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ABSTRACT

An examination of Robert Zoellner's "Talk-Write Pedagogy" (a dialog, written in 1969, about a student's inability to write what he meant) in the context of current composition theory and research demonstrates the cogency of his ideas for today. Zoellner contends that the "think-write" pedagogy has failed students because it demands that students internalize the rules of some abstract concept about what constitutes good writing, and causes them to write words for the teacher instead of for themselves. Zoellner bases his talk-write pedagogy upon the concept of modality and of intermodal transfer to explain how the reinforcement of one behavior or skill improves the performance of another. Writing should improve talk, and talk should improve writing. In the talk-write pedagogy, the teacher and student engage in a rapid exchange of vocal to scribal dialogue that allows the teacher to immediately reinforce successive and closer approximations to some desired behavior. Zoellner's dialogic pedagogy helps the student to create a unique voice and address real readers. Zoellner anticipated many of the concerns which composition theorists and researchers such as Lisa Ede, Andrea Lunsford, and Nancy Sommers are dealing with today. His ideas are still as cogent today as they were when he wrote them 21 years ago. (Twenty-eight notes are included.) (PRA)

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Robert Zoellner's monograph, "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," took up most of the January 1969 issue of College English. Although, as James Berlin points out, "many of the techniques recommended by Zoellner . . . are commonplace today--for example, the focus on the activities of writing rather than on thinking skills or reading,"¹ little is heard today among composition theorists or researchers about Zoellner's propositions twenty-one years ago. Unable to get colleagues interested in pursuing his ideas, Zoellner himself eventually stopped teaching composition in favor of teaching literature.² Yet, Zoellner anticipated our present concern with the writing process rather than with the writing product and with illuminating that process by means of protocol research. An important distinction exists, however, between current research and Zoellner's ideas, for much of the recent research into composition has been informed by cognitive psychology, whereas Zoellner's work is informed by the tenets of behavioral psychology. In this paper, I will examine Zoellner's propositions in the context of what today's composition theorists and researchers are saying, with the aim of showing the cogency of his ideas for today.

Drawing upon the principles of behavioral psychology, especially those derived from laboratory testing, enabled Zoellner both to critique what he termed the "think-write"

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pedagogy and to posit a new direction for composition--the "talk-write pedagogy" with its view of "writing-as-action."³ Crucial to an understanding of Zoellner's position is his contention that we can only speak with any assurance of observable behavior--that which we see and hear the student perform. His point of divergence from traditional pedagogy occurs when thought is posited as the precursor of writing. The problem with the "think-write" approach lies in its being a "simplistic pedagogy, totally internalist, entirely intellectualive."⁴ The think-write pedagogy has failed students, he contends, because it demands that the student internalize the rules of some abstract concept about what constitutes good writing. Students are then required to produce such writing working in isolation in order to meet some objective of the teacher--an objective which Zoellner refers to as an "invisible archetype."⁵ What happens in such a situation, Zoellner argues, is that writing becomes divorced from the real world within which students live and, as a consequence, the student writes "themes made up of words-for-teacher which are seldom if ever words-for-me" (Zoellner's emphasis).⁶

Before discussing the relationships between Zoellner's work and current pedagogy, I would like to take a brief look at his application of the tenets of behavioral science as the basis for his talk-write pedagogy, beginning with his use of "Skinnerian multi-trial operant learning." In operant conditioning, student behavior is conditioned, or shaped, through immediate reinforcement of "successively closer approximations to the

[writing] behavior with which the [teacher] ultimately wants to work."⁷ Anticipating, however, that behavioral conditioning will be thought of as the "Pavlovian, dog-drool kind," Zoellner stresses the radical difference between operant conditioning and Pavlov's reflex conditioning. Reflex conditioning is concerned with the interior autonomic nervous system and is "stimulus-based"--the organism is forced to respond to internal manipulation.⁸ Operant conditioning, in contrast, is concerned with external behavior and is "response-based": "the experimenter steadfastly views the bit-of-behavior he wishes to alter as a learned habit, the alteration of which involves 'reconditioning'" (Zoellner's emphasis).⁹ Zoellner goes further than Skinner, however, because Zoellner bases his talk-write pedagogy upon the concept of modality and of intermodal transfer to explain the "phenomenon of modally mediated transfer, whereby reinforcement of one behavior or skill improves performance of another behavior or skill."¹⁰ In other words, the discrete parts of the process are complementary: "Writing . . . should improve talk, and talk, writing."¹¹ Operant learning principles appear something like this in the talk-write pedagogy: the teacher and student engage in a "rapid exchange of the vocal-to-scribal dialogue" that allows the teacher to immediately reinforce successive and closer approximations to some desired "bit-of-behavior," which might be nothing more than what Zoellner calls "cortical utterances" or "visceral blurts."¹² This process continues with the teacher and student engaging in a

dialogue (consisting of talking, then writing) to get the student to a desired level of learning; the writing may consist of nothing more than a sentence or at most a paragraph.

Yet, because multiple trial learning could take a very long time to enlarge a student's behavioral repertory, modelling becomes an important part of the activity. In Zoellner's application of modelling to his pedagogy, not only does the instructor or students role-playing as instructor reinforce closer approximations of the desired writing behavior, but they also model desired behavior for the other students. Zoellner expects that those observing the dialogue will then appropriate what they have observed into their own repertoire of skills. As an additional modelling technique, Zoellner feels that teachers should demonstrate their own writing in the classroom.¹³ This concept of teacher as writer-model informs the practice of Donald Murray who regularly demonstrates his own writing both in the classroom and in teaching workshops.

The most important concept which Zoellner derived from behavioral psychology, however, lay in its emphasis on the study of observable behavior. Zoellner's propositions are based upon this concept, that we should concentrate on the observable behavior of students--that which occurs as they write--rather than study a thought process that was "invisible and empirically inaccessible."¹⁴ In the November 1969 issue of College English,

Zoellner gave his view of the thought process:

My own position is that there must be . . . something inside man anterior to expression and upon which expression is at least partially dependent. But these interior states must not be, in my view, conceptualized as thoughts, ideas, or concepts, or attitudes, or meanings, or intentions.¹⁵

As is obvious from even this brief discussion of Zoellner, much of current protocol research, especially that of Linda Flower and John Hayes, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Zoellner's ideas, for such research is aimed precisely at conceptualizing the inner thought process present in the writing situation. Though Flower and Hayes discuss writing as a "form of thinking," they also view the text as the product of thought. In conceptualizing their model of the composing process, the "Multiple Representation Thesis," they say they have relied upon "thinking-aloud protocols and cued recall techniques" that allow them to "tap the thinking that leads to text."¹⁶ Concern with the thinking that precedes writing lies at the heart of the pedagogy at which Zoellner takes aim. By objecting that we cannot study, much less understand, invisible mentalistic processes, Zoellner anticipated the criticism found in the recent work of Marilyn Cooper, Michael Holzman, and David Dobrin, who question the empirical validity of protocol research directed at discovering invisible thought processes.¹⁷

Another difference between Zoellner's pedagogy and that of Flower and Hayes is his emphasis upon dialogic problem solving by which the variance between what the writer intends and what the writer writes is subjected to a dialogue aimed at its resolution. As a dialogic method, the talk-write pedagogy helps the student create his or her unique voice as a writer and to address real readers. The writer in the talk-write classroom has an audience made up of the teacher and his or her peers. Zoellner's dialogic pedagogy addresses the need later identified by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford for the synthesis between a real audience, with its focus on the reader, and an imagined or created audience, with its focus on the writer.¹⁸ For Zoellner, talking and writing are social acts. By means of his pedagogy, he sought to create a classroom situation that realistically mirrored "the cultural configurations within which our students will have to lead their lives."¹⁹ Flower and Hayes, however, posit an essentially isolated writer dependent upon stored knowledge, or learned behavior, to produce a text.

Zoellner's aim in his monograph is not to throw out traditional methods of teaching but to superimpose on them a practical model for the classroom that is oriented entirely to observable behavior. Zoellner noticed that while students could articulate their intention, they were often unable to write what they said they had meant to say. Nancy Sommers later noted this problem in her protocol research on revision; she used the term "dissonance" to describe "the incongruities between intention and

execution" that "governs both writing and meaning."²⁰ Her solution to this problem calls for students to utilize revision as a discovery process to arrive at meaning.²¹ In Zoellner's attempt to solve this problem, he conceived of a pedagogy that would exploit vocal skill to increase writing skill--the "talk-write" pedagogy.

Basically, the talk-write pedagogy is a confrontation between the teacher and the student over the student's inadequacy to write what he or she meant. In confronting the student, whether in the office conference or in the classroom, the teacher creates stasis. The question-and-answer dialogue of the talk-write pedagogy resembles the "stasis" of classical rhetoric in its aim to resolve the variance between what an author has written and what an author has intended.²² Zoellner's talk-write pedagogy utilizes dialogue--that between any of several persons or groups--instructor and student, student and student, or even an instructor or student and the rest of the class. This dialogue takes place as students write and is in the form of questions and answers aimed at eliciting from the student his or her intention and then having the student immediately write down what he or she has said. Though Zoellner does not directly address concepts of classical rhetoric, the talk-write pedagogy could, in its function as a "public act"²³ in the classroom, be used to resolve questions such as those found in stasis theory: questions about a "fact" or a "definition" or "the nature of an act" or even "about legal processes."²⁴ Thus, as a means of

discovering what the student has to say, the talk-write pedagogy performs a valuable role in invention.

As a rhetorical approach, the talk-write dialogic pedagogy corresponds with John Gage's contention that writing can be viewed as "an activity directed toward the discovery of warrantable knowledge."²⁵ Gage sees a role for the use of stasis in the classroom as one of the "technical formulae" of classical rhetoric which can "be prescribed for the purpose of learning how to transform knowledge through discourse" and thus must be seen for what it is "in a dialectical light" as an "activit[y] that people will perform."²⁶ This is wholly in keeping with the aim of the talk-write pedagogy to enlarge the student's "repertory of adaptive and useful behaviors," which could be termed knowledge.²⁷ "[B]readth of behavioral repertory is," Zoellner contends, "among other things, that which makes the human organism human."²⁸

Zoellner anticipated many of the concerns which composition theorists and researchers are dealing with today. At a time when little empirical research was being done in composition, he called upon teachers to test his theories and to come up with theories of their own to test. Moreover, he called for theories whose tenets could be practically applied in the classroom to teach students to write more effectively while addressing the concerns of the pluralistic culture within which they live. The ideas put forth in Robert Zoellner's monograph twenty-one years ago are as cogent today as they were then.

Notes

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3. Robert Zoellner. "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition." College English 30.4 (January 1969): 267-320. 277, 314.
4. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 289.
5. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 301.
6. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 307.
7. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 276.
8. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 277.
9. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 292.
10. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 312-13.
11. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 301.
12. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 308, 273.
13. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 311.
14. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 289.
15. Robert Zoellner. "Response: Mentalizing S. R. Rodent." College English 31.2 (November 1969): 215-230. 220n.
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19. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 319.

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23. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 311.

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25. John T. Gage. "An Adequate Epistemology for Composition: Classical and Modern Perspectives." Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse. Eds. Robert J. Connors, Lisa S. Ede, and Andrea A. Lunsford. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984. 152-169. 167.

26. Gage 167.

27. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 317.

28. Zoellner "Talk-Write" 317.