—the learning process is driven by the need to act or what Mezirow calls the "line of action" (the implementation of the learner's "purposes and intentionality" (14)):

Action is the outcome in the experiential learning cycle. Acting will normally be underpinned by understanding. Similarly, the provision of an explanation has a basis in understanding. In terms of the map [Figure 1], this implies that the learner reaches the stage of “working with meaning” in order to act, do or experiment. The learner is, by implication, drawn through the stages of “noticing” and “making sense” to “making meaning” and “working with meaning” in order to fulfill the action required. The learner must therefore be taking a deep approach to learning. In other words, the requirement for action drives the quality of the learning in the whole cycle. (160).

Moon is quick to point out that the experiential learning cycle is not a neat, simple linear process as this description suggests. Similar to the recursive nature of the writing process, she states, “in reality, the process is ‘messy,’ with stages re-cycling and interweaving as meaning is created and recreated” (35). In fact, the writing process is a perfect example of an “experiential learning” process, and it is no wonder that a recursive model of this process has taken preeminence in modern composition theory. We can see, then, the significance of reflection within the writing process. If reflection is crucial for learning within the experiential learning process, reflection by definition must play a significant role for learning within the writing process.

### **Views on Reflection and Composition**

In the field of composition and rhetoric, reflection has had two primary uses or “frameworks” behind it. As Moon mentioned, reflection is the same no matter the context, but the framework guiding the reflection distinguishes one “type” of reflection from another. For composition, reflection has two predominant purposes or “frameworks”: assessment and knowledge (or learning). These two uses mirror the rhetorical notions of “reader-based” prose and “writer-based” prose: reflection for assessment is primarily done for the benefit of the reader/assessor, while reflection for learning is primarily done for the student learner’s benefit. Often, as in the case of portfolio reflections, the act of reflecting is for both audiences and for both purposes.

Although this study will focus on the second use of reflection (reflection for knowing), it is worth briefly reviewing reflection as used for assessment. Roberta Camp discovered that assessing only a student’s final product was insufficient. Through her work on a research project studying portfolio assessment in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, she came to “suspect that significant aspects of students’ learning about writing might lie well beyond what could be discovered from even the most perspective readings of final drafts.” She realized that she knew little about her students’ composing process, their perceptions of their own writing process or the intentions behind their writing. Through reflective pieces accompanying writing drafts, Camp began to establish a dialogue with her students rather than the monologue that had characterized her previous grading practices: “the knowledge gained from reflection and dialogue about student work helped to create both a vocabulary for discussion of student learning and criteria for judging students’ achievements as thinkers and writers” (“Expanding the Dialogue to Make Learning Visible”). Teachers primarily benefit from this form of reflection by becoming more perceptive and responsive evaluators. Kathleen Yancey echoes this same “framework” for reflection when she heralds reflection as a “seeing inside” (70) for the reader/evaluator. Reflections provide crucial information to assist in both feedback and assessment: “We understood reading as *contextual*. We therefore wanted students to participate in creating the

contexts in which their texts would be read" (Yancey 73). These reflective statements enable teachers to avoid being "dumb" readers of their students' writing and provide better feedback (Sommers 178). They also give teachers a glimpse of the relationship between the "delivered curriculum" from the course and teacher and the "experienced curriculum" as perceived by the student (Yancey 54). Detecting gaps in this "curriculum" helps a teacher provide better feedback and guidance.

### **Reflection as a Way of Knowing**

The second "framework" or use for reflection common to composition is to see reflection as a "way of knowing" (Gleason 63). The act of reflection itself is a "meaning making" event for the writer where knowledge is constructed not just received. Herman Hughes and Mary Kooy express this view in their article "Dialogic Reflection and Journaling": "Students may fill their head with facts, data, or some expert's ideas, but true learning will not have taken place until students create meaning for themselves from those facts, data, and ideas. They must construct knowledge rather than passively absorb it" ("Knowledge Construction"). Hughes and Kooy go on to identify the importance of reflection for this kind of self-constructed learning: "To learn, to make knowledge their own, students must reflect on, interact with, and react to the materials presented to them" ("Knowledge Construction"). Joel English confirms Hughes and Kooy's viewpoint, labeling reflection as "constructionist" in nature: "but a pedagogy that fosters reflective action espouses the *constructionist* view of language and reality" ("Basis of Metacognition"). Significantly, reflection happens in writing, in language, and it is through one's use of language that reality and knowledge are constructed. In this way, reflection can be labeled as a form of epistemic writing that "aids in thinking, learning, and self-knowledge" (Brown "Self Reflection Exercises").

Richard Haswell, writing in the field of Student Self-Evaluation, presents a similar view about reflection's importance for learning parallel to the constructionist view of reflection. Haswell sketches a composite picture of what he called a "learning episode." From his own survey of forty years of research into adult development, he lists eight ingredients of adult development--one of which is self-reflection: "[development] episodes also require some degree of metaconsciousness, some standing back from and reflection on the process itself. Unlike frame-filling (acquisition of content), frame changing seems to require certain forms of self-awareness (86). Haswell expresses the term "integration" to describe the process whereby students make knowledge their own through the self-reflection done in Student Self-Evaluations (97). As a method of assessment, he believes SSEs are ideal because they "both measure and allow learning" (98).

Reflection as a way of knowing fits in with views of writing for discovery talked about by Donald Murry, Peter Elbow, and Janet Emig. Donna Qualley in an excellent book on reflection called Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry connects reflection, or as she says "reflexivity," with discovery. Qualley defines reflexivity this way: "reflexivity involves a commitment to attending to what we believe, think, and feel while examining how we came to hold those beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. This kind of monitoring and self-awareness seems critical for enabling us to grasp new ideas and information"(41).<sup>1</sup> She contrasts "earned insights" with "ready-made conclusions": "I comprehend an earned insight to be a kind of understanding whose essential truth is only realized or more fully grasped as it is made manifest through the individual's experience and contemplation of that experience" (35).

Ready-made conclusions, in contrast, are packaged truths received uncritically by the learner. Reflection upon experience is one important means of crystallizing "earned insights." We can see in Qualley's use of the terms "attending" and "examining" Mezirow's concept of reflection as a form of validity testing.

But what kind of knowledge is significant for composition? Jennifer Moon says that differences in reflection are due to how the reflection is "used, applied or guided" (5). If reflection is used in composition for self-discovery and the formation of knowledge (learning), then what kind of knowledge are these reflections used to generate? Of course, teachers use reflection to deepen a writer's knowledge about their subject; however, for composition, the most significant form of knowledge gained from reflection is about writing and the writing process. Jeffrey Sommers cites a number of studies that show when students learn more about their composing process they write better. He concludes that reflection--in this case the "Writer's Memo"--is one of the best ways to generate this increased awareness:

It is this inquiring and reflecting--this looking back in the process leading to the completed draft, and reflecting on both it and the final product--that constitutes the essential value of the writer's memo. All the other benefits grow out of increasing the student's awareness of the composing process. (185)

Similarly, Terry Underwood showed in a study of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade writers that engaging students in reflection resulted in their increased awareness of the challenges writers face. Speaking from her work in the Pittsburg Public Schools on large-scale portfolio assessment, Roberta Camp provides a more detailed description of the knowledge about writing that reflection helps generate for writers:

From the teachers' classroom experiences with these many forms of portfolio reflection and our discussion of the resulting portfolios, we found that portfolio reflection made visible several important aspects of students' learning about writing:

- \*What the student believes he or she has done well in writing. ...
  - \*The student's criteria and standards for writing. ...
  - \*The students' processes and strategies for writing--and his or her awareness of them. ...
  - \*The student's interests and goals for future writing. ...
  - \*What the student understands that he or she is learning about writing.
- ...("Expanding the Dialogue")

Having students reflect upon their writing and writing experience results in a greater insight into both their writing and experience. No matter what the object for reflection (in this case writing and the writing experience), reflection leads to increased knowledge and discovery about that "object."

The notion of reflection increasing a student writer's awareness is also discussed by Sondra Perl and her application of Eugene Grendlin's term "felt sense." Felt sense is non-verbal and relates to our feelings:

In his [Grendlin's] words felt sense is "the soft underbelly of thought... a kind of bodily awareness that encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject as a given time... . It is felt in the body, yet it has meaning. It is body *and* mind before they are split apart." (qtd. in Perl 365).

Mezirow also mentions the significance of “felt sense” within the context for learning and discusses reflection’s connection to “felt sense”: “We explain our felt sense by interpreting it and reflecting on our interpretations, using it as a criterion for assessing the correctness of our interpretation of our situation”(14). Perl, in particular, has placed a high value to “felt sense” within the writing process. Tapping into the power of one’s “felt sense,” Perl says, begins with paying attentions: “This process seems to rely on very careful attention to one’s inner reflections and is often accompanied with bodily sensations” (366). She goes on to coin the term “retrospective structuring” to describe the process of attending to “felt sense”: “I have labeled this process of attending, of calling up a felt sense, and of writing out of that place, the process of *retrospective structuring*. It is retrospective in that it begins with what is already there, inchoately, and brings whatever is there forward by using language in structured form” (367). Reflective writing prompts call on writers to match words to their “felt sense” and subject this articulation to validity testing. We can see this process of emergence and testing within Perl’s description of writing from a “felt sense”:

As we begin to describe it [our felt sense], we get to see what is there for us. We get to see what we think, what we know. ... If the process is working, we begin to move along, sometimes quickly. Other times, we need to return to the beginning, to reread, to see if we captured what we meant to say. ... What is “right” or “wrong” corresponds to our sense of our intentions. We intend to write something, words come, and now we assess if those words adequately capture our intended meaning. (367)

Perl describes a companion process she labels “projective structuring” which deals with what one intends to say. She believes writers shuttle back and forth in the writing process between these two postures, one relying “on the ability to go inside” and the other relying on the ability of the writer to “assess how the words on that page will affect ... the reader” (369). Reflection as a tool for “paying attention” calls on writers to engage with and critically reflect upon their “felt sense.”

Reflection plays one other role related to a writer’s growing awareness of the writing process. Reflection helps to regulate and moderate the writer’s control of the writing process. To explore this view, we must delve into some of the literature from the field of metacognition and the cognitive study of the writing process. As Marjorie Montegue says, “metacognition facilitates the selection and allocation of techniques and strategies for successful task completion” (qtd. In English “Basis of Metacognition”). “Metacognition” here I take to be synonymous with reflection. Sherry Swain in a broad description of this executive role of reflection states, “reflection enables us to evaluate experience, learn from mistakes, repeat successes, revise, and plan.” We can hear a similarity in this managing role for reflection to studies done on the cognitive process theory by Linda Flowers, John Hayes, Sondra Perl and Sharon Pianko. Reflection seems to take on the role of what Flowers and Hayes called the “monitor” which controls the processes of Planning, Translating, and Reviewing. I’m not suggesting that reflection is the monitor, only that it activates the monitor to play its executive role for the writing process: “the monitor represents the conscious control and regulation of processes exercised by the writer... [and] represents metacognitive awareness of how and when to invoke strategies appropriately” (Sitko 96).

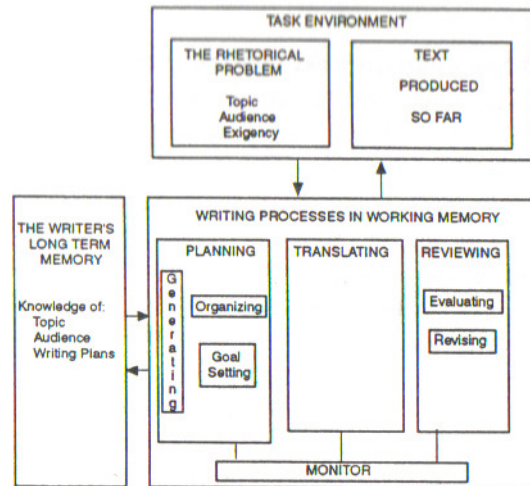


Figure 1. The Hayes and Flower model of the writing process. (taken from Sitko 96)

These early researchers into the writing process located the operation of the monitor in what Donald Schon calls “reflection-in-action” where “our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it” (26). I am suggesting that the monitor is similarly active, perhaps more, in what Schon names “reflection-on-action” which occurs retrospectively to an action.<sup>2</sup> Reflection, then, provides from a metacognitive viewpoint what Douglas Hacker calls “procedural knowledge.” Summarizing ideas from R. H. Kluwe, Hacker says, “processes that ‘monitor the selection and application as well as the effects of solution processes and regulate the stream of solution activity’ represent, according to Kluwe ... metacognitive procedural knowledge” (9). Reflection seen as a metacognitive activity engages this “procedural knowledge,” and Flowers and Hayes’ model of the writing process and the “monitor” provide a good picture of the complex procedure reflection helps to regulate.

It may be helpful at this point to summarize the key points that this review of the literature has revealed about reflection as a “way of knowing.” As mentioned before, there are not different types of reflection; reflection is a mental process. What distinguishes one reflective act from another is what Moon calls the “framework”—the uses, application, or guidance surrounding the act. Mezirow defines reflection as a form of validity testing that can be either confirmative or transformative. When used in composition for increasing knowledge, reflection represents a form of meaning-making and discovery for students in which they construct their own knowledge. Rather than “frame-filling,” reflection promotes “frame-changing”; rather than a mental process taking in “ready made truths,” reflection encourages the discovery of “earned insights.” In this way, reflective writing represents a form of constructionist and epistemic writing. The second major aspect of reflection as a “way of knowing” relates to the special use composition has for reflection—to help students learn more about their writing and composing process. Reflection increases a student's awareness of his or her writing process and facilitates a student's ability to attend to their “felt sense.” Reflection also serves to provide procedural knowledge for the student writer over their own act of writing.

### Focusing the Question for Inquiry

As I have mentioned, reflection appears to play a central, mediating role for learning. In particular, the literature reviewed has uncovered many of the theories and assumptions about reflection as a way of knowing for composition:

- Through using reflection, students construct their own knowledge.
- Writing reflectively helps encourage discovery and insight.
- When students write reflectively about their writing process, it helps them gain knowledge and perspective on their own writing and writing process.
- Reflection also helps students manage and regulate their activities related to writing.
- Reflection helps students develop prototypical models that enable them to transfer knowledge gained from one writing experience to the next.

But are students engaged in the writing process really generating this kind of knowledge from reflection?

Going further, can we describe reflection's place within the writing process as an experiential learning cycle? Can we see evidence for reflection's influence on the student's writing growth through multiple drafts within what Fred Kemp has called the "Writing Feedback Loop"? In his Instructional Manual for TOPIC, Kemp lists the steps of the writing feedback loop:

1. Writing
2. Receiving feedback
3. Adapting to that feedback
4. Rewriting

The two steps between writing and rewriting are essentially reflective, so we could rewrite this sequence as "write—reflect—rewrite" (or experience—reflect upon the experience—try the experience again). Can we confirm and validate the theories and assumptions about reflection as a "way of knowing" within the writing process?

## Methods

This study was a Case Study following the "Constructivists Interpretation Process" as described by Marcial Baxter Magnola ([see Appendix 1](#)). It focused on the writings of four students within my Freshman Composition II class in Spring 2005 at San Antonio College. In particular, the study analyzed the reflective writing pieces written after drafts were done—Writer's Reviews—rather than on Draft Letters written as companion pieces to drafts. Draft Letters predominately serve the purpose, or "framework," of assessment and are addressed to a reader/evaluator to provide context for the interpretation of and feedback to a draft. Writer's Reviews, instead, are not addressed to any particular audience except the writer and are intended to focus the writer on where they are in the writing process. (For a complete list of the prompts for these Writer's Reviews, see [Appendix 2](#).) Yancey would characterize these Writer's Reviews as "Constructive Reflections" that occur in and amongst the drafts.

The data collected from students for analysis included the following material from the writing process of two writing cycles:

- Three drafts for each writing cycle (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> draft). The third draft was the final draft turned in for a grade
- Compare draft versions between draft 1 and 2 and drafts 2 and 3 to show changes between drafts.
- Three Writer's Reviews for each writing cycle (reviews written after each draft)

- Any peer response done on the drafts (various forms of peer response was done on drafts)
- Any Draft Letter reflections included before the drafts
- My final graded copy of the essays

Although my focus of close textual analysis was the Writer's Reviews, the additional data on the student's writing cycle proved useful for providing a broader context for understanding the student's reflections.

The textual analysis of the Writing Reviews was initially done following categories established by Chris Anson in one of the few empirical studies of student's reflections available. Anson adapted Halliday's functional approach to language as a construct that best describes what he observed. These functions of language include the *ideational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *textual*. Translating these terms into the context of rhetoric and composition, Anson defines the *ideational* function as referring to content, the *interpersonal* function to issues related to audience and purpose, and the *textual* function to the "formal characteristics of writing on the page" (65), including issues of form and grammar. Anson also includes a second axis for analysis which includes three time-oriented dimensions: the *retrospective*, the *projective*, and the *temporal*. Anson defines what each of these kinds of comments show:

The *retrospective* comments focus on what the writer says he or she did during the process of creating the text. *Projective* comments focus on actions (rhetorical, linguistic, informational, etc.) that the writer says he or she intends to take with the draft in order to move it forward or finish it. *Temporal* [comments] includes comments in which the writer talks about the text as it is (not as it was done or as it might be changed. [With *temporal* comments there is] a sense of the text being "at rest." (65)

Anson's temporal dimensions within reflection echo Kathleen Yancey's comment that "reflection entails a *looking forward* to goals we might attain, as well as a *casting backward* to see where we have been" (6). Each reflective statement was coded both for its function of language (I, N, T) and its temporal dimension (R, P, TP). Coding the Writer's Reviews in this way provided a descriptive framework for seeing what was going on in the students' reflections; I did not use the occurrence of these categories or their frequency to make determinations about the writer's fluency, as Anson does in his analysis.

My focus was on how reflection impacted the student's writing process and learning, and so I included a second level of analysis following one of Yancey's ideas. Yancey extends Anson's strictly temporal categories by pointing out how a dynamic emerges as we "project" and "review." She believes that often in reflection a dialogue arises between projection and review. It is in this dialogue where "working dialectically... we seek to *discover* what we know, what we have learned, and what we might understand"(6). It is this *discovery* that this project sought to identify and describe.

The textual analysis served to focus my attention to particular places in students' reflections more than offer a basis of interpretation themselves. Following the constructivist interpretation process, I did a "Multiple Analysis" where I asked a colleague to code the reflection for one student's writing cycle, and she and I discussed our ideas and conclusions based from these codings. In addition, I interviewed each of the four students involved in the Case Study (following the fifth element of the constructivist interpretation process—"member check") and asked them questions about their own reflections.

In order to delve deeper into these reflective pieces and detect patterns (especially since the analysis scheme of Anson and Yancey did not prove very fruitful), I performed a more open-

ended discourse analysis of each students' reflections coupled with information I gained from the student interviews and multiple analysis session with my colleague ([see Appendix 3](#)).

To form conclusions from what I saw in the reflections, I turned to a fourth level of analysis—an openness to “multiple theories or perspectives” (another of the six elements of the constructivist interpretation process). From my research, I assembled a number of interpretive schemes that have been applied to or relate to reflection:

- William Perry's Measure of Intellectual Development (1970) (Moore and Hunter)
- The Model of Reflective Judgment (King and Kitchener 1994)
- The Measure of Epistemological Reflection Model (Baxter Magolda and Porterfield 1988)
- The Map of Learning and the Representation of Learning (and the role of reflection) (Moon 1999)
- The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984)
- Mezirow's Theory of Transformational Learning (1991)

As I sought to apply these various interpretive schemes, I found only three that offered interesting insights (these have already been discussed in the first section of this essay): Moon's Map of Learning, the Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle, and especially Mezirow and his theories about reflection and learning.

Following the constructivist interpretive process, I also performed a “Peer Debriefing” where I took my conclusions from one student's reflections and shared them with a peer who has no stake in the interpretation process. Dr. Rich Rice from Texas Tech was kind enough to discuss my conclusions on Omar's reflections (a transcript of our discussion is included in [Appendix 4](#)). It was at this point, after many layers of analysis, that I performed my final analysis of the reflections.

## The Learning Context

The “transferability” of my results depends upon how well my learning context is relevant to similar contexts; thus a “thick description” of my classroom, students and their assignments is required.

Freshman Composition II, as I teach it, is a class which focuses on building students' abilities to write critically from readings and research. They wrote interpretive or “critical essays” that are argument/persuasion in nature, and each one incorporated quotations from primary or secondary sources. For the first essay students were provided a thesis to support or oppose related to the play *Antigone*. Dualistic in nature, the essay was meant to ground them in writing a critical essay incorporating quotes for support from a reading. The second essay was what Dewey would call an “ill-structured” problem. Students were to write an essay on the broad question of “What America Means to Me.” As they developed and supported this thesis, they were required to incorporate quotations from the fiction, poetry and prose we read. They were also able to blend some of their personal experience as they supported their idea. The third essay was a research essay on a contemporary issue of contention. I used the Justice Talking website to help them find an issue, and I required them to work in research groups of four or five on a common issue. Although students shared the same general issue and assisted each other in researching, each student wrote their own argument taking a position on their group's issue. Issues chosen by the groups where the recent Supreme Court ruling banning the death penalty for

juveniles, the Three Strikes Your Out Law, the RAVE Act, and whether the fast food industry is to blame for the problem of obesity in America today. Students were required to use at least six sources as they supported their position and write an essay of a minimum 1000 words. The fourth essay was a critical essay on an interpretation they had of a novel we read for the class.

The writing cycles I pulled data from were from Essay #2 and #3. In Essay #2, I would say the challenge was carving out a thesis of their own for the essay from a broad array of possibilities, and then justifying that viewpoint from the readings we had done and their own experience. Essay #3 faced students with all the challenges of a research essay, especially the challenge of finding, understanding, and incorporating outside sources. For each essay, students wrote three drafts. I highlighted the first draft as a “freewriting draft” following Peter Elbow’s notions of getting students writing. For the first draft of Essay #2, I stressed forming their thinking by having an introduction, separate supporting points, and a conclusion, but I told them not to worry about the inclusion of support from sources or grammar at that point. For the first draft of Essay #3, I purposefully called it a “zero draft” and told them to just write, considering the writing to be a dialogue with themselves about the essay topic and what they truly thought about the issue. By draft two in each essay, I expected students to have more of a “dress rehearsal” of their essay. Though it may still have rough or incomplete spots, I pushed students to try to turn in as complete a draft as they could. The third draft was the final draft and turned in for a grade. By asking students to turn in three drafts, I purposefully wanted to make revision a part of the writing process. I also wanted to create an “experiential learning cycle” where students were asked to “do” and then reflect upon the “doing”—three times.

When drafts were turned in, we met in a computer classroom and each draft was posted into an electronic bulletin board for peer response. Our methods of peer response varied from simply reading drafts, to short response, to elaborate and detailed peer responses. In each case, I provided questions to guide the peer response. Typically, students were asked to do three peer responses with the option of a fourth response for extra-credit. Any peer responses not completed in class were to be done out of class for homework. Students were, thus, within a writing workshop learning environment where it was easy for the entire class to post their writing, respond to each other’s writing, and read each other’s writing (both in the computer classroom and out of class since the bulletin board was accessible via the internet).

Writing reviews were done after the drafts were turned in and typically after peer response was done. They might be done on the same day the essay was turned in, or done during the next class period. In each case, the writer’s review was posted as a reply to their own essay and any peer responses also posted as replies. The bulletin board made it easy for a student to review their draft and any peer responses as they wrote their writer’s review. I should mention that it also facilitated my collection of data as well since I could print one message to have all the data I needed for any single draft.

The students in my class are “traditional” community college students. They are a mixture of ages, ethnicities, and competencies. The vast majority of students are working as they go to college. Women tend to outnumber men (I have nine women and eight men in this class), and since I teach in San Antonio, Texas I have a large number of Hispanic students (interestingly, no African-American students in this class). The four students chosen for the study were in part chosen because of their willingness to be in the study and the fact that there was complete data for their writing, but each student is typical of a kind of student I frequently see in my composition classes. Robyn is a young woman who returned to school after a few years working after high school. She is an intelligent, good writer who obviously reads and

writes a lot. She genuinely tries to do her best in school but struggles because of the difficulty balancing work and school. I had Robyn in Freshman Composition I, and I know her as the kind of student who if she is able to put her best effort into an assignment will do very well. In contrast to Robyn is Linda. Linda like Robyn is returning to college and is married. Though Linda is a competent reader and writer, her literacy skills are not as advanced as Robyn's. Writing is not her favorite thing to do, and she struggles to bring her writing up to the "C" level, or "B" level if she works hard. Omar is a young man fresh from high school who is bursting with ideas and passionate opinions. He has his own blog and writes a lot, though he admits to revising his writing very little. Like Robyn, he is highly literate, though a bit raw. He is a good writer now, but I can see that in time he will develop into an excellent and mature writer (in fact, he has matured quite a bit just in this semester). Scott like Omar is also a true freshman, but he struggles with his writing and tend to seek help from others. He has not yet gained a level of independence and authority over his own writing. He does well, though, adapting and learning and has made good progress this semester in his writing. Although each student struggles with his or her writing, Robyn and Omar represent higher level writers while Linda and Scott represent middle level writers. If there is a fault to my sample of students, it is that I did not include students who would represent low level writers. This may be in part due to the fact that all of these students are Freshman Composition II students and not Developmental English students.

## Results

### Overall Perspective

The results of my study point to the need for a critical perspective on reflection—we can't believe in its absolute magical powers (as it is sometimes described) for learning. Nor can we limit the site of reflection to what happens in writing for students; often students reflect through talking, reading, and thinking as well. Reflection seems to be best understood following two of Dewey's key characteristics of reflection: a) that reflection is validity testing, and b) that reflection seems to be a mental process applied to problem solving or to situations that are "ill-structured" or uncertain. In addition, this study corroborates Mezirow's notion that reflective learning can either be confirmative or transformative. It appears that the greater degree to which students have trouble confirming their thinking, the greater probability that they will be led to "negate" their previous thinking and transform it to a new meaning scheme or perspective.

Reflection seems to have particular relevance for a writer's quest for "stance" in writing. A writer's pursuit of a working "stance" is a complex alignment of the writer and the subject matter, the writer and the task requirements, the writer and the audience, the writer and their own thinking and prior learning. This quest for "stance" is the writer's most highly rhetorical task, and it appears that reflection plays a key role in validating and problem-solving in this activity. Two striking points emerged from my observations related to stance: first, that students used the term "stance" themselves within their reflections, and second that I saw clear examples of reflection serving to confirm stance and transform it.

### Transforming stance

Instances of reflection serving to transform stance were particularly evident in the writing processes of Omar and Robyn. Omar made a particularly interesting rhetorical shift within his

reflection on his stance for essay #2 on what it means to be an American. He prefaced his draft 2-1 with this statement: “Warning: This is an emotional essay. I will completely change it to make it a bit more mature than it already is. I’m sorry if anyone is really offended by what I have to say about ‘being an American.’” In his first line of his draft 2-1 writer’s review he states: “Honestly, I hated writing this essay with a passion.” I believe Omar, in part, disliked writing the essay because he felt he did not have the correct stance or approach to his topic.

Within his draft 2-1 reflection, Omar did something that I saw all of the students in my case study do at different times. Within the reflection, he began to write as if he were writing the essay; he wrote views on the topic in an expressive way. Omar’s draft 2-1 writer’s review contained five paragraphs of this speaking on the topic. I will quote one entire paragraph as an example:

Yes, I am angry about the American debt and the current president, but I hold nothing against the people who blindly walk their lives in comfort, rather than wanting to change their own lives to benefit themselves. I give more power to those enjoy their jobs. This is one of the reasons why I wish to become an English teacher. I want my students to be able to think outside the box. They must have the skill of perceiving situations and experiences in different ways. Only then can we have any kind of reasonable discourse and avoid racism and classification with understanding and sympathy. Is that too radical to ask? Can Americans be able to see beyond what they see? Will I be able to? I really don’t know.

Chris Anson in his study also identified students whose reflections became “immersed in the ideational function” (71) as Omar’s does in this example. I characterized this form of reflection as “content reflection” (from Mezirow) and as a form of idea exploration, confirmation, and testing. Omar himself came up with an interesting metaphor for what he was doing while writing in this way, calling it like kneading bread. In a sense he was kneading his ideas like they were bread, pushing, squeezing, testing, shaping them. One paragraph later, Omar lands on the notion of social reform: “I love social reform. I feel that change is exciting and needed greatly.” The next paragraph goes on to say, “That is the greatness of this country. Through massive effort, we can push reform. With our Bill of Rights protecting our freedom of speech and freedom of peaceably assembling, anyone can get their message across.” As if to convince himself further, he writes again in the first line two paragraphs down, “I believe that America deserves a social reform.” Omar writes as if he were journaling on the topic, or in his case blogging. But Omar’s ranting and kneading has been productive for him. By the end of the writer’s review, he writes, “This essay will be revised to these new ideas that I have. ... Being and American—it is not so much crap anymore. It actually means something.” What we see in this draft 2-1 writer’s review is Omar transform his stance toward the topic so it is more in line with his true beliefs. Through this reflection, he has negated his previous approach toward the topic and discovered a new one more to his liking—social reform. In fact, Omar’s second draft equaled the length of his first draft (approximately 1000 words), but 90% of the second draft was new content.

When asked in an interview if doing the reflection really helped him, he replied that it had. He quickly added that it really helped discussing the topic also with his girlfriend. The reflection had helped him transform his stance toward the topic in an important way, but it was not the only site where his stance evolved (apparently Omar even talks out his thoughts as he washes dishes). The significance of Omar’s rhetorical shift in his stance can be seen in how he

revised for draft 2-2. His new thesis states: “To be an American is to declare yourself as whatever you want to be and to speak out against a government that can either help you or destroy you.” Omar has made a significant rhetorical maneuver toward an improved stance, both in terms of his belief and in terms of how his ideas will come across to others in the class. In draft 2-1, Omar seemed to focus on the notion that there is something wrong in America, and we need to fix it. Omar’s discomfort with his stance in draft 2-1 comes from the fact that he is focusing on particular things that are wrong with America, and he worries that because he is criticizing these things about America that he might offend other people. These fears are well grounded considering the touchy, politically-polarized times we live in. What became a breakthrough for Omar in the 2-1 writer’s review was a shift away from the details of the problem to the solution to the problem (social reform). Interestingly, Omar makes a further rhetorical shift to his stance on his own and probably by talking with others. His draft 2-2 is not about social reform; instead, he shifts the thesis to be about freedom of speech—the means to social reform. Through this new approach to his topic, he can avoid the potentially controversial things he believes need reform and express the much less controversial belief in the right to speak freely in favor of reform. In his final reflection on draft 2-3, Omar has a long, considered reflection on the entire writing process he underwent. His central theme in this reflection was the adjustment he made after his first draft from being “scattered brained” where he felt he opened a can of worms to where he was able to “rewrite it and improve my ideas in a more mature manner.” Rephrasing his statement, I believe we can say Omar made adjustments to his stance beginning with the draft 2-1 writer’s review that led him to express his ideas in a more rhetorically successful manner.

One of the clearest examples of validity testing in reflection that led to a transformation of stance occurred in Omar’s Essay #3. Omar’s draft 3-0 (the “zero draft” was the first draft) expressed a strident argument in favor of the death penalty for juveniles. His stand: Murder is wrong. Crime must go punished. Within Omar’s draft 3-0 writer’s review, we can clearly see him testing the validity of his argument. He opens his reflection by expressing some discomfort with his thesis, “I cannot say I am exactly ‘proud’ of talking about death and punishment,” but the content of the first three paragraphs is still solidly behind his original support for the death penalty. He speaks about where he is in the writing process: “I am still in the process of reading and gathering as much information as I can about this topic and trying to find good points in why the juvenile killers SHOULD be executed for their offenses.” By paragraph four, his stance in support of the death penalty begins to crumble after his attempts to confirm that stance in the previous three paragraph’s reflection. Significantly, Omar uses the word “stance” himself: “The most difficult part of this was to actually find a stance to something like this. How can I say that people need to die for what they did when I have never killed anyone or met anyone that killed someone?” He goes on to voice opinions that undercut his original thesis: “Life is a precious commodity, like time. ... Have they [juvenile killers] been able to change their lives for the better? ... Killers are human, too. That is something we tend to overlook. ... However, is death the final answer for people who have taken life? Did thieves need their hands cut off when they stole? Did adulterors need to have their testicles cut off?” He ends the writers review by exclaiming, “What has the human race come to?” It is clear that Omar has shifted his position completely to the other side on the issue. What we see in this reflection is what Mezirow would call premise reflection—a deep analysis of the assumptions that underlie a framework of perception or in this case an opinion. His reflection was driven by a problem—his thesis didn’t feel quite right—and through reflection he tests and eventually rejects his previous stand. In his

final writer's review for the essay (after draft 3-2), Omar points to the importance the draft 3-0 reflection had for him: "[it] really helped me out, though. I was able to get a firmer stance on what I wanted to write (because before I wrote that I was really debating on where to stand... to the point where I became very confused). Having to talk it over strengthened my belief that life is more important than sending people to death." When I asked Omar whether he might not have switched his position if he had not done this reflection, he answered with a hesitant "maybe."

Omar's draft 3-0 reflection led to a major change in his thinking and approach to this essay—Mezirow would say a transformation of his meaning perspective—but as Omar produced a new draft following his new line of thinking, he found he had a problem with one of his supporting reasons. We can see him deal with this new problem in his draft 3-1 reflection. One of his arguments will hinge on the notion that juveniles are not fully capable of responsible action ("to comprehend what they are doing"), but he believes in the common sense truth from his own experience that juveniles do know what they are doing and can act responsibly. At the end of his first paragraph he says, "Adults and adolescents both can understand that killing someone may lead to their own demise, from my experience." The next paragraph goes on: "My main assumption from my first reason is that everyone under the age of 18 does not have the ability to comprehend what they are doing. Therefore, they should not be executed." Then, in a line by itself, he writes, "My first statement contradicts my second statement." Reflection upon the assumptions beneath one of his reasons has led him to find a significant problem in his thinking. The rest of the reflection is dominated by his validity testing of his thoughts regarding this reason and whether he should reject it (negate it) or find a way to keep it. These are a few of his statements from the draft 3-1 reflection that reveal this testing and probing: "I'm really not sure about this reason. It is too general. ... Do I really believe that everyone under the age of 18 that kills someone is able to comprehend what they have done? I really don't, actually. ... Each person is an individual, meaning that each person is different. We all cannot judge the same way (when it comes to our law system)." Omar's premise reflection has helped him find a way to accommodate this reason into his overall argument: "My solution? Mention the fact that not everyone can be judged the same, which is why we have court systems." Within his next few lines, he projects how he will fit this argument into his essay and expresses some relief in being able to focus on more solid reasons in his argument: "Also, since I am for the Supreme Court's decision, it will be easier to find support for my claim and stance. I believe this goes beyond "brain development" and I will be more than happy to get beyond that reason." Omar still seems to doubt the "brain development" rationale for prohibiting juvenile executions, but his reflection has led him to a position that allows this rationale, but with the flexibility that fits his common sense belief that juveniles can be responsible for their actions—everyone is an individual and the court system will deal with the issue of each person's brain development in a case by case basis. Omar confirms the impact of doing the writer's review on his thinking in his last section of the reflection: "As of right now, since I wrote out this writer's review, I have a more confident stance of where I want to be with this paper."

The progressive evolution in his "stance" stimulated by doing reflections after draft 3-0 and draft 3-1 validate reflection's place within the experiential learning cycle. Reflection on each succeeding "experience" (in this case, written draft) provided insight and perspective on the previous experience which enabled him to proceed to the next experience more successfully. Mezirow discusses the important concept of "line of action" as an important context of learning: "The line of action has to do with implementing the purposes and intentionality... . Although

seldom explicitly acknowledged, line of action is a central influence on perception, remembering, problem solving, and learning” (14). We see Omar seeking to follow the line of action of producing a well-supported argument on an issue, but along the way this trajectory runs into road blocks—first with his overall thesis, second with one particular supporting argument. What we see in his reflective writing pieces is his ability to discover these difficulties and find a way to get back on track with his line of action.

One final example will help to illustrate further the concept of reflection as transformation and reflection within the experiential learning cycle. This illustrative example of Robyn’s experience in Essay #3 will show how reflection had a key role in helping a writer out of writer’s block.

Robyn experienced little difficulties with writing her Essay #2. Her reflections are detailed and workman-like and don’t reveal any major difficulties that are discovered or worked. At the end of writing cycle in the draft 2-3 writer’s review, I asked her to discuss what she had learned that she could take away from the experience. In this reflective writing piece, she expresses something like a method or equation she has discovered to produce a good paper: “It has created a way for me to freewrite my ideas first, put those ideas into an “essay” type of form, then back them up, then proofread. Very easy, very helpful.” She has arrived at a method for essay writing which she believes she can carry forward with her. When she began Essay #3, she began with the first step of her method—freewriting (which was how I asked her to write this “zero draft”). In the writing review after draft 3-0, she seems confident and on track:

This zero draft was a good tool to put down my thoughts. This will make it a lot easier to go in and organize my first draft with my arguments. I took what I felt and wrote it down, which will then be organized into “People defend the death penalty by \_\_\_\_, but I feel \_\_\_\_, and this is what my source says.” I’ve already got the first blanks filled out, so now going in and putting in my sources to backup my argument will be easy.

Her plan follows the abstract conceptualization she expresses at the end of writing her last essay, and she seeks to follow this same method for essay writing here in Essay #3. She ends this writer’s review projecting her next step: “I’ll be able to take the majority of what I wrote [in the zero draft] and incorporate it into my essay, since they’ll be good arguments.”

However, writing the essay did not go as she planned. She arrived the day the second draft (draft 3-1) was due without a new draft. She had not been able to write, though she had been researching and reading sources. The step of “putting in my sources to backup my argument” was not as easy as she thought. I asked her to go ahead and do the 3-1 writer’s review anyway, using her 3-0 draft once again as the draft she would respond to. What happened for her in the draft 3-1 was an epiphany or as Mezirow would call a transformation to her meaning perspective. She begins her 3-1 writer’s review by listing four primary supports (main reasons in support of her thesis). She then writes: “I’ve just found four main reasons why I agree with the ban on the death penalty for minors. ... The zero draft looks like it went off on a tangent. I may be able to include a few of those points in my real paper, but the majority of that draft will be excluded from this one.” We see her negate her previous thinking and formulate a new direction that will work. At the end of the 3-1 writer’s review, she acknowledges the difference doing this reflection has made:

This review has actually helped me out quite a bit, since this past week all I’ve been able to achieve is agreeing with myself that the ban was good. I’ve had my thesis, I just haven’t been able to work it into my paper. This has been the best

improvement I've had. I've been able to pin-point my main four arguments and now it'll be easier for me to write my paper."

Doing the reflection helped her break through the block that had been causing her problems. She had not been able to see a clear way of structuring her paper so as to incorporate the information she was learning from her sources into an argument. In the final 3-2 writer's review she acknowledges "This was the toughest essay I've done in either Freshman Composition classes to date." She deals in this reflection with why the paper was so tough for her to write. At first she says, "I have strong opinions on the matter, but for some reason when it came time to stating them in the context of the paragraphs, they didn't come easily." She doesn't seem to have a clear sense of why she had difficulty writing. However, she answers herself a few lines down: "How would I characterize my writing process?? Sloooow. Unorganized. There was too many resources and I felt overwhelmed." The reason she fell into writer's block was that she became "overwhelmed" by her sources. I believe that Robyn's difficulty in this writing cycle was fundamentally a problem of stance—her stance between her thinking and the information available to her in her sources. She was unable to write because she could not find supporting reasons that both fit her thesis and fit with the plethora of information on the subject she had available to her. Doing the reflection helped her align her thinking with her sources, and in this way was transformative.

Each of these three examples serve to illustrate the soundness of Mezirow's notions of transformation and reflection: "Reflective learning becomes transformative when assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid" (6). These examples show the writer wrestling with fundamental problems with stance and the rhetorical negotiation with the writing task. Omar saw in Essay #2 that his original approach to the essay on America was distorting and would lead him to write an potentially offensive paper to others. In Essay #3 he first found his thesis to be inauthentic and later tweaked one of his supporting reasons to be more authentic with his beliefs. Robyn saw her original approach to her essay as invalid and wasn't able to make sense of her sources to match her thinking. In each case, the writers found some problem with their stance as a writer, and it was through reflection that they were able at least to begin the process of solving this problem and proceeding to the next draft.

### **Confirming stance**

As we have seen from Dewey, reflection is validity testing. In the process of reflecting, we may find that our thinking is distorted, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid, but we might not. As we test our ideas and procedures, we may find that they are all right. In this case, reflection serves to confirm our ways of interpreting experience. The next few examples from Linda and Scott will illustrate how reflection also plays a key role in confirming stance in writing.

In essay #3, Linda took a position against the RAVE Act. The crux for Linda after writing her first draft has to do with her "stand." She is mixed about how she really feels and what she is writing. She expresses the problem as she sees it: "The only problem I would need to solve at this point is sticking to my decision on where I stand with this topic. At first I was for the rave act and now I'm against it so I just hope I don't change my mind towards the end." In an interview with Linda, she commented that doing this reflection helped her feel more confident in the decision to take the stand she had taken. The second writer's review (for draft 3-1) asked students specifically to try and review the assumptions behind their arguments. Linda interpreted this a bit differently. She stated her reasons and expressed her main support for each reason (she did not go into the warrants beneath these reasons as I was prompting her to do). This restating

of her reasons was still helpful for her. She said it made her more confident in her backing, in her argument. She said something else interesting—she said it helped solidify her defenses. Obviously, she still had doubts about her stance on the topic. When I mentioned this observation, she admitted that she was thinking of another peer who was taking the opposite position to her, and she felt that she had to be able to “defend” her ideas.

But Linda’s dilemma writing this essay ran deeper, as she expressed in her final draft 3-2 writer’s review. In this reflection she makes an intriguing statement: “I learned that writing about the right thing is not always doing the right thing. If that makes any sense.” I asked what she meant by this statement, and she told me that she knew RAVEs were wrong and she opposed them, but she felt that the law was worse so she opposed the law. It put her in the uncomfortable position of supporting RAVEs when she really doesn’t support them. When asked about the place of these reflections throughout the writing process, she said, “The reflections helped me express why the way I felt the way I did with the paper.” Reflection seemed to help her negotiate and plan her writing process, but more importantly, it seemed to help her deal with her doubts about her stance. Although it felt inauthentic for her to take a position that might make her appear as someone who favored RAVES, her doubts about the law and reflecting upon her arguments supporting these doubts led her to confirm her position against it (rather than negate that position as we saw happen for Omar).

Scott faced a similar difficulty with his stance in essay #3. Like Linda, he wrote opposing the RAVE Act, and like Linda he did not personally like RAVES, so it put him in the uncomfortable position of going against his inclinations and perhaps being perceived as a RAVE-er himself. In his draft 3-0 reflection, he says about writing his zero draft, “It helped me figure out my stance, and made me realize that I need facts to back up my arguments instead of opinion.” At this point, he seems comfortable with opposing RAVEs, and he is focused on developing support for that position. Interestingly, Scott mentions stance three times in this review, even commenting that the zero draft will prove useful in the future to help remind him of his stance. Like Robyn, Scott failed to produce a second draft of the essay on the due date. Even without a draft, I urged him to do the draft 3-1 writer’s review. Before addressing the writer’s review, he wrote a brief writing piece containing his thesis and three supporting reasons. When he started the writer’s review, he soon began a section where he wrote on the topic (what Omar called “idea kneading”). He seems to be having difficulty with one argument in favor of the RAVE Act—that it would reduce drug use. By discounting this opposing argument in his reflection, he seems to be bolstering his own stance in opposition to the Act:

I have no hope in the government having any positive effect on raves because people will simply do drugs at another location. Fair enough. I'm a realist. Drug use is alive and well in this country. Raves simply provide a more flashy environment to use the drugs. I think the RAVE act will only anger people. It may save a few lives, but the effect it will have will only motivate people to find ways to beat it.

In this content reflection, we see Scott not just testing an opponent’s argument, but by negating that argument he is confirming his own reasoning. His reflection moves next from confirming his reasoning to justifying his stance. He gives some indication that he originally thought he would be in favor of the RAVE Act. He bemoans the fact that his research turned up no articles in support of the Act: “It was up to me, the writer, to pull from the informative articles and turn them into reasons that were FOR the rave act. But loads and loads of people are trying to abolish it.” Here Scott seems to be throwing up his hands and saying, “Don’t blame me for opposing the

Act; there just isn't any support out there for it." Within this one paragraph in his draft 3-1 writer's review, we see Scott make two acts of confirmation: he confirms his opposition to one premise of the Act, and he confirms his stance against it as being more in line with general opinion about the Act. When I asked him about this section in his reflection and if it contained ideas he had formulated while writing the reflection, he said they were not new to him. He did make the comment, though, that doing the reflection "re-solidified" his stance.

In his reflections, Scott negotiated his stance with a topic that was new and foreign to him. He said the reflections reminded him of what he was doing: "It makes you think about your writing." When asked if he felt that doing this reflection was necessary, he replied that it would have made no difference to the final product whether he had done the reflections or not. It appears that although his reflections served some element of confirming his stance, it had negligible effect on his writing process. From talking to Scott, I learned he received considerable help with this essay from his father and sister that had a more significant effect on his writing process than the reflections did.

### **Summary of Other Observations and Conclusions:**

I was particularly curious to examine the question of whether reflections generated knowledge (discovery) or merely represent knowledge the writer already has in mind. Omar spoke of "rolling epiphanies" as he writes reflections, but I don't think this experience of discovery holds true for all reflective writing. In particular, I had questions about whether reflections generated "procedural knowledge" for students on the writing process and whether this accounting of their writing process made any difference for their writing process. Did writing reflectively about their writing process generate any knowledge for them?

The writer's review prompts asked students to describe their writing process creating the draft and project what they need to do for the next draft, and students did well creating shopping list-like section of "here is what I did" and "here is what I think I need to do." You can certainly see reflection operating as a "monitor" in the writing process, particularly for projective ideas of what to do next. However, I found numerous instances where students did not follow the plan of action they set out in the reflection. It seems clear that reflection is one site for decision-making regarding the procedures of the writing process and not the only one or even sometimes the most significant one. For Linda, the reflections seemed to help her move forward in her writing process for Essay #3 and helped her draw attention to what she was doing. Similarly, Scott said doing the reflections drew his attention to what he was doing, but he admits the reflections didn't seem to matter much. My guess is that the reflections didn't seem formative for Scott because he was leaning for "authority" in his writing more on his father and sister who helped him. Robyn did wonderful and detailed process reflection, but they didn't have much impact on her real thinking.

Why do reflections seem to be more solidifying or verifying for some and not for others? The explanation may be in the concept of "mindfulness." Both Scott and Linda were not very "mindful" of their own composing process, and thus the reflection heightens their mindfulness—though with a varying degree of affect. Robyn is already an experienced and mindful writer, so the reflections tended to be more descriptive of what she was already thinking rather than formative for her, so doing the reflections didn't impact what she did in the writing process much. Here some of Perl's notions of "felt sense" may apply. Less experienced or engaged

writers like Linda and Scott may not be as conscious of what they are doing as they write, so doing the reflections helps draw attention to their “felt sense” of what they are doing, making them more “mindful” writers. Process reflections make a writer’s line of action more visible and tangible. I think the concept of tangibility is important—reflection brings into language thinking that may be in what Perl would describe as a pre-linguistic “felt sense” state. Mezirow writes of the importance of this linguistic representation: “knowledge for the learner does not exist in books or in the experience of the educator. It exists only in the learner’s ability to construe and reconstrue the meaning of an experience in his or her own terms” (20). Writers within the reflection are “construing and reconstruing” what they are doing in the writing process in their own terms and so they are moving toward being more conscious writers.

### **Discussion and Implications for Teaching**

This research study of student’s post-draft reflections has uncovered the significant role reflection plays in a writer’s search for “stance” during the writing process. If there is one “way of knowing” that reflection seems best suited for generating and refining, it is a writer’s sense of stance. Determining stance is a complex process of alignment that is the most rhetorical act a writer does and the essence of composition. While figuring out stance, a writer must position, connect, and arrange a complex and shifting relationship between

- the writer and the subject and information on the subject
- the writer and the task requirements
- the writer and the audience
- the writer and their own thinking
- the writer and their purpose for writing

When all these elements of stance are in alignment, the writer is able to proceed with writing his or her composition. However, as elements come out of alignment or the need to place some element into alignment emerges, the composing process can be disrupted. Reflection as a form of validity testing applied to issues of stance within the writing process can help bring writers back into alignment “whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid” (Mezirow 6). Reflection can also serve to confirm a writer’s stance when these assumptions and premises are found not to be out of alignment. However, this study also confirms that a critical perspective is needed on reflection. Though reflection may have some influence on a writer’s stance, it may not, and certainly the act of writing a piece of reflective writing is not the only site where issues of stance are resolved for a writer.

This study may provide guidance for the kinds of questions teachers may use as prompts for post-draft reflective pieces. It suggests that questions geared to have students examine their stance may be preferred to general questions on the writing process such as “Describe your writing process as you composed your draft?” In particular, reflective prompts should call on students to test the validity of their stance in early drafts, and recount the difficulties and doubts they had developing their stance during the course of drafting their essay. General prompts may do well to even use the word “stance” inside the prompt since it appears it is a term students use themselves to describe the complex rhetorical maneuvering they are involved in within the writing process. Specific prompts might delve into particular elements of stance as listed above.

Below are some examples of possible prompts for reflecting upon stance:

**General prompts:**

On an early draft:

You just completed a draft on your essay. How do you feel about your stance toward the topic so far in your essay? What particular difficulties do you see with developing your stance as you move into revising your paper?

On a final draft:

Recount and evaluate the development of your stance in this essay? Where did it go well? What doubts do you still have about your stance? How could you have been more successful in formulating your stance? Have you learned anything from writing this essay that you can carry with you to the next time you write an essay?

**Specific prompts** (these can be tailored to highlight particular elements of developing stance):

On an early draft:

You just completed a draft on your essay. How do you feel about your stance toward the topic so far. In particular, how comfortable are you with your thesis? Where do you think your thesis needs improvement? If you are comfortable with your thesis so far, why?

You just completed a draft on your essay. How do you feel about your stance toward the topic so far. In particular, how well do you think you have positioned your self and your ideas toward your audience? Where might you lose your audience based upon your thesis, support, or general approach to the topic? How might you improve your ability to reach your audience and achieve your purpose?

For this draft, you were to include support in the form of quotations from your sources. Where do you stand as far as getting the sources you need to be convincing in your paper? Do you really think the quotes you have used are the best and right ones to achieve your purpose? Why? Where in your use of sources do you detect problems and what do you need to do make your argument using these sources better?

On a final draft:

You just turned in the final draft of your paper. Discuss your development of stance during the composing process of this essay? In particular, analyze your efforts to match your support to your thesis? What problems did you have with support and why? How successful were you do you think in supporting your thesis and why?

This essay called on you to write to a specific audience with a specific purpose in mind? How successful were you in presenting yourself credibly, presenting arguments and supports that were convincing, and appealing to the audience's emotions? Chart out how you developed the management of all these appeals to your audience and discuss where it worked and where it could have gone better and why.

Many other prompts are possible based on highlighting specific elements of developing stance. Even procedural reflective prompts could be more productive for students if they are phrased in such a way so as to prompt validity testing of their process.

### **Conclusion**

This preliminary study of post-draft reflections has affirmed my own belief in the value of reflection as a means to learning for students within an experiential learning process like the writing process. In particular, I have discovered reflection's important role in helping students develop "stance" in writing. But this study suggests more to me. I see more clearly that reflection is a heuristic. The heuristic tradition of scholarship in composition and rhetoric has focused almost exclusively on invention. This study suggests that invention and reflection should not be seen as separate events in the writing process but rather as the continuation of the same recursive mental process. Reflection should have a place within the writing process and our teaching of the writing process on equal footing with invention.

## Notes

1. Qualley defines "reflexive" as something different from "reflection." Qualley distinguishes reflection as something done on one's own, while reflexivity involves an encounter with an "other" that is a "bidirectional, contrastive response" (11-12). She uses a quote from Barbara Babcock about the myth of Narcissus as analogy to illustrate the difference between reflection and reflexive:

Narcissus's tragedy then is that he is not narcissistic enough, or rather he does not reflect long enough to effect a transformation. He is reflective, but he is not reflexive--that is he is conscious of himself as an other, but he is not conscious of being self-conscious of himself as an other, and hence, not able to detach himself from understanding, survive or even laugh at this initial experience of alienation. (qtd. in Qualley 14).

Although Qualley devotes considerable time to distinguishing the term reflexive from reflection and even from metacognition, and I respect her work immensely, I consider the two terms to be synonymous. I'm leaning on Moon's notion that reflection is a mental process common even to what Qualley is calling "reflexivity." Reflexivity is, to me, a form of deep reflection, similar to what Carol Pope called "refraction." Pope says refraction is an extension of reflection when she turns the mirror and sees the object of her reflection from different angles. Qualley would agree, but then say Pope should also gaze at herself gazing at the mirror from different angles--that would be reflexivity. I consider all of these to be "reflection."

2. Jennifer Moon suggests that reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are not different. She suggests that "reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are part of a continuum, the same processes being involved that act quickly and usually unconsciously during action or, further along the continuum, act more slowly and probably more consciously"(44).

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