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### Writing Processes of Undergraduate Students

Starting from a very young age, students are taught a singular, linear writing process: one is supposed to start by brainstorming and planning via a myriad of tables, charts and webs, then is supposed to continue by rewriting said outlines in paragraph form to construct the essay, which then flows neatly into revising. Though we seem to have agreed upon an answer of what the writing process should look like within our school systems, we are still fantasized by famous authors' writing processes, and the plethora of ways in which we can use modern technology to copy, paste, delete and spellcheck our writing. Eager for efficiency, we continue searching for the ideal writing process, which may leave some wondering why we learned this single stoic process in the first place.

In the early days of computer word processing, Kozma (1991) investigated whether using organizational software would help increase efficiency and depth of essays; it was found that there was an increase of planning that went along with using the organizational software, however, there was no correlation with improved writing, and decreased writing quality was actually found in some cases (Kozma, 1991). Since then, studies have focused more on drafting with word processes. For example, Schellens & Van Waes (2003) considered the differences in writing processes between those using a computer and those using a pen and paper. Again there was no correlation between one mode of writing and a higher quality essay. This study only found that these two types of writers revise differently throughout the process. For example, it is easier to revise throughout, in smaller units, while using a computer, because you can just delete;

however, for those using a paper and pen, revision usually came at the end of a paragraph, because making revisions is much messier on paper (Schellens & Waes, 2003).

A third study examined the writing processes of undergraduate students by having them take notes of their writing processes throughout their entire processes of writing two papers. The study found that there was again, “no significant association between writing strategy and essay mark” (Torrance, et. al, 1999). Though this study didn’t find a singular superior process, it did, however, characterize three subsets of writing strategies among undergraduate students. The first strategy (Procedure 1) followed the linear path that we are familiar with. Students spent much of their time collecting information, then moved to planning, to transcribing (referred to as translation in this study), and finally to revision. The second strategy (Procedure 2) contained considerably less planning, and if there was planning, it was during translation. Here, there was also typically no final revision stage. Procedure 2 was the most frequently used strategy. In the third strategy (Procedure 3), translation started much earlier, and collecting was present during translation. A large portion of this process was dedicated to neat copying (roughly 40%) (Torrance, et. al, 1999).

Though the studies by Kozma and Schellens & Van Waes begin to consider different components of the writing process, these studies do not examine the entire writing processes of undergraduate students. These studies were also conducted in 1991 and 2003, prior to computers becoming a necessity for every undergraduate student; therefore the data has become dated when considering the writing processes of undergraduate students in 2017. The three primary writing processes of undergraduate students obtained by Torrance, et. al (1999) still provide a firm start for looking at the writing processes of undergraduates in 2017. Though this research was conducted in 1999, this study gives good insight of where this research should start with how

undergraduates write, and how they have adopted these three primary methods, while knowingly only being taught one primary, linear process. My current qualitative pilot study is meant to capture these diversities and uncover others as I survey and interview undergraduates at the University of Denver to explore undergraduates' writing processes.

All participants in the interviews and questionnaires were undergraduates at the University of Denver perusing varying degrees. Some of the data was collected from fifteen participants who were asked in their Theories of Writing class to respond to the question "What is your writing process?" The other data came from five one-on-one interviews with students that are not currently in a writing class and are not pursuing writing as a major or minor, whereas some of the students in the Theories of Writing class are Writing minors or English majors, along with other degrees.

In the one-on-one interviews, students were first asked to describe their writing process. After they stated their writing process in their own words, the three writing methods found by Torrance, et. al (1999) were read to them and they were asked to pick which, if any, they felt most resembled their writing process. After, students were asked if their writing process was something they had been formally taught/learned in school, or if they developed it on their own. Students were then asked about whether they ever felt self-conscious about their writing, seeing as their processes may be different than the ones they were taught. The last two questions in the interviews asked students whether they used organizational software to assist with their writings (Kozma, 1991) and if they preferred using paper and pen or their computer to write (Schellens & Van Waes, 2003).

Most of the students in the interviews struggled to definitively answer what their writing process looks like. It was clear that many of the interviewed students had never given much

thought to their writing processes prior to the interview. Students following the more linear process with organization and planning could answer this question more clearly. All, except one of the interviewed students responded extremely well to the three variations of the writing process that were read to them in the second question (Torrance, et. al, 1999); allowing each student to have clearly identified processes helped them realize which process they were in and how that creates a framework for their individual writing process. By providing excerpts from Torrance, et. al, I hoped to help students identify with a specific writing practice, making the interviews and qualitative data more substantial, seeing as students will finally be able to identify his or her general writing practices after listening to what a few types there possibly are. This was done after first being asked to describe his or her writing process so that they first have to report on their own writing without proper definitions yet. As for whether students learned their writing process or not, four out of the five students interviewed said that they didn't learn their writing process in school. All of the students said that they learned a writing process in school, but only one student interviewed has actually adopted that taught practice as his own writing strategy. Only one student felt self-conscious of her writing; however, she made it very clear that the reasons for that were tied to her being self-conscious about the English language in general because English is not her first language. This same student was the only one who used organizational software to assist with grammar in her writing. Most students used a combination of a computer along with pencil and paper throughout their entire writing process. Only one student solely used a computer for her entire process.

In the questionnaires, there were much more fewer overt similarities and differences across responses, however, the level of depth within the responses was much greater, and students shared more about their individual writing quarks than did the interviewed students.

Across all of the responses, topics like the ideal work environment, inclusion of planning/outlines, time frame and active working time were mainly included; juxtaposition existed within each topic. For the environment, most students specified a particular ideal writing environment, while one student claimed to be able to work anywhere. Noise level was also considered here, with some students preferring absolute silence, and others preferring white noise or some sort of ambient sound. One student specifies, “I tend to write best when it’s dark and when I have [Indie] music playing in the background.” While another says, “I need complete silence and control over my writing environment.” Most students also discussed the inclusion or exclusion of planning and outlining in their writing process. Some students immediately stated that they must have a plan and many outlines before they can start writing, while others preferred jotting down ideas as they came to them (usually through different environments and interactions throughout the day), and others completely rejected planning of any kind, one in particular stating that, “If you create a strict outline and follow that, there is little room for tangents or alternate ideas” emphasizing that writing without a plan allows for more creativity. Other students writing processes began with “just start writing” and then organize later. A few students included their overall timeline, how long students preferred to work prior to the deadline for a paper, and their active working time, how long they wrote in one sitting before having to take a break or move on to something else, in their responses. One student said, “I need at least a week to organize my thoughts and outline before the due date of an essay... finish papers two days before the deadline so that I can revise and edit without stressing over a time line”, while another said “I do like working under pressure” and doing the paper the night before. Active working time ranged from “only lasting an hour” to when the writer had “short motivated bursts of energy” to “three hours maximum” to no set time.

Students in both the questionnaire and the interview mentioned a few other more minor topics. Some mentioned that their process may change depending on the type of writing, the main types here being science writing or creative writing; because science writing is much more formulaic than creative writing, these students reported to having a very specific and clear approach to their science writing, versus the creative writing which includes more factors and research for topics they may not have already learned in class or lab. A few students in the questionnaires included whether they used only their computer to write, or only a paper and pen or their computer, but the only students that mentioned it were extremely supportive of one medium over the other.

Before considering the potential implications of this study, it will be helpful to discuss whether a different form of collection could have improved the data. Torrance, et. al (1999) discusses the downfalls of questionnaires and retroactive responses and the benefits of their collection methods, “current self-reports from students at the time they were actually writing... [offering] more accurate real time descriptions than that provided by retrospective questionnaires” (p. 190). However, I found that using the questionnaires provided the most information about an undergraduate’s individual writing practices than the interviews conducted or the current self-reports by Torrance, et. al. Torrance, et. al actively interrupted the writers processes by having them respond to a beep at different points in their writing processes, potentially breaking their train of thought, though the study claims that writers got used to the beeps after being 30 minutes into their process.

I found the questionnaires to hold the most information about the subtle individual differences and preferences of the undergraduate writer. This may be because students had more time to mull over the question than they did in the interview, or because these students had been

studying writing processes and theories of writing for nearly ten weeks at the time they were asked for their self reports, or because some of them were involved in writing courses outside of the university's minimum requirement. Regardless of the reasoning, I think this study could have been improved had I conducted questionnaires with the interview questions rather than performing interviews, because I felt the students included more anecdotal pieces about their processes, rather than short, immediate reflections without meditating over the questions for a bit.

Overall I think this study ultimately shows how little uniformity there is amongst the writing processes of undergraduate students, and if there is so little uniformity, how can writing be taught better to help students strengthen their own writing processes, rather than putting this process in a neat box. It seems the primary subjects involved in student writing processes are their environment, consistency or lack of outlining and planning, overall time frame, active working time and the role that working with paper and pen plays into the overall writing process, if at all. I think paying particular attention to each of these subjects in schools could help students find which writing process works best for them, at a younger age, so that students can keep improving their own writing strategies sooner. Expanding our teachings to include other acceptable writing processes could potentially help younger students become more comfortable developing their own writing strategies, rather than feeling insecure about writing a particular way.

Another study similar to this one, but examining processes of middle and high school students' writing processes would improve upon the subject of writing processes as a whole, and I think there would have been more variation to the question about insecurities in writing. I don't think the undergraduates felt insecure about their writing strategies because they have had plenty

of time to discover what works for them, however, among middle and high school students I think there more insecurities would be found, especially because they are still being told what process they should use by their schools.

#### References:

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The following consent form must be signed and handed in with each project that includes any interviews you conduct as part of your research. Furthermore, permission must be attained for any observational data obtained from spaces the public is not normally allowed:

By signing, you are granting consent for this information to be used as part of a research exercise that I am completing for a course at the University of Denver. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide may be used in a class project and/or published in research writing that I am doing, but your identity will only be known by me and my professor. Although profile information may be included in my project, your name and the name of the organization will NOT be used. You may further agree or disagree whether to be recorded via audio/video for research purposes.

\_\_\_\_\_Zainab Dafalla\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_\_11.17.17\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

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\_\_\_\_\_ James Roan \_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ 11/17/17 \_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

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\_\_\_\_\_ Deron Porter \_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ 11/17/17 \_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

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\_\_\_\_Brendan Hogie\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_11/17/17\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

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\_\_\_\_Mika Smith\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_11.17.17\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)