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Some Thoughts about Feelings: The Affective Domain and the Writing Process

Susan McLeod

The "emotions" are excellent examples of the fictional causes to which we commonly attribute behavior.

B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior*

I am watching a roomful of college freshmen take an essay exam; I can nearly see the tension in the air. Several young men and women stare into space, pencils poised, brows furrowed, sweating slightly. A number of others gnaw their lower lips. Others chew their pens, their pencils, their fingernails. One examinee tears a page out of his bluebook, crumples it tightly, and fires it at a nearby wastebasket. When I announce there are five minutes left there is a rustle of sighs and low groans, a burst of final activity. Students leave, their faces smiling or frowning; few faces are totally impassive.

One does not have to watch freshmen at work to know that writing is an emotional as well as a cognitive activity—we feel as well as think when we write. This is true of most human behavior, as Piaget pointed out some time ago: "At no level, at no state, even in the adult, can we find a behavior or a state which is purely cognitive without affect nor a purely affective state without a cognitive element involved" (quoted in Derry and Murphy 29). But we have tended to ignore the affective domain in our research on and speculation about the writing process. This is partly due to our deep Western suspicion of the irrational, the related scientific suspicion of anything which cannot be observed and quantified (exemplified by B. F. Skinner), and the simple fact that we lack a complete theoretical perspective and common vocabulary with which to carry on a cogent academic discussion of affect.

I do not intend to argue for the inclusion of the affective domain in our research and discussion; that has already been done eloquently by Donald Norman in the field of psychology, and by Mary Farmer and Alice Brand in the field of writing. What I should like to do here is sketch in a few areas where research on affect should be fruitful, and then propose a theory of the emotions which might help us organize and understand this research. For the

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convenience of discussion, I shall treat affect as if it were a separate entity, much as one separates out threads that are intertwined in order to examine how the entire cloth is made. Readers should understand, however, that while we might examine cognition and affect separately, we should think about these processes holistically, since that is how they operate.

First, some definitions. Psychologists use the term "cognitive" to refer to the processing of information or invoking of knowledge, both conscious and unconscious, deliberative and automatic. (Note that cognition denotes more than simply rational, thought-like processes.) The term "affective" refers to the domain of emotions and feelings. These can vary in intensity from "cold" (preferences, moods, attitudes, where the organism is not highly aroused) to "hot" (emotional states characterized by activation of the autonomic nervous system—tense muscles, increased heartbeat, sweaty palms). They also can vary in direction, from positive to negative. I am primarily interested here in students and their affective reactions to writing and to themselves as writers.

What, then, are the areas in which we should look at the affective aspects of the writing process? The answer is, of course, all areas, but let me suggest a few where some fruitful research questions might be asked: My categories are not parallel, nor are they mutually exclusive; they are meant to be suggestive rather than restrictive.

Writing Anxiety

Though defined variously, writing anxiety is generally understood to mean negative, anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one's writing situation, or one's writing task) that disrupt some part of the writing process. The term is used to describe writers who are intellectually capable of the task at hand, but who nevertheless have difficulty with it. Writing anxiety, or writing apprehension, as John Daly has named it, is the most heavily researched affective issue in writing. Since the mid-1970's, when the Daly-Miller Scale of Writing Apprehension was first constructed, empirical studies of the phenomenon have burgeoned (for a summary of these studies, see Smith, *Reducing Writing Apprehension*). Researchers have identified subjects who are at the extremes of the scale and then correlated this variable with others: they have found, among other things, that undergraduate women are slightly less anxious about writing than men (Jeroski and Conry) but that among returning students over the age of 22 women were more anxious than men (Thompson). They have found that highly apprehensive students seldom enroll in advanced writing courses (Daly and Miller) and that such students write differently than low apprehensive students (Daly, "Effects").

All this information is very interesting, but in the end there is little in these studies that leads us toward theoretical enlightenment. I do not mean to sound critical of empirical approaches to research; in fact I find many empirical studies quite useful, and the Daly-Miller studies have certainly been

important in establishing writing apprehension as a construct. But as one psychologist says, anxiety research "asks the simplistic question: If I have two variables, let's find out how they covary. It rarely asks why one would want to find that particular answer or investigate that particular covariation" (Mandler, "Helplessness" 363). Daly himself points out that there has been little research on such questions as what causes writing apprehension, how it develops, and how it is maintained ("Writing Apprehension" 61).

Lynn Bloom, in her naturalistic case studies of anxious writers, does explore these larger questions and suggest some answers. In one study, published in Mike Rose's important book, *When a Writer Can't Write*, she examines the internal and external constraints on two anxious writers. Both are women struggling to complete their doctoral theses; one learned coping strategies and finally finished, while the other, because of personal and contextual constraints, will probably never complete the work. Bloom's work helps us understand the pressures that come to bear on particular writers in a particular context, and seems to me to be an excellent model for future research on writing anxiety.

Studies of writing anxiety suggest to us that the emotions have only a negative effect on writing. But emotions can be enabling as well as crippling, as the work of Reed Larson shows. In research reported in Rose's book, Larson investigated two groups of students working on a long paper. One group had disruptive emotional experiences when writing. Some writers in this group found themselves interested in their topics but over-aroused, over-anxious and excited, unable to focus on the task even though they worked hard on it; others in this group were under-aroused emotionally, disinterested, bored. The papers of these students who found their emotions disruptive were judged by independent raters to be fragmented, disjointed, and mechanical. The second group of students found that their emotional involvement helped them. These students became deeply engaged in the writing task, experiencing what they called "flow."

This emotional state is described by Larson's colleague Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, who reports in *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* on his study of people in creative and challenging activities (dancing, rock climbing, chess); it seems to occur when there is a balance between the perceived challenge of the task and the person's skills. Even though the students in the second group were not superior to the others in terms of verbal achievement tests and grade point averages, they did appreciably better on their papers than their emotionally over- or under-involved counterparts. As researchers and teachers, we need to know more about this state of emotional engagement with a writing task, a state which elsewhere has been termed "inspiration" (Northam).

Motivation

Motivation refers to one's inner impulses or drives toward some goal. Hayes and Flower, in their discussion of a cognitive model of the writing process,

mention motivational cues (such as the teacher's stern look when giving an assignment) as part of the writer's task environment (12). Extrinsic motivating factors (pleasing or pacifying teachers, getting good grades, or reaching an eventual career goal) certainly come to bear on the writing process, and we need to know more about how they operate. But John Nicholls, in an article entitled "Conceptions of Ability and Achievement Motivation," suggests that such factors are less effective than internal motivating factors in terms of student learning; the internal features we should be examining in our research are ego-involvement (wanting to look smart, or wanting to avoid looking stupid), and task involvement (217). In the latter, the task is inherently valuable and becomes an end in itself, often resulting in the "flow" described above. Not all tasks will be inherently valuable to all students, but we should ask ourselves how we can design tasks which are challenging and interesting enough to provide opportunities for this sort of engagement with writing.

Beliefs

Beliefs are convictions that are not necessarily provable. Our students come to us with a great many beliefs about writing which diminish their perception of their own skills as writers. Some of these are general cultural beliefs: good writers do not struggle but wait until inspiration visits; writing skills equal editing skills; the study of grammar will make you a better writer. But they also come with beliefs about themselves as writers. One interesting avenue of exploration is the issue of locus of control—some students perceive their successes and failures in writing as controlled by outside forces, such as luck or the teacher (an external locus), while others see the same results as stemming from their own capabilities (an internal locus). One researcher, Mary Budd Rowe, calls these two types of learners "gamblers" and "bowlers"; the gamblers see the world as a game of chance over which they have little control, while the bowlers believe that their own skill and hard work will have an effect on the final score.

As teachers, we have all had experience with these two kinds of students. The bowlers will ask questions about how to improve their papers and will persist at revision tasks. The gamblers, often as bright as the bowlers, will give up on the writing task and come up with explanations of why they didn't do well (the teacher didn't like my topic, the writing lab wasn't open during my free hours). Since most of us who teach are by nature bowlers, ones who have succeeded at academic tasks, it is difficult for us to see the latter students as anything other than lazy. The notion of locus of control helps us see that their reluctance to revise might be related to something more fundamental—their belief that they have little control over the results of their efforts.

Attribution theory takes us a step further in analyzing student beliefs about the reasons for their success or failure at writing tasks. Bernard Weiner, a so-

cial psychologist who has studied the need to achieve and beliefs about why one succeeds or fails, has developed a model that helps explain the attribution of success and failure. Weiner posits four causes of success and failure: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Weiner organizes these supposed causes along the two dimensions of locus of control and stability. (See Figure 1.)

STABILITY	LOCUS OF CONTROL	
	Internal	External
Stable	ability	task difficulty
Unstable	effort	luck

Figure 1 Attributions of Success and Failure (From Weiner, *Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory*)

Locus of control—internal or external—we have touched upon already. Stability refers to whether the cause of success or failure can vary from one time to another for a student. Ability is an internal, stable factor, while effort is internal but unstable, since one can change one's effort from time to time. Task difficulty is external and stable (a given task does not change in difficulty), while luck is external and unstable.

Various studies have used this matrix to determine patterns in the causes to which people attribute success or failure. Weiner found, for example, that causal attributions in part determine future expectations of success and failure. When students attributed their success to the unstable, external cause of good luck, for example, their expectations for future success were not as high as when they saw their success as due to the stable, internal factor of ability. Many students come to us with the belief, sometimes well-grounded in their previous experience, that writing teachers are capricious individuals, and that, therefore, success in the writing class will have little to do with ability or effort. This belief hinders their writing efforts.

Attributional patterns are also related to an individual's self-concept. For instance, Ickes and Layden found that individuals with a high self-concept tend to attribute successes to internal causes and failures to external causes, while those with a low self-concept tend to attribute success to external and failure to internal factors. (See McCarthy et al., "Self-Efficacy and Writing: A Different View of Self-Evaluation" for an interesting application of the notion of self-concept.) As teachers, we need to know more about how we can help students value their own abilities, how we can reward effort in suitable ways, and how we can clarify evaluation procedures and standards in order to show students that we are not judging them arbitrarily, but against a measure they can understand and internalize.

Two final dimensions of beliefs with direct application to composition are the phenomena of learned helplessness and mastery orientation. Some students who fail continually on a task learn to be helpless at that task and to see failure as inevitable on similar tasks—in many cases giving up before they have even begun. Other students who have succeeded and who have become mastery-oriented attribute their failure at a task to lack of effort; these students tend to persist and even improve when they fail (Dweck and Goetz). Such research suggests that we need to look carefully at these individual differences when we intervene in student writing processes. For example, the inadvertently harsh remark we make about one student's paper might—if she is mastery-oriented—actually help to spur the student on, while the same remark might devastate the student who sees failure as inevitable and stop her progress entirely.

A Theory of Affect

These three broad areas—writing anxiety, motivation, beliefs—are ripe for study in terms of affect. How shall we proceed? There are several theories of the emotions that we might choose to guide research. But I should like to suggest that the constructivist views refined by George Mandler in *Mind and Body* are most compatible with what we know about the cognitive aspects of writing from the works of John Hayes and Linda Flower.

According to Mandler, emotional experience consists of two factors, one physiological, the other cognitive. When an emotion occurs, the autonomic nervous system is activated (the familiar "gut" response: a knot in the stomach, a quickened pulse, a heightened awareness of external stimuli). There is also a cognitive interpretation of this visceral arousal according to past experience or current situation; this interpretation makes sense of the physical agitation, evaluating the physiological evidence either positively or negatively.

This is what an emotion is; but what triggers the physiological reaction/cognitive interpretation in the first place? Mandler says that a major source of emotion is the interruption of an individual's plans or planned behavior, plans which have a tendency toward completion. When our plans are interrupted, our autonomic nervous systems are activated and the physiological evidence is interpreted as emotion—excitement or frustration. In spite of the interruption, the individual will often persist in trying to complete the original plan. Completing an interrupted sequence is a positive, even a joyful experience.

I have not done justice in these few lines to Mandler's rich and complex theory, but I hope it is clear how the theory fits with a problem-solving view of the writing process. Flower and Hayes, in discussing the thinking processes that writers use, define planning as the whole range of thinking activities that go on before putting words to paper (although planning continues throughout composing). These plans are interrupted "with disturbing frequency" ("Plans"

40) by various constraints, once writers begin to translate the content of their plans into written words—constraints such as knowledge of the topic, the linguistic and discourse conventions of written prose, and the rhetorical problem ("Dynamics" 34-40). Writers' goals and strategies must be defined, assessed, and redefined as they write. In other words, interruption of plans, a major reason for emotions to occur, is integral to the writing process. If we agree with Mandler, we must admit that it is impossible to write without some emotion occurring.

What seems crucial is the cognitive interpretation of sensory data. While writing this paper, for example, I found the flow of words continually interrupted by the constraint of audience; because I was writing for readers more interested in teaching than in psychological research I had to stop a number of times to consider how I would present that research. My physiological state was certainly agitated (I wrote, then paced, then wrote again); but I was so intrigued by my subject and task that I interpreted the sensory data as excitement—the excitement of the chase, perhaps, as I tracked my ideas. My emotional state was enabling.

When many of my students write they also show evidence of autonomic nervous system arousal—paper wadding, pencil chewing, sighing—but they describe this agitation in negative terms. They are anxious, frustrated, blocked; they have difficulty continuing. There are, of course, cognitive possibilities for some students' distress: they may not have an adequate repertoire of plans (Flower and Hayes, "Plans"), or they may have rigid rules that keep them from moving on in the writing process (Rose), or they may be interrupted by premature editing (Peel 29). But these cognitive reasons for negative feelings do not explain why *competent* writers often have high levels of anxiety and frustration. Mandler's theory helps to explain this phenomenon—some competent writers, because of their beliefs, perhaps, interpret physiological arousal in negative terms.

Mandler's theory also helps us understand why students are reluctant to revise their written work even when they admit they need to revise. The "joy of completion" which comes when an interrupted action is finally completed is to them a signal of closure. Other researchers (Bloom and Broder) have pointed out that problem solving involves cycles of tension and relaxation: once a problem is solved, the problem solver relaxes and "feels" finished, even if the solution is inadequate. Since the intended action has rushed towards completion (Mandler, *Mind and Body* 173), the problem solver or writer reports feeling satisfied and feels no need to go back and review what has been done.

Pedagogical Applications

I have suggested various areas where research on affect would be fruitful, and suggested a theory which could help drive such research. But I want to close

with a word to the teacher. How can an increased understanding of the non-cognitive aspects of writing help us to help our students with their writing?

A common thread that runs through much recent research on improving student learning in all fields is the need for metacognition—knowing about knowing. Lester Faigley's recent research suggests that one way we can help students write better is to increase their awareness of their own composing and revising processes. This research suggests that there are executive mental processes which experienced writers use to monitor their progress, to help them pull back and examine their work as they proceed. If we can show students how experts monitor their writing and what devices they use to do so, then we can encourage students to emulate those models.

It follows that we should also find out how experts monitor their emotional states as they compose, and use that procedure as a model as well. If Mandler is right, we can tell students that all writers are agitated as they compose, and that they can learn to find that agitation enabling rather than debilitating. We might also explain to students that the feeling of pleasure they have when they finish a first draft is not an indication that the entire task is finished.

Teaching people how to interpret sensory input is not a new idea. A study of a noxious medical test found that patients who were told what sensations to expect were able to attend to these cues as information and to process them as "normal" rather than threatening. The instructions they were given played a major role in reducing the patients' distress and in the successful completion of the test (Johnson and Leventhal). A medical metaphor (students as patients, teachers as doctors who diagnose problems and send them to writing "labs") is not intended here; but we can use as models the physicians and dentists who tell their patients not to mistake pressure for pain. We can work out specific coping strategies to help students control their affective reactions—monitoring their emotional state, allocating their energy, stopping themselves when they are over-excited—so that their emotions work for them rather than against them.

In short, we can help with strategic self-management in the affective as well as in the cognitive domain. We can help students know themselves in the fullest sense, and thus help them become better writers. I think, and I feel, it can be done.

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Critique

Like a ghost of the writer I read this page.
Every word has cousins; the order is never
arbitrary. All that is not said—
is it near? Why isn't it said?
What is developing? A part of my attention
begins to estimate this voice. Is this
an artless song? Am I being used?
Can these lines take a lie detector test?
Can this writer be trusted? When I read
this, who am I supposed to be?—
a mother? a father? a lover? a stranger?
Someone who knows as much as the writer?
Do other words wake up? Does this page
give me the feel of arriving where truth is?
The track of this page has diverted my life.
Now I turn back to what is my own.

William Stafford
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