Centering the Activity of Writing: Designing Writing Tasks for the Introductory Creative-Writing Classroom

C. Connor Syrewicz
University at Albany, State University of New York
c.syrewicz@gmail.com

Abstract: *In this paper, I argue that writing tasks (assignments, exercises, prompts, activities, etc.) are one of the best tools we have to teach our students how to perform the activity of writing more effectively. Contemporary creative writing instructors tend to be suspicious of writing tasks, and I argue that this suspicion is a largely result of the predominantly "text-centered" view of writing instruction that prioritizes teaching students "textual knowledge" above all else. Following others, I call for placing a much greater pedagogical emphasis upon the process of producing texts, and I argue that this can only be accomplished by centering the activity of writing in our pedagogies. From there, I review empirical research from composition studies and educational psychology in order to make three predictions about the efficacy of writing tasks, and I explore the implications of these hypotheses by discussing how I use writing tasks to teach introductory creative writing students to use Anne Lamott's concept of "short assignments" as they write. Finally, I conclude by identifying some directions for future research and by making a few remarks about the benefits of pedagogical pluralism in postsecondary creative writing education.*

Keywords: *process, process pedagogy, writing tasks, assignments, writing assignments, cognitive strategy instruction, explicit instruction, rationales, activity-centered instruction, text-centered instruction, procedural knowledge*

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT PROCESS, OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE WRITING TASK

When I started teaching, the thought of using what composition scholars call *writing tasks* didn't sit well with me. Writing assignments, exercises, prompts, activities—I was assigned a few of these in my time as a creative writing student, and I couldn't remember a single one that I had found fruitful or even fun. It's hard to remember any of the particular writing tasks I had been assigned, but I remember them just enough to know that they mostly looked like the

examples that the poet and creative writing studies (CWS) scholar Alexandria Peary mentions in her discussion of the subject: "Write a narrative with four given plot elements, use only monosyllabic words, rework a cliché, adopt the point-of-view of an object, and so forth" (6). In other words, the writing tasks my teachers designed mostly involved telling me and my classmates something about the texts they wanted us to write.

When I was a student, I didn't like these kinds of assignments for a whole bunch of reasons that probably have to do with the tricky psychology of motivation (see Reeve 145-54 for a summary), but as a first-time teacher, I didn't like these kinds of assignments because I didn't like the idea of telling my students what to write. At the time, I was an MFA student in fiction, and I was learning all sorts of "rules" about what supposedly makes a work of fiction "good" or "bad." And while I saw a certain value in some of what I was learning, I was also seeing that many of the works of fiction that I loved the most didn't conform to any of the supposed "rules" I was being taught, so where did I get off telling my students to follow them?

Today, it's easy to see that my misgivings about writing tasks were largely a result of the *text-centered pedagogies* my teachers had used to teach me how to write: in my workshops, I was told what was "good" and "bad" about the texts I wrote; in my seminars, I was assigned texts to read before I was asked to talk about what made them "good" or "bad"; and in the craft essays I was reading, writers mostly discussed what made texts "good" or "bad." In other words, I had been so inundated by information about texts that the only purpose I could imagine writing tasks serving was that of telling students what kinds of texts they should write.

In recent years, a number of CWS scholars have attempted to challenge the predominantly text-centered paradigm of contemporary, postsecondary creative-writing education by calling for a greater emphasis on what composition studies scholars would call *process pedagogy* (Peary 1-7; Reissenweber 2; Mayers 42-8). And while I was eventually convinced that these scholars are correct, as a new teacher, I was wary of the idea of "process." The word conjured images of outlining, of drafting, of revising—of a series of rote, mechanical steps that reminded me neither of my own writing process nor that of any of the other writers I knew.

It's with some embarrassment that I admit that my feelings about process pedagogy reflected little more than my own ignorance and arrogance: Process pedagogy means much more than teaching our students a mechanical series of steps for planning, drafting, and revising. And yet I also have to say that my feelings about the term process haven't changed very much in the years since I first encountered that word. In most other areas, "processes" refer to predictable series of steps, and yet decades of empirical research show that the processes of writers tend not to follow

[1] I am currently in the process of analyzing the "procedural information" (Guthrie et al. 254) in both volumes of The Writer's Notebook: Craft Essays from Tin House, and a preliminary analysis of the first volume shows that roughly 65% of the information in it involves writers discussing what "good" and "bad" texts look like, while 35% of the information in it addresses the writing process.

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a predictable series of steps but are rather highly recursive: in the course of only a few minutes of writing, for example, a writer might form intentions, revise their intentions, come up with ideas, translate those ideas into words, transcribe those words, revise their words, revise their ideas, translate their ideas into words, transcribe those words, and so on (Graham "A Revised" 269).

For this reason, the term that I prefer more than "process" is *activity*, as the basic insight upon which process pedagogy was founded is that writing is, above all else, an activity, something that someone does. In this way, it is like riding a bicycle; and just as one learns to ride a bicycle by learning how to perform the activity of cycling, one learns to write texts by learning how to perform the activity of writing. Plot, lineation, voice, form, meter—all of these ideas are helpful enough, but they all refer to knowledge of texts, not to the activity of writing. Writers can use these ideas as they are writing, but knowing them is a little like knowing what it looks like to cycle well—it's only so helpful when it comes to actually doing it.

This view of writing would predict that text-centered pedagogies would be somewhat effective but that *activity-centered pedagogies* would be significantly more effective by comparison; and indeed, a large body of empirical research from composition studies and educational psychology has shown that pedagogies that teach students how to perform the activity of writing tend to be more effective than pedagogies that focus on texts alone (Hillocks 204-22; Graham and Perin 459-67).

Based on this evidence, I believe that post-secondary creative writing education would improve considerably if creative writing instructors focused somewhat less on the texts their students wrote and somewhat more on what the students did as they were writing them. Switching from a text-centered pedagogy to an activity-centered pedagogy is difficult, however, because writing tends to be a solitary activity, and because much of the activity of writing is unobservable. Teaching someone to perform an easily observed activity like riding a bicycle, for example, usually involves being present as the student is practicing so that the instructor can observe, guide, and correct their performance. Creative writing instructors, by contrast, often cannot be present as their students are writing, and even if they could, they probably wouldn't be of much help, as many parts of the activity of writing occur in the privacy of the writer's mind (Graham "A Revised" 265-71). Writing instructors, therefore, need other ways of guiding their students as they are performing the activity of writing, and the writing task is one of the best tools we have to give our students guidance in the absence of more direct methods.

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[2] Studies of expert writers show that writers use knowledge of texts as they are writing (see, for example, Hayes and Flower 1108-9 and Flower et al. "Detection" 33-5), but performing the activity of writing involves many factors other than the knowledge of texts (Hayes 4-26; Graham "A Revised" 254-71). Therefore, text-centered and activity-centered pedagogies are not opposed; rather, text-centered pedagogies are activity-centered pedagogies that marginalize most parts of the activity of writing.

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In what follows, therefore, I am going to present three hypotheses on designing effective, activity-centered writing tasks, and these hypotheses are:

1. Writing tasks that are used in the context of pedagogies that center the activity of writing will lead to greater levels of learning than writing tasks that are used in the context of pedagogies that leave the activity of writing at the margins.

2. Writing tasks that serve learning objectives that students can clearly identify will elicit more motivation from students, will lead to greater levels of learning, and will lead to more "transfer" than writing tasks that don't serve a clearly identifiable learning objective.

3. Writing tasks that are designed around "cognitive strategies" will result in higher levels of learning and greater levels of transfer than writing tasks that are designed around other available methods for teaching new skills.

Evidence from cognitive and educational psychology suggests that these hypotheses are likely to hold true any time we are teaching students new ways of performing the activity of writing (see Clark et al. 6-10 for summary), so these hypotheses may prove true at any level of creative-writing instruction, so long as what we are teaching is new to the students themselves. In exploring the implications of these hypotheses, however, I will discuss how they could be applied in the introductory creative writing class in particular. Introductory students often bring with them a wealth of knowledge, skill, and experience that is either directly related to creative writing or that is, at the very least, applicable to it. But because the activity of creative writing is likely to be the newest to introductory students, these hypotheses will probably be the most relevant in an introductory setting.

Before I begin, however, I would like to underline the somewhat speculative nature of the claims I am making. Though evidence from composition studies and educational psychology seems to support these hypotheses, little empirical work has been done on the effect of different pedagogical practices on students in post-secondary creative writing classrooms. We don't, therefore, know whether, or to what extent, these hypotheses will prove true in the teaching of post-secondary creative writing. I am, in other words, using the term *hypothesis* very intentionally: The following three claims are little more than provisional predictions, and like most provisional predictions they will probably be proven wrong, misleading or (at the very least) incomplete in the light of new empirical evidence. It's possible, for example, that creative writing is so different from other forms of writing that what has proven true in the teaching of other kinds of writing will not prove true in the teaching of creative writing. Likewise, it's possible that the people who tend to take post-secondary creative writing classes are different enough from the students that have been studied in other fields of writing research that the findings from those other fields will prove untrue of post-secondary creative writing students. And even if these hypotheses do prove to be somewhat true of creative writing instruction, they will almost certainly prove untrue for some populations of students. We

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should never forget that no single way of teaching will work for all students; therefore, we need to understand how our methods are failing some student populations so that we can develop alternative methods which meet these groups' particular needs.

I posit these hypotheses, in other words, not because I think they should necessarily change the way that anyone teaches but because I believe the time has come to empirically investigate how our pedagogical methods actually affect the students we teach. My hope, therefore, is not that they will be applied uncritically but that they will help to shape any empirical investigations that may follow.

HYPOTHESIS #1: WRITING TASKS THAT ARE USED IN THE CONTEXT OF PEDAGOGIES THAT CENTER THE ACTIVITY OF WRITING WILL LEAD TO GREATER LEVELS OF LEARNING THAN WRITING TASKS THAT ARE USED IN THE CONTEXT OF PEDAGOGIES THAT LEAVE THE ACTIVITY OF WRITING AT THE MARGINS.

As I see it, the text-centered paradigm suffers from two problems, one specific and one general. The specific problem has to do with the efficacy of how textual knowledge is taught. Interestingly, some recent empirical evidence may suggest that expert creative writers don't use much textual knowledge at all as they write, but rather that certain textual outcomes are unintended or semi-intended consequences of writers engaging in specific kinds of cognitive processes as they perform the activity of writing (Peskin and Ellenbogen 237-44). In the study in question, the composition scholars Joan Peskin and Beverly Ellenbogen compared the cognitive processes of ten published, academic poets with those of ten novices by asking them all to think aloud as they wrote poems. Peskin and Ellenbogen found that the expert poets engaged in far more free-floating and associative cognitive processes throughout the writing process than did the novices, and that the experts engaged in far more deliberate processes, especially those related to active revision (237-41). Interestingly, neither the experts nor the novices mentioned textual features much as they composed their poems, but the poems by the expert poets contained significantly more poetic devices than those that the novices wrote (241-3). More research is needed (see Syrewicz 6-10), but if this finding turns out to be true, then this would imply that we may be making a mistake by teaching our students about texts, and that students might achieve more positive textual outcomes if we focused more on teaching them how to perform the activity of writing using cognitive processes that are similar to those of experts.

Assuming that it is not a mistake to teach textual knowledge, however, text-centered instructors often hinder the efficacy of their instruction by focusing almost exclusively on texts themselves and by failing to address how this knowledge should be *used* as their students are writing. Evidence from composition studies and educational psychology suggests that

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knowing something does not ensure that it will be used by a student as they are writing (Flower "Interpretive" 116-7; Perkins and Saloman). As the composition scholar Linda Flower points out, "People know a great deal more than they use" ("Interpretive" 116), and so if we want a particular piece of textual knowledge (e.g. "show, don't tell," point of view, minimalism, the objective correlative, etc.) to influence the texts our students write, this knowledge needs to be not only stored in the student's memory but also activated and used as they are writing. And because the activation of knowledge is not something that we can take for granted, evidence suggests that it needs to be explicitly prompted and deliberately practiced before it finally becomes automatic (Clark et al. 6-10; Samuels and Flor 109-13).

Likewise, it's not enough for a piece of knowledge to be activated; it's also important that the piece of knowledge be used in ways that are actually helpful to the activity of writing. As the composition scholar Mike Rose has shown, some students experience writer's block because they rigidly cling to the pieces of textual knowledge that are activated as they are writing (394-9). One student that Rose interviewed, for example, reported that she experienced writer's block because she had learned that "a good essay always grabs a reader's attention immediately" (394), which led her to spend hours on the first paragraphs of her essays. By contrast, the students who didn't experience writers block were extremely flexible about how they used their textual knowledge once it was activated. Like the blocked writers, some of the things they had learned about texts would be activated as they were writing, but unlike the blocked writers, they would quickly abandon this knowledge if it wasn't appropriate or helpful (396-7). We can avoid some of these problems by encouraging flexibility as we teach textual knowledge. When we deliver maxim-based textual knowledge such as "show, don't tell," for example, we can emphasize that this maxim should be used flexibly and not rigidly. (We might even reword entirely: "Show, don't tell, except when you should tell.") On the other hand, if we center the activity of writing by asking our students to practice using textual knowledge, we can also encourage flexibility through corrective feedback. If a student seems to be rigidly clinging to a textual concept as they use it, we can address this rigidity and guide them toward a more flexible approach.

The point of addressing how textual knowledge can be used extends beyond that of simply avoiding unhelpful uses, however. Evidence suggests that expert writers tend to use textual knowledge in particular ways throughout the writing process. The composition scholars John Hayes and Linda Flower, for example, review a number of studies which seem to show that "Expert writers draw on textual conventions and genre patterns and other discourse schemas to give shape to their planning" (1108). Likewise, the educational psychologist Deborah McCutchen reviews a number of studies which seem to show that having large amounts of textual knowledge available as one is writing can make it easier for writers to translate their ideas into language (58). And finally, as Flower et al. point out, expert writers tend to use textual knowledge both to identify common textual "problems" (e.g. "this sounds 'wordy'") and to find solutions to the "problems" they identify ("Detection" 47-51). Evidence suggests that leaving it

up to our students to discover for themselves how to use textual knowledge will be frustrating, discouraging, and less effective than explicitly guiding them in how to use this knowledge in ways that have been shown to be effective (see Clark et al. 7-8). One might argue that leaving it up to our students to discover how to use this knowledge for themselves will lead them to use it more creatively; however, research has shown that failing to teach our students how to use knowledge will not lead them to use it creatively but will make it less likely that they will use it at all (see Clark et al. 6-10 and Rietzschel 209-11).

Centering the activity of writing in our pedagogies, in other words, does not mean that we should ignore texts or textual knowledge. On the contrary, the evidence I've cited here suggests that having a large amount of contextually appropriate textual knowledge may help a writer to improve how they write. That said, it's not enough simply to supply our students with textual knowledge, as we cannot take it for granted this knowledge will influence the texts that students produce. Rather, students must also receive guidance and practice using textual knowledge, and writing tasks can help students to do this by providing them with the guided practice they need to master using textual knowledge effectively.

The general problem, on the other hand, has to do with the fact that text-centered pedagogies tend to ignore *most* parts of the activity of writing. Research has shown that writing is an complex activity that involves the mingling of a great number of social, cognitive, behavioral, environmental, and bodily factors (Graham "A Revised" 254-71), and by focusing on textual knowledge to the exclusion of other factors, the text-centered paradigm provides our students with almost no instruction in those parts of the activity of writing that have been shown to affect the quality both of the texts that students produce and of the writing process itself.

In 1985, for example, the psychologist Teresa Amabile published the results of a study that attempted to measure the effects of different motivational orientations on the poetry written by college students. Amabile recruited seventy-two community college students who reported that they were actively involved in creative writing. These students were then randomly sorted into two experimental groups and one control group. In the experiment, students in all three groups were asked to write a poem. Then, when all three groups had finished, each of the two experimental groups were asked to complete a questionnaire about their reasons for writing. One experimental questionnaire asked about their *intrinsic* reasons for writing (i.e. writing for the joy and interest of writing), and the other experimental questionnaire asked

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3 Importantly, none of this suggests anything absolute about the relationship between the writer's motivations and the texts they produce. The intrinsic/extrinsic dimension of motivation is only one dimension among many (see Reeve 75-293), and motivation is only one, small part of the activity of writing (see Graham "A Revised" 254-71); therefore, having high levels of intrinsic motivation does nothing to guarantee that a writer will produce a text that others find "creative." Intrinsic motivation matters, but it is only one factor among many that affect a writer's performance.

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about their *extrinsic* reasons for writing (i.e. writing for rewards, approval, etc.). Then, once the students had completed the questionnaires, all three groups were asked to complete a second poem. And finally, the creativity of all of the poems were rated by a group of twelve experienced poets. While no significant differences were found between the creativity-ratings of the initial sets of poems that all three groups wrote, the second group of poems that were written by the students who had completed the questionnaire on extrinsic reasons for writing were rated as significantly less creative than those that were written by the students in the other two groups, suggesting that "concentrating on extrinsic reasons for writing [resulted] in a temporary decrease in creativity" (397). These findings are consistent with a large body of evidence that people who do things for intrinsic reasons tend to be more persistent, creative, and conceptually flexible than people who do things for extrinsic reasons (see Reeve 111-4 for summary). Likewise, evidence suggests that people who do things for intrinsic reasons tend to report higher levels of subjective well-being than people who do things for extrinsic reasons (114). Therefore, it seems reasonable to believe that people who write for intrinsic reasons will, on average, tend to produce slightly more "creative" texts and will tend to enjoy the activity of writing more than people who write for extrinsic reasons.

Because there are a very high number of "good" ways to write, creative writing could be thought of as a highly "ill-structured" activity (Jonassen and Hung 8-15). Anyone, therefore, who would try to claim that it's easy to define what it means to perform the activity of writing "well" would be, to put it simply, wrong.

On the other hand, research like the intrinsic-motivation study I just cited suggests there are some ways of performing the activity of writing that are on average more effective than others. For example, researchers in the field of educational psychology have found that writers who possess high levels of certain psychological constructs—such as topic knowledge (Albin et al. 319-31; Benton et al. 75-7), self-efficacy (see Bruning and Kauffman 162-4), self-regulation (see

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[4] Another reason to emphasize the fact that we're talking about statistical averages is that it helps to remind us that we should be extremely flexible in how we teach students to perform the activity of writing. As I wrote earlier, no single way of writing will work for every student (and this may be especially true in a domain of writing, like creative writing, in which standing apart from the group is often highly valued). Personally, I take this to mean that we should acknowledge with our students that the material they are learning may not "work" for them individually and that there is nothing wrong with them if the material isn't working for them. Likewise, I often encourage my students to do their best to achieve the learning objectives of the course or unit, but to unapologetically abandon these learning objectives if they have tried their best and have nevertheless found them unhelpful.

[5] Writing seems to be a highly contextual or "domain-specific" activity (see Kellogg and Whiteford 109-11), and so, as I have argued elsewhere, much more research will be needed if we want to understand what it means to perform not just the general activity of writing "well" but also the domain-specific activities of writing different kinds of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction (see Syrewicz 6-10). That said, it would be very surprising if certain factors that have been found to help writers in other domains of writing (i.e. high topic knowledge, high intrinsic motivation, high self-efficacy, effective self-regulatory skills, etc.) were not also helpful to creative writers.

Santangelo et al. 188-90; Boice 448-54), and working memory capacity (see McCutchen 56-7)—tend to write more effectively than writers who possess low levels of these constructs. Likewise, studies of expert poets have shown that expert poets tend to engage in far more free-floating discovery processes (Peskin and Ellenbogen 237-8), to engage in far more active revision processes (238), to focus more on significance (rather than signification; 242-43), and to more successfully deactivate cognitive control while drafting (Liu et al. 3364-6) than novice poets.

Considered together, all of this research suggests that performing the activity of writing "well" means a lot more than possessing a lot of textual knowledge. *Using* textual knowledge may be helpful, but because it is only one small part of the activity of writing, I believe that it's a mistake to focus on it to the exclusion of other learning objectives—such as increasing our students' intrinsic motivation, increasing their self-efficacy, teaching them strategies for efficiently and effectively increasing and using their topic knowledge, etc.—that have almost nothing to do with acquiring and then using textual knowledge as one is writing.

To summarize, this hypothesis posits that writing tasks will be more effective in the context of activity-centered pedagogies than in the context of text-centered pedagogies for two reasons: one specific and one general. The specific reason has to do with how textual knowledge is taught. Certain textual outcomes may not be the result of tacitly or deliberately using textual knowledge as one is writing (Peskin and Ellenbogen 237-41), and textual knowledge cannot influence the texts that students write unless it is activated and used by the student as they are writing. Writing tasks can help to teach students both how to activate and how to use this knowledge by prompting them to activate it and then by giving them specific guidance about how to use that knowledge in helpful and productive ways.

The general reason has to do with all of those parts of the activity of writing that text-centered pedagogies ignore. Writing is a complex and multi-faceted activity, which means there are many parts of the activity of writing other than those that involve using textual knowledge (Graham "A Revised" 254-71). The research I've reviewed here shows that these other parts of the activity of writing can effect both the degree to which people like the activity of writing and the quality of the texts that writers produce. So activity-centered pedagogies are likely to be more effective than text-centered pedagogies because they give instructors the chance to teach students how to perform these other parts of the activity of writing more effectively.

In my discussion of this hypothesis, I mentioned how writing tasks could be used to improve the way in which textual knowledge is taught, but I'm expecting that assigning writing tasks will be an efficacious way of teaching other activity-centered learning objectives as well. Therefore, in the next hypothesis, I will discuss how an introductory creative-writing instructor could use writing tasks to effectively pursue other activity-centered learning objectives with their students.

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HYPOTHESIS #2: WRITING TASKS THAT SERVE LEARNING OBJECTIVES THAT STUDENTS CAN CLEARLY IDENTIFY WILL ELICIT MORE MOTIVATION FROM STUDENTS, WILL LEAD TO GREATER LEVELS OF LEARNING, AND WILL LEAD TO GREATER LEVELS OF "TRANSFER" THAN WRITING TASKS THAT DON'T SERVE CLEARLY IDENTIFIABLE LEARNING OBJECTIVES.

Increasing self-efficacy, increasing intrinsic motivation, increasing and using topic knowledge, increasing and using textual knowledge—if an instructor wanted to pursue one of these activity-centered learning objectives in their introductory creative writing class, how would they go about doing so as effectively as possible?

Though it may seem obvious, it's worth mentioning that an instructor would need to begin by choosing a specific learning objective that they would like to pursue. Soon, I will discuss a body of literature that seems to show that people learn to do things more effectively when they consciously understand the skill they are attempting to master (see Clark et al. 6-10), but our students can't consciously understand the skill they are trying to master unless we have first consciously chosen a learning objective that will (ideally) help them to improve how they write.

At this point, one might ask a very reasonable question: Why we don't just let our students choose their own learning objectives? This question is animated by an admirable appreciation for giving students choice in their education, which has been shown to improve student motivation (see Reeve and Jang 210-12, 215-17). Unfortunately, research also shows that allowing novice students to choose their own learning objectives is not very effective because most novices don't know enough about the domain in question to know where their time and energy would be productively spent. This means that they end up spending their mental energies searching for a productive goal, and while some students are able to discover goals that help them to improve, many students don't end up finding a goal at all, and some even seem to choose goals that may hurt more than help (see Clark et al. 7-8). If, on the other hand, we take the time to identify learning objectives that are likely to help most novice students to improve their writing, then we can save students the energy of figuring out what they could do to improve for themselves.

But what kinds of learning objectives are likely to help most novices to improve? Over the last few decades, writing researchers in other fields have used studies of expert writers to identify potentially fruitful learning objectives. And while this method is not, by any means, perfect, I believe that it has been fruitful enough that it is worth reproducing in the CWS context (see Syrewicz 6-10). On the other hand, it's not enough to base our choice only on research which shows how successful writers write, as research shows that learning seems to happen slowly and in steps (see, for example, Alexander 224-38). As Hayes and Flower write, "Pushing

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[6] See Hidi and Renninger's four-phase model of interest development (113-7).

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students to use expert strategies too early may be like encouraging acrobats to start with the high wire" (1112), so it's also important to consider the needs of the specific population of students that we are teaching.

At some institutions, for example, introductory creative writing courses can be taken to satisfy general education requirements, which may lead some students to take these classes primarily for extrinsic reasons. This may not account for a large number of students if the institution serves populations of people who come from what sociologists call "reading class" backgrounds (Griswold et al. 129), as reading-class students might self-select into creative writing courses, while non-reading-class students self-select into other art courses that are more relevant to their interests. But if an institution mostly serves students who do not come from a reading-class background—first-generation college students, rural students, etc. (129)—then a creative writing instructor might find that a significant percentage of their students are taking their course primarily for extrinsic reasons. Given that intrinsic motivation has been found to lead to greater levels of intellectual flexibility and conceptual understanding (see Reeve 113-4), and that interest has been shown to be an important condition of acquiring expertise in a domain (see Alexander 222-3), in this situation, a creative writing instructor might do well to focus less on teaching their students any particular knowledge or skills and to focus more on increasing their intrinsic motivation and interest in creative writing. Teaching a student to take an interest in creative writing may not exactly feel like "teaching" creative writing, but given that interest and intrinsic motivation are important pre-conditions for learning, it seems reasonable to expect that interested, intrinsically motivated students will acquire more expertise overall than students who are uninterested or extrinsically motivated. So helping a student to find a passion for creative writing may actually help this student more than any other learning could.

If, on the other hand, a creative writing instructor is teaching a group of introductory students who already have high levels of intrinsic motivation and interest, then choosing these as learning objectives would probably not help them very much. Teaching students to use textual knowledge might seem like an attractive option at this point (and for all I know, it could very well be a good choice), but because textual conventions differ across various domains of creative writing, teaching textual knowledge often means teaching students the values and conventions of one single domain of creative writing. Domain-specificity is not something that we should necessarily avoid (Kellogg and Whiteford 109-111), but a creative writing instructor might reasonably feel hesitant to enculturate their introductory students into one particular domain of

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[7] I should be clear that my thoughts on the subject of choosing learning objectives are highly speculative and that much more research will be needed if we want to understand what kinds of learning objectives will best serve particular populations of introductory creative-writing students.

[8] Psychologists refer to a writer's ability to manage the writing process as their ability to "self-regulate" the writing process (Zimmerman and Risemberg 76-80; Santangelo et al. 188-89).

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creative writing too quickly, and so they might choose to teach skills and knowledge that are not very domain-specific, such as learning to use strategies for effectively managing the activity of writing (Santangelo et al. 188-90; Graham and Perin 451) or strategies for increasing and/or using topic knowledge (Albin et al. 319-31; Benton et al. 75-7).

In any case, once an instructor has chosen a learning objective that is (ideally) appropriate for the population of students that they are teaching—let's say, learning strategies for effectively managing the activity of writing—how would they go about pursuing this learning objective in ways that make it as likely as possible that their students will achieve it? The answer to this question is complicated, but evidence suggests that part of the answer is simple: explicitly.

Explicit Instruction

Composition scholars and cognitive psychologists make a useful distinction between two, basic kinds of knowledge: declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to all of the things *that* a person knows to be the case: the knowledge *that* a third-person narrator uses third-person pronouns like he, she, and it, for example. Procedural knowledge, on the other hand refers to all of those things that a person knows how to do: *how* to ride a bike or *how* to write, for example. Activity-centered pedagogies are probably more effective than text-centered pedagogies (Hillocks 204-22; Graham and Perin 459-67) because they focus on developing the procedural knowledge necessary to perform an activity, but this is just a focus, an orientation: It should by no means suggest that we should avoid declarative knowledge, as declarative knowledge is quite useful. As I have shown, some forms of declarative knowledge (like textual knowledge and topic knowledge) may be beneficial when they are paired with the procedural knowledge necessary for effective use.

Likewise, decades of research on learning by educational and cognitive psychologists shows that one learns procedural knowledge more effectively when they first learn *about* the activity that they are going to learn. In other words, students seem to learn effectively when they are given declarative knowledge about an activity before they begin to engage in the practice necessary to develop procedural knowledge (Clark et al. 6-10; Alexander 224-38; Guthrie et al. 251-63).

This might sound a little strange, but it's quite intuitive when one thinks about it in more concrete terms. Imagine that someone who had never seen or heard of a bicycle was suddenly presented with one and then was told to get on it and to learn how to ride it. One would reasonably assume that this person would have an incredibly difficult time learning to ride the bicycle. If, on the other hand, their instructor explained to them the purpose of the bike, described the activity of riding, and then got on and rode around for a while—maybe if they even gave the student some helpful hints about what they were doing to ride the bicycle successfully—one would expect that all of this declarative knowledge about cycling would aid the student as they eventually got on the bicycle in order to try riding for themselves.

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And indeed, the research I have just cited shows that taking the time to build up a student's declarative knowledge about an activity helps them to learn to perform the activity more efficiently and effectively (see Clark et al. 6-10 for summary).

For example, one of the strategies for managing the writing process that I teach my introductory students comes from the novelist Anne Lamott and has to do with the value of using what she calls "short assignments" as one is writing:

> Often when you sit down to write, what you have in your mind is an autobiographical novel about your childhood, or a play about the immigrant experience, or a history of—oh, say—women. But this is like trying to scale a glacier. It's hard to get your footing, and your finger-tips get all red and frozen and torn up. Then your mental illnesses arrive at your desk like your sickest most secret relatives. And . . . you know they are there with their weird coppery breath, leering at you behind your back. What I do at this point, as the panic mounts . . . is to stop . . . So I just sit there for a minute, breathing slowly, quietly. I let my mind wander. . . . and I finally notice the one-inch picture frame that I put on my desk to remind me of short assignments. It reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame . . . All I am going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story in my hometown, in the late fifties . . . just what can see through the one-inch picture frame, just one paragraph describing this woman, in the town where I grew up. (28-9)

Lamott's writing speaks to a body of literature which suggests that the way in which a writer imagines their goals can affect how they perform the activity of writing (see Hayes and Flower 1107-9). As Lamott's account suggests, imagining too large a goal ("an autobiographical novel about your childhood") can be emotionally and cognitively overwhelming, and this is supported by research from the cognitive sciences which shows that attempting to solve a highly complex problem can lead people to rely on unhelpful mental shortcuts in order to reduce the "cognitive load" that the problem places upon the mind (see Rietzschel 210). But Lamott claims that she is able to effectively manage these feelings by intentionally imagining a smaller, more manageable goal for herself ("one paragraph"). And her claim is supported by evidence from the psychology of creativity (211), which seems to show that intentionally constraining the scope of a problem using a strategy like Lamott's "short assignments" can help people to come up with more ideas and might even improve their creativity by "[reducing] the cognitive load of the task and hence [helping] people explore less accessible 'areas' of problem space" (215).

Using "short assignments" will not, of course, turn an introductory student into the next Roxane Gay, but speaking anecdotally, my students have reported to me that using short assignments has (predicably) helped them to manage their anxieties around writing, to come up with more ideas, to come up with more creative ideas, and to stay productive when working on drafts. Therefore, I usually include a unit on short assignments in most of my introductory classes.

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The goal of teaching a unit on short assignments is to teach students to *use* this strategy effectively as they are writing, but the evidence I have cited here suggests that students will learn to use this strategy effectively if they first learn about the strategy explicitly. I will discuss how I do this at some length as I explore the next hypothesis, but for now, it should suffice to say that I begin my unit on short assignments by developing my students' background knowledge of the strategy, by describing its purpose, and by modeling its use (Graham and Perin 451). A student can only be said to have learned a piece of declarative knowledge if that piece of declarative knowledge has been stored in the student's long-term memory, and research from cognitive psychology shows that people store knowledge in their long-term memory as a result of actively thinking about that knowledge: The more that a student actively thinks about a piece of knowledge, the easier it will be for the student to remember that knowledge later (see Lang 19-41). This finding leads the post-secondary English instructor and education scholar James Lang to advocate for the use of regular "retrieval practice" in post-secondary classrooms (29-34). As Lang points out, some of this retrieval practice can happen in class, but he also points out that it's very effective to assign our students short, low-stakes writing tasks in which they are asked to retrieve the knowledge they have learned, as regularly retrieving knowledge strengthens their memory of it.

The reader might, at this point, be cringing at the idea of assigning students the task of regurgitating information back at us, and this feeling is quite reasonable as it sounds a lot like "the banking model of education" that has been (rightly) criticized by writers like Paolo Friere among others (57-58; Gooblar 14-16). That said, contemporary theories of learning which focus on "active learning strategies" rather than the "passive learning" associated with the banking model identify "frequent testing with immediate feedback" (Gooblar 18) as one of the active learning strategies that can be the most helpful for helping students to retain information. As the education and English scholar David Gooblar writes, "Perhaps the most desirable difficulty that we can introduce into our classes is the test" (80), and he goes on to review a body of research which shows that frequent, low-stakes testing with immediate feedback is a highly effective way of helping students strengthen their memory of declarative knowledge (see 80-3). In other words, asking students to remember information is not necessarily an expression of the banking model of education; rather, the banking model refers to any situation in which instructors simply lecture at students and expect them to remember information without enlisting their active participation. Frequent, low-stakes testing, by contrast, enlists a student's active participation in storing information.

That said, it's not enough simply to assign writing tasks that are designed for retrieval practice. As both Lang (40) and Gooblar (83) point out, it's important that students understand the purpose of completing writing tasks designed for retrieval practice, as understanding the purpose of a writing task increases its efficacy and prevents it from feeling like busy work. In fact, this point speaks to an aspect of writing-task design that follows from this hypothesis: explicit rationales.

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Explicit Rationales

Rationales are simply explanations of the reasons that we are asking our students to do something, and I tend to include short rationales before the directions of all the writing tasks that I assign my students. For example, when I design low-stakes writing tasks which are meant to help students to do some retrieval practice, I often begin each task with a short rationale like, "In answering the following question, I would like you to try to remember some information from the lecture, as research suggests that trying to recall that information will strengthen your memory of it."

One will notice that my rationale includes two parts: (1) a statement of what, exactly, I am asking my student to do ("*try* to remember"), and (2) a statement that makes clear why I want them to do what I am asking them to do ("strengthen your memory"). The first part of the rationale is important because it (ideally) leaves little room for students to question what exactly they are being asked to do as they write: in answering the question, they should be trying to remember the information. I mentioned earlier that I encourage retrieval practice using low-stakes writing tasks, and my reason for doing so is to discourage my students from feeling the need to try to look up the information in order to answer the question correctly. Students know that I am grading the assignment based only on whether or not they completed it, so there is less of a need to worry about whether they are remembering the information correctly, as they will get the same grade either way. Likewise, these kinds of low-stakes assignments are also an opportunity to offer some gentle corrective feedback if students clearly misunderstand the material. Grading policies aside, however, the first part of the rationale (in which I specify what I would like my students to do to complete the task) should help to increase the efficacy of writing tasks by increasing the likelihood that they will do what I want them to do (like remembering) and not something else (like looking up the answer).

The second part of the rationale is important because it (ideally) helps students to understand how completing the writing task will serve some larger *purpose* beyond the writing task itself. Understanding the purpose of a writing task is likely to improve its efficacy (see Clark et al. 6-10). Likewise, rationales can also help to improve student motivation by making students feel as though their *autonomy* is being supported. Psychologists of motivation have shown that people tend to feel more motivation in situations in which they feel as though their autonomy is being supported (see Reeve 145-54), and offering students clear rationales for the work that we assign them has been shown to have exactly this effect (Reeve and Jang 216). At first glance, this finding may sound strange: If I am assigning my students some work to do, why would clearly stating the purpose of the work make our students feel as though they are freely choosing to do it?

We can begin to see why this is the case when we consider what it would be like to be in a class with an instructor who assigned a writing task and refused to explain the point of the assignment. The writing task may be able to help me in some way, but if I cannot see how

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and if the teacher refuses to give me an answer, then it will feel as though I am only doing the assignment because it was assigned. In other words, in this situation, I do not feel as though I am the cause of my own behavior but that something outside of me (the teacher) is the cause of my behavior, and research in motivation clearly shows that when most people see something other than themselves as the cause of their behavior, they feel controlled and lose motivation (see Reeve 146). If, on the other hand, the instructor offers me a clear rationale for the writing task, and if I am able to see how completing the writing task will help me to become a more effective creative writer, then I am more likely to feel as though I am freely choosing to do the work that has been assigned.

In the words of one English instructor, assigning writing tasks without helping students to understand the purpose of the task leads them to think that the task is "a waste of time, an idle exercise, busywork" (Salvatori and Donahue 83), and so rationales can improve student motivation by helping them to see that their time would be well spent if they completed the task that was assigned to them.

Explicit Instruction, Rationales, and Transfer

Finally, it's worth mentioning that using explicit instruction and providing rationales may also be able to help students to *transfer* more of their learning from the classroom and into other contexts. The concept of "transfer" originated in the field of educational psychology where it has been defined as any instance in which "learning in one context enhances (positive transfer) or undermines (negative transfer) a related performance in another context" (Perkins and Salomon), and I mention it here because transfer is, arguably, the ultimate goal of any instruction: We want the knowledge and skills that our students learn in the classroom context to be transferred to some other educational, professional, or personal context. By the end of a semester, students may be able to demonstrate that they have "learned" some kind of knowledge or skill from the class but if that knowledge or skill never enhances the way they perform an activity outside of the classroom—if the knowledge or skill is never transferred— then one could argue that no real learning has taken place. And it is all the more important that we pay attention to transfer because, in the words of educational psychologists David Perkins and Gavriel Saloman, "Transfer . . . cannot be taken for granted. Abundant evidence shows that very often the hoped-for transfer from learning experiences does not occur."

Recent research in composition studies has indeed confirmed that students tend to auto-matically transfer few (if any) of the skills they learn in their composition courses into other contexts. As the compositionist Ellen C. Carillo writes, "research corroborates that students don't automatically transfer what they have learned about writing from one class into the next. The key word here is 'automatically.' Transfer is not impossible, but it shouldn't be taken for

granted" (34). And lest we think that transfer didn't occur because these students didn't find the composition course valuable, Carillo summarizes work by Anne Beaumont and Elizabeth Wardle which seems to show that "even when students described their first-year writing courses as valuable, they were largely unable to generalize its teachings and thus imagine how that writing connected to other courses" (35).

Composition students probably have a slightly more difficult time transferring their learning than do creative writing students because the context of a composition class can be so different from that of other writing contexts: It can be hard, for example, for a student to imagine how the work they did to write a literacy narrative might help them to write a research paper for a biology course. That said, I believe that it would be a mistake for creative writing instructors to ignore the research on how transfer takes place, both because transfer is the ultimate goal of any instruction, and because transfer has been found to occur so seldomly.

Explicit instruction has consistently been found to increase the likelihood of students transferring their learning into new contexts (see Klahr and Nigam 661, 666). Though the mechanism which accounts for this outcome is currently unclear, Perkins and Saloman review a body of research which shows that "explicit abstractions of principles from a situation foster transfer," and so explicit instruction may increase the likelihood of transfer by helping students to abstract important principles from their learning which can be applied in new contexts.

Likewise, rationales increase the likelihood of transfer if they include an element that encourages students to imagine themselves using the procedure they are learning in future writing tasks. For example, when I assign writing tasks which are designed to help students practice using short assignments, I will often write a rationale that links the practice they are doing to a future context: "In completing the following exercise, I would like you to practice using 'short assignments,' so that you can use them to write the first draft of the short story you will submit to workshop." Rationales like this may be able to promote transfer by encouraging some students to imagine themselves using short assignments in the future. That said, I don't think that anyone should rely on rationales like this alone to increase the likelihood of transfer. Rationales probably only have a small effect on transfer as students are not being explicitly asked to imagine future writing contexts. In addition to these kinds of rationales, an instructor would probably do well to assign students writing tasks that explicitly direct students to engage in some of those cognitive behaviors—like abstracting, reflecting, and imagining using the skill in new writing contexts—that have been shown to increase the likelihood of transfer.

In Summary

In discussing this hypothesis, I have covered a lot of ground, so I would like to briefly summarize the main points that I have attempted to make: (1) Explicit instruction seems to help students to learn new ways of performing an activity by developing their declarative

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knowledge about the activity, which they can use to practice and to learn procedural knowledge more efficiently and effectively. (2) Explicit instruction seems to increase the likelihood that students will transfer their learning by helping them to abstract important principles from their learning which they can apply to new writing contexts. (3) Explicit instruction is likely to improve the efficacy of writing tasks by helping students to connect the work that the writing task requires to the larger learning objectives of the unit and course. (4) Rationales help students to connect the writing task to the learning objectives of the unit and course, which is likely to improve their efficacy. (5) Rationales improve student motivation by making them feel as though their autonomy is being supported. (6) Rationales may slightly improve the likelihood of transfer if they are written in ways that lead students to imagine doing similar kinds of work in future writing contexts, but these rationales should not be solely relied upon to encourage transfer.

As I mentioned earlier, activity-centered pedagogies are likely more effective than text-centered pedagogies because activity-centered pedagogies focus on teaching students the procedural knowledge necessary to perform an activity while text-centered pedagogies focus only on teaching a relatively narrow band of declarative knowledge. This, however, raises an important question: How do we teach procedural knowledge effectively? This leads me to my next hypothesis…

HYPOTHESIS #3: WRITING TASKS THAT ARE DESIGNED AROUND "COGNITIVE STRATEGIES" WILL RESULT IN HIGHER LEVELS OF LEARNING AND GREATER LEVELS OF TRANSFER THAN WRITING TASKS THAT ARE DESIGNED AROUND OTHER AVAILABLE METHODS FOR TEACHING NEW PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE TO WRITERS.

In the context of K-12 writing instruction, one of the most efficacious methods for teaching writing is called "cognitive strategy instruction" or simply "strategy instruction," for short (Graham and Perin 451, 466-7). As I mentioned in the introduction, there are many reasons why strategy instruction may not prove as efficacious in the post-secondary creative writing classroom, but because the mechanisms by which people learn new information seem to be quite similar no matter the person's age (see Clark et al. 6-10), and because the efficacy of strategy instruction has been found not to change based on the age of the student (Graham "Strategy" 203), I expect that we will find cognitive strategy instruction to be highly efficacious in teaching new knowledge to postsecondary creative-writing students.

The Focus of Strategy Instruction

Strategy instruction refers both to a pedagogical model and to a particularly activity-centered focus of instruction. The focus of instruction has to do with teaching "strategies" that help students to perform some part of the activity of writing more effectively, such as

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regulating the writing process or tackling one or more of the five "production processes" that writers use as they write: (1) conceptualizing goals, (2) coming up with ideas, (3) translating ideas into language, (4) transcribing words on a page, and/or (5) reconceptualizing one's goals, ideas, and/or language (Graham "A Revised" 269). Expert writers engage in all five of these production processes throughout the entirety of the writing process; therefore, the point of teaching strategies is not that of teaching writers to write according to a rote process. Rather, the point of teaching strategies is to teach students effective ways of performing these activities when they need to do so as they are writing.

But because production processes are "processes," strategies are generally formalized as a series of steps that writers can follow as they are writing. Some creative writers have expressed an understandable skepticism toward using a formal series of steps to learn how to perform the activity of writing (see, for example, Montgomery 2-3), and the genre of what we might call "commercial craft" with titles like "Five Steps to Great Characters" (2) probably has not helped the reputation of learning to writing according to steps. But research from a number of fields shows that performing an activity according to a series of steps can be an effective way of learning new procedural knowledge (see Eiriksdottir and Catrambone 756-7; Guthrie et al. 254-61; Graham "Strategy" 188-204). Performing an activity is always a "process," which suggests that there are multiple "parts' or "sub-activities" involved. This will not, of course, seem to be the case when one performs an activity with a high level of skill: those who have truly mastered an activity perform the different parts of an activity with such elegance that the activity appears to occur not as a set of discrete steps but as one, completely fluid motion. But just as musicians reach this level of fluidity by separating a composition into parts and then practicing those parts individually, so too can writers separate "strategies" into steps so that the individual parts can be practiced.

When I teach introductory creative writing students Lamott's "short assignments" strategy, for example, I will formalize it as a series of four steps:

1. Imagine the text you'd like to write, or (if you have already started your draft) read the last two or three paragraphs that you wrote.

2. Now, imagine a one-inch picture frame, and try to view the next part of your text through it. How much of the text can you see? A page? A few paragraphs? A single paragraph? A sentence? A word?

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9 On the other hand, there is some interesting evidence which suggests both that people are often reluctant to use step-based instructions until they have to and that people prefer observing examples to using instructions (see Eiriksdottir and Catrambone 752-6). This research refers to how people use written instructions, so it may not turn out to be true in a pedagogical context, but this evidence may suggest that there may be a better methods of formalizing strategies than as a series of steps.

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3. Write whatever you can see through that one-inch picture frame. 4. When you have run out of ideas, return to Step 1, and keep going!

And eventually, I simplify this into three steps that I call the ROW strategy:

1. Read the last few paragraphs.

2. One-inch picture frame.

3. Write and repeat.

The detailed set of steps is useful during the initial stages of instruction when I am introducing the strategy as it (ideally) helps students to build a robust concept of the strategy itself, and the simplified set of steps and the acronym (ideally) helps students to remember the strategy, which should make it somewhat easier to use.

One can imagine how these series of steps can help us to design writing tasks, but simply using these steps as the instructions on a writing task and then assigning that writing task to our students would probably not be a very effective way to teach our students to use this strategy. In a 2006 meta-analysis of writing instruction for K-12 students, the educational psychologists Steve Graham and Dolores Perin found that instructors who used explicit and sustained instruction to teach strategies were at least twice as effective as instructors who did not use explicit and sustained instruction to teach strategies (450). Strategies, therefore, are the focus of strategy instruction but just as important is the pedagogical model.

Strategy Instruction as a Pedagogical Model

According to this meta-analysis, the most efficacious model of strategy instruction is called self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), and SRSD involves six stages that are meant to help students move toward the independent use of a strategy:

> (a) Develop background knowledge (students are taught any background knowledge needed to use the strategy successfully), (b) describe it (the strategy as well as its purpose and benefits are described and discussed; a mnemonic for remembering the steps of the strategy may be introduced too), (c) model it (the teacher models how to use the strategy), (d) memorize it (the student memorizes the steps of the strategy and any accompanying mnemonic), (e) support it (the teacher supports or scaffolds student mastery of the strategy), and (f) independent use (students use the strategy with little or no support). (451)

In the last section, I discussed how explicitly developing a student's declarative knowledge about an activity can help them to learn procedural knowledge more efficiently and effectively, and the SRSD model accounts for this by dedicating the first four stages of

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instruction to the teaching students about a strategy before they begin to use it in the fifth stage. Generally, I develop the units of my introductory creative-writing classes around the SRSD model, so when I teach my students to use short assignments, I begin by developing their background knowledge of the writing process itself. I assign readings about the five production processes, and through lectures and discussion, I point out that writers use the five production processes throughout the entirety of the writing process. Then, I focus specifically on the processes of conceptualization and ideation. A writer may begin with anything from a relatively well-defined goal to an extremely vague goal for the text that they would like to ultimately write, but in either case, at some point they have to come up with ideas for the content of the text. I then begin to describe the short-assignments strategy by explaining how using it can be helpful for coming up with ideas as one is writing, and I assign Lamott's short chapter on the subject. After discussing Lamott's chapter, I then introduce students to the formal strategy itself, and I model its use by thinking aloud while I do some creative writing of my own. Thinking aloud while writing in front of our students may sound terrifying to some, but it is made less terrifying when one realizes that making mistakes while one is writing has actually been shown to be incredibly helpful to our students, as it seems to improve their self-efficacy (see Bruning and Kauffman 165). The goal, therefore, should not be to impress our students with our brilliance but to do some writing, to make some mistakes, to correct ourselves, and then to keep writing, as this type of modeling is actually better than making no mistakes at all. After this, it's generally easy for students to memorize the simplified version of the strategy with the use of the mnemonic ROW, so at this point I begin to "support" their use of the strategy.

As I mentioned in the last section, I develop students' declarative understanding of the strategy through the first four stages of instruction by assigning a number of low-stakes writing tasks, which are designed to help students to engage in regular "retrieval practice," but writing tasks take on a special importance in the "support" stage of instruction. The support stage of instruction is when we begin to develop our students' procedural knowledge of the strategy, so "supporting" our students' use of the strategy means creating many low-stakes opportunities for them to practice using it to write. But before I design writing tasks which encourage students to practice using the whole strategy, I usually attempt to "scaffold" its use by asking students to practice using different parts of the strategy.

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[10] It's worth mentioning that the pedagogical model of SRSD is very flexible and that it probably needs to be adapted for use in most post-secondary creative writing classrooms. The use of a mnemonic device, for example, probably really helps to facilitate memorization in K-12 students, but it may not make much sense to use this device when teaching certain complex strategies for writing, or it may have the harmful effect of being read by some students as infantilizing.

[11] Each of these writing tasks is preceded by a rationale that explains that the exercise is designed to help students to practice one part of the short-assignments strategy so that they can use it effectively when they are working on their own work.

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The point of reading a few paragraphs of what one has already written, for example, is to allow those paragraphs to prompt a few potential ideas for what may come next. *"The story,"* as they say, *"is always smarter than you"* (Corin 87), and so I begin to support this strategy

by assigning some writing tasks in which I ask students to read a few paragraphs of prose or a few stanzas of poetry before instructing them to come up with some ideas for what could come next. After students have practiced coming up with ideas, I then assign them a writing task in which they are asked to apply the "one-inch picture frame" to the ideas they came up with and to produce a few paragraphs or stanzas based on each of their ideas.

After students have had some practice using the strategy on the work of others, I finish supporting my students' use of the strategy by asking them to go through a similarly scaffolded process in order to produce work of their own. Often, for example, I give students a writing task in which they are asked to come up with between five and ten ideas for poems, stories, or essays (depending on the genre that I'm teaching), and then I follow this writing task with another in which students are asked to use the one-inch picture to write the first few stanzas or paragraphs for each idea. After this process is completed, students are left with a number of potential textual beginnings, and from here, I can finally ask students to practice using the whole short-assignments strategy independently: first, by choosing one of the beginnings they came up with, and then by using short assignments to ROW their way through turning that beginning into a draft of a story, poem, or essay.

The process of moving from a partial and scaffolded use of a strategy to holistic and independent use of a strategy can be likened to the process of learning to ride a bicycle with training wheels. Scaffolded writing tasks work like training wheels insofar as they reduce the complexity of the activity, allowing the writer's conscious mind to focus on mastering different parts of the strategy effectively before they attempt to use the whole strategy. One will notice that I reduced the complexity of the assignments both by splitting the strategy into two parts (reading and then using the one-inch picture frame to write) and also by having students move from continuing the work of others to producing their own work. But there are plenty of other ways to productively reduce the complexity of the writing tasks we assign. Constraints of any kind are useful for reducing the complexity of a writing task, so long as a writing task is not so constrained that a student cannot write a text that feels like "their own," so to speak. Creative writing instructors tend to be highly suspicious of constraints (see, for example, Bizzaro 67-8), but in the context of strategy instruction, constraints are useful for facilitating the develop-ment of new procedural knowledge. Riding a bicycle effectively requires one to steer, pedal, and balance simultaneously, but it would be quite a challenge to learn all of the activities simultaneously. Therefore, learning to ride can be facilitated by constraining the activity with training wheels. Musicians often constrain themselves to one part of the compositions they are learning to perform. Acrobats, as Hayes and Flower point out, don't begin with the high wire

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(1112). People learn procedural knowledge by progressing from low levels of complexity to high levels of complexity, and in the context of writing tasks, this means graduating from more-constrained writing tasks to less-constrained writing tasks.

The final assignment of my short-assignments unit is relatively unconstrained writing task in which students are asked to independently use the strategy to complete a draft of a creative text. This gives students practice using the strategy in a more naturalistic setting, in which the student needs to use the strategy while simultaneously performing all of the different production processes necessary to produce texts. That said, it's important to keep in mind that this situation is not purely naturalistic either. In a naturalistic setting, the student would need to activate and to the use the ROW strategy without being prompted to do so. Therefore, it's not enough to make sure that the student can use the strategy accurately and independently. As Lang points out, instructors often make the mistake of "blocking" their instruction into units, teaching the unit, and then leaving the unit behind as the course progresses (65-6). Evidence suggests that students benefit when instructors regularly reinforce previous learning throughout a course (see Lang 63-90 for summary); therefore, I do not leave short-assignments behind at the end of the unit. Rather, I continue to prompt students to use the ROW strategy by including it in the instructions of the writing tasks that I design for other units, encouraging students to continue to practice, and challenging them to use multiple different strategies simultaneously, as they would in a more naturalistic setting.

The Efficacy of Strategy Instruction

This hypothesis predicts that strategy instruction—which is to say using explicit, sustained instruction in order to teach students "strategies" for writing—will be more efficacious and will lead to greater levels of transfer than other currently available methods for teaching new procedural knowledge to writers. Empirical evidence shows that this pedagogical model is highly efficacious in the area of K-12 writing instruction. Likewise, the tenets of the model are confirmed by a large body of evidence on the efficacy of explicit instruction (see Clark et al. 6-10). Because strategy instruction is an explicit model of instruction, I expect that it will lead to high levels of transfer (see Clark et al. 7-8). But strategy instruction won't only lead to transfer because it is explicit; it will also lead to it because it places a special emphasis upon practice. Perkins and Saloman point out that "thorough and diverse practice" is one of the most important conditions of transfer, as "extensive practice of the performance in question in a variety of contexts . . . yields a flexible, relatively automatized bundle of skills easily evoked in new situations." Likewise, deliberate practice has been found to be one of the most important factors in the acquisition of expertise (see Ericsson et al. 367-8), so any method of instruction that emphasizes deliberate practice is likely to increase the likelihood of transfer.

All of this said, this hypothesis intentionally leaves open the possibility that strategy instruction may be improved upon or that another method of instruction may eventually prove

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more efficacious than strategy instruction. It seems likely to me, for example, that strategy instruction can be improved by incorporating some of the insights from research into "teaching for transfer" (see Devet 122-37). It may make sense, for example, to include a seventh stage of instruction, after students have learned to use the strategy independently, in which they are asked to reflect on their learning and to imagine themselves using the strategy in new contexts, as research suggests that these exercises increase the likelihood of transfer (see 131).

Likewise, some interesting research has been presented which suggests that the methods one uses may matter somewhat less than the teacher's skill in putting them into practice (see, for example, Andrews et al. 401-403). Work like this may one day supplant a focus on models and methods and may turn our attention to other factors such as "teaching expertise" (394). In the meantime, however, strategy instruction has proved efficacious in teaching K-12 writing, which is a good reason to test its efficacy and to consider using it to teach post-secondary creative writing.

CONCLUSION

A consistent theme of the previous hypotheses has been that the efficacy of writing tasks is mediated by the pedagogical context in which they're found. I have hypothesized (1) that writing tasks will be more effective in the context of activity-centered pedagogies because writing tasks can be used to help students to learn how to perform parts of the activity of writing effectively, (2) that writing tasks will be more effective in the context of explicit instruction because students seem to learn procedural knowledge more efficiently and effectively if they first understand the activity declaratively, and (3) that writing tasks will be more effective in the context of cognitive strategy instruction because this pedagogical model combines explicit instruction with the particularly activity-centered objective of learning "strategies."

I think that the pedagogical context is important to designing writing tasks because we can only begin to understand how to design a writing task once we have identified the purpose of the writing task. In the context of activity-centered pedagogies, the purpose of a writing task is to help students to learn how to perform the activity of writing; in the context of explicit instruction, the purpose of a writing task is both to help students to retain declarative knowledge and to prompt students to activate and to use this declarative knowledge as they are writing; and finally, in the context of strategy instruction, the purpose of a writing task shifts based on the stage of instruction from that of retaining declarative knowledge, to that of developing a student's procedural knowledge of the different parts of a strategy, and then finally to that of giving students the opportunity to use it independently.

This view of writing tasks is a far cry from the view of writing that most post-secondary creative writing instructors currently hold. Many are reluctant to assign writing tasks (see Moneyhun 226), and others seem to believe that the only reason to assign a writing task is

to prompt a student to write a "good" text (see, for example, Bizarro 67-68). I believe that these views are evidence of the sway that text-centered pedagogies still hold over creative writing education, and while text-centered pedagogies arise out of an admirable love of texts, I believe that this point of view narrowly focuses on the ends of writing to the exclusion of the means. If we want to improve the texts that our students write, we must improve the ways in which these texts are written. Thus, in this paper, I have drawn upon the research from educational psychology and composition studies in order to make some provisional predications about those objectives and methods that are the likely to improve how our students perform the activity of writing. And I have focused my attention on one tool that is likely to prove essential to this pursuit: the writing task.

As I have shown, the writing task is one of the most important tools that an activity-centered instructor has to help their students to acquire new procedural knowledge, and I believe that we can begin to appreciate usefulness of writing tasks only after we have appreciated the need to center the activity of writing. Writing tasks are a tool, and like all tools, their efficacy depends upon how they are used. And while I do not believe that writing tasks will prove to be a very effective tool if they are used to teach students about texts, I do believe that they will prove to be a very effective tool if they are used to teach students new procedural knowledge.

With all of that said, it's important to underline the fact that we know very little about effective post-secondary creative writing instruction. I have framed these three claims as "hypotheses" in order to emphasize that they may not prove true in a postsecondary creative writing context. Likewise, even if they do prove true in this context, there is still a lot that we still won't know about the activity of creative writing itself, making it extremely hard to identify activity-centered learning objectives that are likely to help our students improve. If we want to teach students how to perform the activity of writing, then we need to better understand that activity and that is why, elsewhere, I have called for more empirical research into both the activity of writing and the activity of reading (see Syrewicz 6-10).

On top of that, I also think it's important to keep in mind the infinite complexity of the students we hope to teach. Even if we do end up finding that some learning objectives and some pedagogical methods do seem to help students more often than they don't, there are no objectives or methods that will work for every student. To my mind, this means both that we need to be extremely flexible about how we put our ideas into practice, and also that our students would be served by encountering a rich tapestry of different learning objectives and methods throughout their time as creative-writing students. Therefore, while I believe that future research will reveal the methods that I have discussed here to be highly efficacious, I believe that they will be the most beneficial if they end up being one of the many pedagogies the creative writing instructors employ in their postsecondary classrooms. While I have been critical of text-centered pedagogies in this paper, I take issue not with text-centered pedagogies themselves but with

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their ubiquity. No single set of learning objectives or pedagogical methods will ever account for the infinite complexity of an activity like writing; therefore, we must seek to develop a plurality of thoughtful and effective creative-writing pedagogies.

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