

Present-Process: The Composition of Change

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ABSTRACT: Because the writing-process movement has been deemed our field's founding "paradigm"—at least since Hairston's 1982 essay declared it so—"process" has remained stuck in the philosophical and historical assumptions of a "paradigm." The paradigm theory, has, from its first associations with composition, offered a view of change wholly unsuited to work in writing. Today, as we face monumental changes in public higher education, thinking in paradigms is even more useless, if not paralyzing. This essay traces the history of the link between process theory and paradigms, argues why the pairing of process to paradigms sold process short, and, finally, resurrects the term "process" as a term that helps characterize innovative approaches to disciplinary and writing program change. By drawing on theories of "process" from a range of fields and by connecting these theories to a case study of one new WAC/BW program, I offer "present-process" as a productive, workable perspective for our field.

The Profession of Process

"I suspect that the readers of this volume already know the central tenets of the writing-process movement about as well as they know the letters of the English alphabet" (Kent 1). So begins the introduction to Thomas Kent's collection *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*. Kent's project was to supplant these "ABC's" of process with three assumptions of the post-process movement: writing is "interpretive," "situated," and, most emphatically, "public" (Kent 1). "Change is in the air," Kent wrote (1). The era of "Big Theory," of "generalizable" approaches to composition, was over.

Kent's volume appeared in 1999, when many compositionists, including myself, agreed that those central tenets about process, famously summarized in Maxine Hairston's 1982 article "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," were both fully known and amply in need of moving beyond. In this article, Hairston detailed "process" as the term to describe the messy, recursive "processes by

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which individuals give shape and meaning to written text” (Perl, “Writing Process” 1). The writing-process movement would focus on “strategies” for composing, would be “holistic,” viewing writing as “recursive,” “expressive,” “expository” (Hairston 124). It would emphasize research focused on writing and the teaching of writing and promote writing teachers who write. It would highlight a “rhetorically based” view of writing as well as regarding writing as a “disciplined creative activity” that could be “analyzed and described . . . taught” (Hairston 124). There were many more features of process; Hairston listed twelve. However, “process” is most famous (or infamous) not for any one of these features but for all of them, as they were put together in the revolutionary “writing-process paradigm.” The words themselves—writing, process, and paradigm—seem to be one phrase, one entity, as evidenced by Kent’s use of it in the subtitle of his book.

Being “beyond” process suggests that the field has already arrived somewhere else. Six years after the writing-as-public winds of change swept through composition, we should be celebrating a brand new climate in the field. But I, for one, feel less than blown away. Is being “post” paradigmatic? Is paradigmatic an accurate way to describe writing as public? Despite years of reading about process and its criticisms, despite years of working closely with pioneers of the process movement and then situating my work and that of my generation emphatically against that movement, I am, once again, turning back to process and wondering: what was it? And is what I do really “post” that?

Turning “back” to process is not quite the right phrase. I am too young to have been a part of the winds of change that revolutionized composition in the era of the “process paradigm.” Yet I am also too steeped in my job teaching basic writing at the City University of New York—amidst monumental changes in public higher education that include the end of open admissions and upheaval in its legendary writing programs—to find the “assumption” that writing is “public” as something revolutionary, or, even, as “something new” (Kent 5). In the aftermath of the culture wars and in the wake of economic and political upheavals in education, critics in the academy and outside acknowledge that no one methodology or discipline can address the complexity of the global changes ahead in the knowledge industry. The fate of literacy education in universities generally and at public, urban colleges like my own in particular is tenuous. Many of the hallmark programs that defined the impetus for composition as a discipline were, just recently, “in crisis” and now are considerably overhauled. Higher education is growing, but study in the humanities is not; basic writing and

open admissions are under attack at most institutions; composition is in the process of distinguishing itself anew from other disciplines and from its own past. No paradigm, no movement, no discipline, in fact, seems immune from sweeping reevaluation.

“That the vocabulary of process is no longer useful is not a reason to despair” writes Gary Olson in *Post-Process Theory* (9). But if the discipline of writing is about anything, it is about change and the way we write in and about change—how we process our work. I argue here that process is exactly what is useful to us right now, not as a “Big Theory” of how individuals compose, but as way to talk about the power of change constructed within literacy programs in our local communities. Looking again at Maxine Hairston’s famous article, “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” is a good place to start rethinking our vocabulary of change.

The Winds of Change: The Process-Paradigm Connection

When, in the early 1980’s, Maxine Hairston called process a paradigm, the “writing-process” movement was not new. Nor was the concept of paradigms, which Thomas Kuhn had made famous, nearly twenty years earlier in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹ But Hairston’s explicit combination of the terms “process” and “paradigm” was new. The particular way she paired these terms has made them exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship for compositionists. The process theory of composing—an outgrowth of the New Rhetoric and a pedagogy aimed at the unprepared, open admissions student represented in Hairston’s article by Mina Shaughnessey’s CUNY basic writers—met the paradigm concept of change—Kuhn’s theory of how knowledge is made, a theory he reserved for the most elite corners of the academy, the “exemplars” of science. When paradigms blended with the “writing-process” something unusual happened. High and low, new and established, theory and practice, a changing public and a professional paradigm meshed—uncomfortably, unequally, problematically, and historically. This odd mixture produced the field we now call composition studies.

We cannot overestimate how radical a move this was. Hairston’s impetus, to link writing, teaching, and institutional change together with epistemology, had incredible power and potential. But the radical possibilities of this mission were curtailed. Post-process proponents have gone a long way towards explaining what went wrong with process—its focus on the individual writer at the expense of social circumstances, its neglect of genres

and the variety of academic and professional discourse, its attachment to the first-year writing course and the problematic politics of that enterprise (Bartholomae, Bazerman, Lu, Crowley).² Historians, critics, and champions of process have put up for scrutiny almost every aspect of what Hairston in 1982 called composition's process "revolution" and what Barbara Gleason, writing nearly thirty years later, referred to as "the intellectual springboard for our modern field of composition" (2). Indeed, Victor Villanueva has labeled process the "given" of our profession (1). Likewise, the term "paradigm" has been dissected in so many ways by so many people that it seems simply to exist as part of our professional lives.³ In the last few years especially, the term has become a staple in discussions about the academy and the future of English and composition and rhetoric.⁴ But they—we—have missed a central tension of the process movement: its *tie* to the paradigm theory of change. While compositionists have used, revised, and debated the term "process," its direct link to the history and fate of paradigms has yet to be explored. Rather than historicize process or paradigms then, I want to locate the moment that "process" became folded into paradigms.

The paradigm-process pairing is as problematic as it was enticing. Kuhn's "paradigm" approach was in every way wrong for process, but dismiss process with paradigms, however, is to lose the powerful message Hairston provided in her pairing of these terms. In suggesting that writing is a process and that the writing-process is a paradigm, she suggested that writing and change are *in* process. They are embedded in epistemological and political shifts, in the movements that we, researchers, writers, teachers, students of composition, participate in as we work on communicating about and enacting change in this new society.

Hairston's link between process and product gives composition the impetus it needs now to (re)claim the idea that disciplinary change happens when public, political, and institutional change are tied to theories of knowledge, and when theories of knowledge connect with reflections on change. The importance of linking what we do in writing to a new understanding of change is nowhere more pressing for me than in our basic writing classrooms and programs, those areas found on the "margins of educational, economic, and political localities of influence" (Halasek and Highberg xv). What is marginal or central to the academy or to the local politic is shifting. If our vocabulary hasn't kept pace with our reality, then the swift pace of change that characterizes the teaching of writing and running of basic writing programs certainly reveals the often paradoxical, reflexive, even recursive nature of our work. Later on in this article I will show why this is true in general and

at my university in particular. For now I want to ask: what would process look like divorced from paradigms but still tied to epistemology and material, institutional reform—to the kind of changes currently underway in recent “revolutions” in the teaching of basic writing?

Paradigms and the Making of Knowledge in Composition

Paradigms have enjoyed enormous staying power in composition studies and in the academy at large because they create a useful way to categorize the many entities that go into the making of a discipline. A paradigm is both a tradition of knowing in science, and that which goes into the making of a tradition, “some implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism” (Kuhn 16-17). Kuhn’s view of science holds that a “cyclical pattern” occurs in knowledge making in which a series of revolutions contributes to a paradigm change. Such cycles are all encompassing. They are “revolutionary”: when the new paradigm emerges, it completely reorients the scientist’s worldview. Revolutions occur, Kuhn writes, “when an individual or group first produces a synthesis able to attract most of *the next generation’s* practitioners” (Kuhn 18). When this happens, Kuhn writes, “the older schools gradually disappear” (Kuhn 18).

This concept showed the sciences and, eventually, most of the disciplines in the academy, how one idea could be replaced by another. For Hairston, however, paradigms became the tool for showing how an idea, a public movement, and a professional mission could be one and the same enterprise. In “Winds of Change” Hairston isolates the social, political, philosophical, and linguistic developments leading to the process revolution. First, she focuses on the intellectual spirit of change generating the revolution—the “intellectual inquiry and speculation about language learning” that she attributes to many fields, “notably linguistics, anthropology, and clinical and cognitive psychology” (118). She then cites a particular event in the field of English studies, the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English at Dartmouth (often called the Dartmouth Conference) as another, programmatic force propelling the “winds” of change (118). And finally, and most notably, she finds a novel theory for a discipline in the so-called “crisis” of the open admissions movement of the 1970s.⁵

In joining a disciplinary identity with student need, Hairston offered the discipline a profound misreading of Kuhn. This misreading is the site of my re-reading and resurrection of “process” from its current state of para-

digm-paralysis. Kuhn emphasized paradigms as a synthesis of forces, one generation of specialists replacing the ideas of the next. But Hairston defined paradigms not as a duality but as a complex, three-part event: a community of research specialists, a community of public activists, and a community of teachers constitute the process paradigm. Writing more than a decade after “process” was first used as a term in composition, Hairston argued that composition was only in the “first stage” of the paradigm shift because the *teaching* of “current-traditional” rhetoric was still the most practiced and the most acceptable practice of teaching writing. The “revolution” for Hairston would occur only if writing teachers became part of the research and publishing community and if that had an effect on their teaching. What Hairston’s article did was bring theory, pedagogy, and the public together, not as an idea but as the building blocks for a new profession, the material for a paradigm. More importantly, she claimed that one couldn’t be understood without the other.

But what is particularly moving for me is not merely the idea that intellectual shifts are built on social change, but that they are based on knowing and teaching the kind of student in the kind of environment least likely to be considered “exemplar” for disciplinary knowledge-making: the open-admissions student in a basic writing program at an urban, public institution. Hairston cites nearly a page from *Errors and Expectations* where Mina Shaughnessy describes the group of open-admissions students at CUNY whose writing “met no traditional standards” (Hairston 83). She supposes that the work of these students and their teachers could serve as “important stimuli in spurring the profession’s search for a new paradigm” (121).

While Hairston brought this feature of the profession to the surface, she fell short of bringing it to “paradigmatic” importance, by placing this discussion in a section entitled “The Transition Period.” The “Transition Period” in Kuhn’s work refers to the point in a paradigm shift that leads to, but isn’t quite part of, the paradigm. This contradictory message about the “important stimuli” of process is significant because it reveals the potentials and pitfalls of the paradigm model. In the “Transition Period,” according to Kuhn, “someone who cares” needs to “recognize that something has gone wrong” (Kuhn 65 qtd. in Hairston 120) with an academic field. Hairston names Mina Shaughnessy as the person who cared to recognize a problem with the academy of the 1970s. She discusses how Shaughnessy sought out philosophical and institutional solutions to what many perceived as the problem of “strangers in academia”—open admissions students admitted to CUNY in the 1970s.

Yet we know now, as clearly as writing teachers knew in 1970, that there are still many “strangers” to the academy. Kuhn’s theory of revolutions assumes that what is transitional becomes “normal science.” The “wrong” elements of a field get righted, once and for all in a new paradigm. Following this line of thought, once the paradigm has been put in place, this public and its teachers are no longer needed as stimuli. Instead, they become the spectators of a paradigm, the “given”: always mentioned but frozen in history. But to work with basic writers today is to stand as proof that the “problem” of the academy never went away, never “transitioned.” As I describe later, the open admissions basic writer, the “new student of the seventies,” (at CUNY and elsewhere), has become the closed-admission “new student of the millennium” enrolled in WAC and Writing Intensive courses. Their problems with literacy and our problems with addressing their needs are unique to our present situation but also deeply rooted in the history of public higher education in New York City and in the nation at large.

The structures of higher education are shifting and our paradigms are in process. Can we find a way to see these shifts as observable, recordable knowledge? Might it be time to revise process for a new present?

The Problem with Paradigms, the Potential for Process-Revised

Outside of our field, important discussions on the fate of disciplines in the twenty-first century shed light on the problem with process as it was married to paradigms. In his book debating and critiquing the considerable influence of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Steve Fuller, a pioneer thinker in social epistemology and Science Technology Studies (STS), puts the problems of paradigms this way: “Kuhn simply repeats the popular historiography of science as the succession of trailblazers at the research frontiers, except that the heroic genius is replaced by the self-perpetuating cult” (9). His criticism rests on the idea that paradigms provide an outlet for a few researchers and scholars and an “activity,” or performance for the public to enact that paradigm (8). Fuller acknowledges the enormous influence Kuhn has had on the academy, but he concludes that the overall effect of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has not been salutary. Rather, its effect has been “to dull the critical sensibility of the academy” (7).

Fuller sees paradigms as antithetical to democratic, rhetorically sound scholarship and teaching because the real work of change is already finished when the paradigm hits.⁶ Because paradigms were all encompassing, the academy, Fuller argues, came to expect—to require—“revolutions.” Most of

these revolutions involved one “generation” supplanting another, one set of ideas being overpowered by another. Paradigms proliferated; new disciplines and specialties within those disciplines accumulated. In turn, the need to justify these paradigms to the academy and to the public and the desire to reflect on what brings various aspects of our professional interests together became the stuff that happened outside of knowledge making. Teaching or writing programs or mere experience—the material justifications for all of our theories—are considered transitional or marginal at best, and outside at worst, of our paradigms. Fuller writes:

Good paradigms make for good neighbors. What dropped out of this picture was a public academic space where the general ends and means of ‘science’ (or ‘knowledge production’ or ‘inquiry’) could be debated just as vigorously and meaningfully as the specific ends and means of particular disciplines or research programs. (7)

Historian John Zammito, as part of a larger project that helps define the new field of science studies, details the hierarchical and pedagogical nature of paradigms this way: the “emergence of normal science is both constraining and enabling, and it is enabling *through* constraint” (56). What he means here is that paradigms propel increased specialization and “rules” that govern that specialization. These rules both encourage and limit the possibilities of science. But Zammito goes on to explain that once the paradigm had shifted, determining how that paradigm would fit into the public was a task for the “writer of textbooks” (56), an activity for the classroom. Paradigms are tools for solidifying ideas, not for generating connections.⁷

Thinking in terms of revolutions or paradigms means understanding disciplines as constellations of ideas, removed from the often shocking, or debilitating, or invigorating changes in student population or politics that fuel our work with writing. This is why being “post” process feels empty to me. While a central “assumption” of post-process theory is “writing is public,” there is no mention of who or what that public is in relation to our discipline’s idea of itself.

Kuhn saw that intellectual change is constructed in communities, but he couldn’t account for the ongoing, recursive relationship that a community would have with a public and with itself, with the continual struggles to find meaning and contemporary relevance in an academic discipline. Fuller offers the term “social movements” as an alternative to “paradigms.” New knowledge is understood in the intellectual and political context of a

changing public and in response to the image a profession creates of itself. He writes:

a new distinction [between paradigms and movements] . . . conceptualizes scientific justification as removing the idiosyncratic character of scientific discovery . . . not simply the fact that a discovery was first reached by a given individual in a given lab, but the fact that it was reached by a particular research tradition in a given culture. (417)

“Movements” are self-referential and reflexive—they recognize how knowledge in disciplines gets made and changed not only by people creating ideas but by the *interaction* between ideas and a public and by the interaction between a community’s thinking about knowledge and their actualizing it in the form of politics and programs—like writing programs. Key to this concept is the notion that knowledge making today needs to be understood as reflexive, in a recursive relationship with its image of itself and with the changing environment. It requires being a social and intellectual body in movement, hanging on the hinges of a transforming society. It requires being okay with process.

The Complexity of Change, The Autopoiesis of Composition

Science and technology studies (which emerged around the same time as composition—a fascinating convergence of anti-disciplinary disciplines that begs for further discussion) is the subject that Fuller nominates to recognize and define such “movements” in the academy. But our field can do more than *observe* the reflexivity of our current epistemological and political moment. Mere description and critique of knowledge activities can end up evoking grand theories without enacting what Kurt Spellmeyer calls “genuine, real-world politics” (286). Composition, in the throes of unprecedented change, is poised to observe and participate in understanding and generating transformative perspectives on disciplines and knowledge making. What if we thought of shifts in our programs as intellectual structures in process?

Considered without its political and paradigmatic baggage, we are able to see how process can, first, release our field from the constraints of paradigmatic thinking, and secondly, help the field make sense of, even celebrate, this moment of change as uniquely important to and for students and teachers of writing. Sociologists of knowledge and systems theorists

provide useful ways to think about process in a complex, present-oriented way. Complexity theorists, a constellation of thinkers that includes social theorists, philosophers, and scientists, focus on what I see as the central mission of composition—the “how” of composing, on “autopoiesis.” These thinkers use the terms “reflexivity” and “recursivity,” important concepts in the writing-process movement, to highlight the need for a more integrative understanding of change. Reflexivity is a function of an increasingly complex “network-generated mind” (Collins 791), a concept whereby “systems organize using communication” and do so with multi-level “non-linear interactive processes” (Blackman 143). Recursivity, in writing-process theory, refers to the back and forth movement, the “retrospective structuring” (Perl “The Composing” 54) of composing. Complexity theorists use recursivity to describe the essential give and take between an environment and its observers. The public or social condition of knowledge does not simply “change how knowledge procedures are conducted” but rather alters “what knowledge is and how we may interact and use it” (Rasch and Wolfe 27).

Autopoiesis, literally meaning “self-production,” is a term used to highlight how an “organization”—an organism or a social system—comes into being through “interdependence.” With its focus on observing systems as we participate in them, autopoiesis is a concept that can help writing scholars connect to process in a different way. A central feature of this theory is that life is internally organized and recursive. We are all observers and participants in change; in turn, we are all changing and remaking both our environments and ourselves.

The concept of autopoiesis deserves a hearing in our field because it offers a way out of the process/post-process debate and it provides a frame for understanding our interactions with a changing academy. Of particular importance to my notion of present-process is understanding knowledge making in our complex world as a circular, feedback loop. Two Chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, are best known for their idea that the essential feature of living systems is its self-referentiality, the self-reproduction of a system’s network. Contrary to the common Darwinian assumption that the basis of life is reproduction, Maturana and Varela argued for a more holistic approach to life—as self-production. Both autopoiesis and process theories of composing highlight the role that reflexivity, recursivity, and self-referencing play in the making of knowledge. As Dietrich Schwantiz puts it, “social systems consist of events” and the “raw material of events” is “communications” (488).

The key features of autopoiesis are central to the task facing scholars of writing and culture today: to see knowledge as a living entity, a feature of the work we do as writers and teachers and scholars, not something we comment on, but something we produce reflexively. The systems theorist Niklas Luhmann has defined reflexivity as the recursive way an environment—a public—and a social system communicate. Theorizing on the sociology of social systems, like higher education, Luhmann offers the following analysis, which helps connect process with more “constructivist” elements of the profession:

Paying attention to this condition of the capacity of observing, we can see that the system *makes* the *difference* between system and environment and *copies* that difference in the system to be able to use it as a *distinction*. (36)

Here Luhmann is rearticulating the mathematics of George Spencer Brown, whose *Laws of Form* sought to show how every act—“intellectual or psychical” is meant to “draw a distinction, to distinguish figure from ground” (Wolfe 257). He connects concepts of process with a focus on “observing” as making a distinction and marking difference in a thought or a piece of writing. This link between observing and recognizing distinction and difference allows us to see the potential for reflexivity as a way of recognizing and enacting change. This approach to process eschews the dichotomies that pervade our field: process versus product, progressive versus constructivist, analytic versus postmodern. Thinking about process this way does not mean a nostalgic return to some yesteryear of revolution. Rather it incorporates much of the criticism of post-process and considers process as a metaphor and agent of change.

In composition, perhaps the most influential approach to distinguish itself from process has been the constructivist movement, best represented by David Bartholomae’s early work. In his now canonical essay “Inventing the University” Bartholomae persuaded many writing teachers that “what our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine what might be said and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community” (600). His point encapsulates much of the thinking behind the social constructivist movement. What is already there is constructed; what is produced in response is constructed in turn.

Bartholomae, Lu, and others were right to critique elements of the writing-process paradigm. But can we use this critique to help reconnect to a more integrated view of the profession? Hairston declared process to be a “revolution” in the teaching of writing. I suggest that process is something much less and much more. It is not a twelve-step program of what goes on “during the internal act of writing” (Hairston 121, 124). Nor is it merely the “processes by which individuals give shape and meaning to written texts” (Perl xi). But it is, as Hairston and others have suggested, an “investigative strategy” that seeks to connect writing with “practices” (Hairston 123), that “emerge” in the act of trying to know “how” a “product came into being” and “why it assumed the form that it did” (Hairston 121). Hairston’s focus was on creating a picture of the composing process, recording and knowing the often-invisible activities of “people’s minds” that can be studied through reading their texts. But I am interested in pictures of the act of composing knowledge as we process this activity through local, literacy practices and programs. These are the *processes* that emerge when we study how the disciplinary community and the public interact and how that interaction occurs through both the theories and the programs that comprise what we do in the academy. Is there a way we can make these processes visible? And what good would that do?

Concern with paradigms and with post-paradigms allows our field to miss the role that reflexive behaviors can have on definitions of the profession and on the realities of students, teachers, and institutions. These behaviors include our study and recording of phenomena as they are occurring and the analysis of how professions and the public are composed in response to and in conjunction with the rapid pace of political, epistemological, and institutional change. If paradigms can name and contain change, autopoiesis can describe it as it is happening, as we compose it through programs and pedagogies.

In what follows, I draw an analogy between this approach to thinking about change and our contemporary scene of composition, or what I am calling a present-process moment.⁸ I offer one perspective on what Fuller would call a “social movement” occurring at my university, CUNY, focusing on the autopoietic or present-process activities of the university’s new WAC program. My example is but one and certainly not representative of many writing or public education initiatives. But because of CUNY’s unique place in this history of composition, it is an example that exemplifies the paradoxes and possibilities of the new connections among writing, the public, and the processes of understanding and making change

Basic Writing, WAC, and the Shifting Ground of Composition

I suspect that readers of this journal already know the basic history of composition at CUNY and its tie to the emergence of composition as an academic discipline.⁹ Compositionists of every stripe acknowledge Mina Shaughnessy and her work with open admissions, basic writers at CUNY as pioneering the process era and as material that propelled a profession into disciplinary status (see Lu, Bazerman, Bruffee).

However, recent historical shifts in the national scene of public higher education—the end of open admissions at many institutions, coupled with a surge of interest in process that is developing outside of our field—suggest a need to reconsider this shared history. My colleagues in basic writing at CUNY and elsewhere have done much to explore the political fall-out of the first concern (Soliday, Sternglass, Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers, Gray-Rosendale, to name but a few). But the parameters of this shift need contextualizing in light of recent intellectual, political, and programmatic changes.

The official end of open admissions, initiated in 1998 and formalized in 1999, when CUNY's Board of Trustees voted for the cessation of this policy, right before its thirtieth birthday, has been the most dramatic of recent shifts at CUNY. Remediation is, at least in word if not fully in deed, disbanded at the eleven four-year schools. At the two-year schools, basic skills courses are still available and at four-year schools, certain 1970's-era open admissions programs remain, including SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge). But everywhere at CUNY there is a major shift in the culture of the university—a sense among faculty and students that the teaching of writing is as charged as it was in 1970, but in wholly different ways.

CUNY students who cannot meet placement criteria in math, reading and writing must first go to the community colleges and then, perhaps, transfer for a B.A. or B.S. Part of the call to “revitalize” CUNY and set higher standards for the colleges involved adding a new “rising junior” high stakes test. The definition of “public” higher education has changed in New York City yet the “the errors and expectations” of our students are just as great, perhaps greater than they were in 1970, because the contemporary CUNY student is *still* often under-prepared, likely to be an immigrant or child of immigrants, struggling financially, speaking English as a second language or dialect, and often the first of the family to attend college.¹⁰

Students now navigate a system where the terms “remediation” and “basic writing” have been discarded but where enrollment and graduation

are contingent on new—but not fully agreed upon—standards. The students and faculty who must negotiate these changes do not represent a “transition period” for a paradigm or for our university. They are New York City public school graduates, but they are also, increasingly, coming to look like the future of higher education nation-wide.¹¹ They and we make up the public that responds to and revises the political and intellectual ground that is changing as I write this.

This political scene set the stage for major programmatic and philosophical shifts in writing education. When the Board of Trustees moved remediation out of the four-year schools, many of the campus basic writing programs that formed the bedrock of CUNY’s writing program (and the inspiration for many others) were also removed. While almost every campus still teaches basic writing in some way, the university’s identity with this program and its philosophies—diverse in theory though intimately tied together through history and politics—is receding. Students in the community and comprehensive colleges still take basic writing courses; still travel through the always-changing maze of remedial, required classes that bring them to their degrees. Yet the stakes have changed—the new exam, and increasingly, additional “writing-intensive” courses have altered the focus of their composition studies. “Basic writing” as a requirement for and an identity of CUNY composition is no longer. In its place came not a paradigm but a program: CUNY’s first university-wide WAC program, which was instituted in 1999.

This program serves all seventeen colleges. Most of these campuses have developed new “writing-intensive” courses to accompany faculty development workshops and student WAC seminars. Writing fellows, advanced graduate students from a variety of disciplines, serve as consultants to faculty and departments on all seventeen campuses. Here we—coordinators trained under process and post-process paradigms, some pioneers of open admissions, others faculty of the new closed-admissions campuses—address many of the same issues we would in basic writing classes. But we do so in a different context, with different students. There is no guiding paradigm, only a tradition of process theory and the recognition of where process could not meet the needs of this changing population.

In 1999, some of the original pioneers of process and basic writing at CUNY came together to create a template for this new university-wide Writing Across the Curriculum program.¹² The first year of the program included a series of workshops aimed at training faculty and writing fellows. These “writing institutes” were built on the model offered by the New York City Writing Project and the Institute for Literacy Studies (housed at my CUNY

campus, Lehman College). The emphasis was collaborative learning as Kenneth Bruffee and other early process-era theorists defined it and on teaching general practices to help with the composing process. The thrust of these workshops was on developing what Hairston called a “holistic” knowledge about how one writes and to engage in some of the rhetorical demands of writing in school. Because the New York City Writing Project has emphasized consulting in the schools, it was no surprise that the workshop relied heavily on collaborative activities for composing and on the processes one takes to compose a text.¹³

Within eighteen months of this program’s enactment, campus coordinators, some aligning themselves with “post-process” thinkers and others who were new to the profession entirely, challenged the emphasis of WAC, citing each campus’s differing needs and the problems with students’ abilities to write in a variety of disciplines. Many of the pedagogical techniques program coordinators used in the first few years of the program were praised—group work, teaching drafting and revision—but the framing for these heuristics was challenged. In the first year, the workshop began and ended with a text the participants were to compose within the space of the week. In the following year, that activity was replaced with a set of readings on the composing processes.¹⁴ By 2001, the program had a larger set of leaders, and workshops altered to focus on what one coordinator called “modes of inquiry in discourse.” These workshops asked for contributions from faculty from across the campuses and curricula, teachers who could speak about the changing needs of their departments, students, and disciplines. In the following two years, this model prevailed. New coordinators were added as workshop leaders, including some with no ties to basic writing, and some outside of English and composition altogether.¹⁵

But in the year that followed, there were complaints by graduate writing fellows and debates among faculty about what was needed—at the institutions and for the writing fellows. Talk of “generalizable” principles for teaching and for teaching writing returned. Writing fellows, new members of their own disciplines, wanted a variety of ways of ways of thinking about writing and teaching that could be translated to any field. This was not a request for process theory per se, but rather for a closer examination of how we might use some of the techniques of process in a more contextualized way. And it was a desire to find principles that could be considered part of a Big Idea about writing, an idea that, once applied in various disciplines, would become “situational” and “public.” This was process shaping up to be something radically transitory but tangibly meaningful.

In the last two years, the WAC program has become more centralized—coordinators and graduate writing fellows are part of a yearlong training initiative—but campus programs have changed dramatically, varying according to shifts in curricula and student population.¹⁶ While the implementation of writing-intensive requirements at most colleges signals the success of the program, there is uncertainty still about its goals and its permanence in the academy. CUNY, like many universities, is also now rebuilding general education and the question of WAC’s “independence” is paramount. Writing fellows and coordinators are intent on focusing on “WID”—writing in the disciplines—but marrying that focus with the call for articulating a liberal arts curriculum.

The WAC-WID program at CUNY has demanded something new of composition faculty: the need to mix pedagogies and programs, past institutional policies and current program needs, and pedagogical innovation with reflection on present politics. What is required now is a focus on enacting change while we observe it. Each university-wide WAC meeting feels, in some ways, like the chance to define writing for the first time for a new CUNY, even as we constantly reference the still visible politics of our university’s and discipline’s pasts. Leaders create schemas that get revised and reworked as results of test scores return, as new professors are hired, as ideas are generated about the fate of composition. Needless to say, work in WAC tends to be self-referential and self-reflexive; experienced faculty often call upon the resources of former projects and research from student inquiries, past and present. Newer faculty often call upon theory and the political context of their new institution.¹⁷ We are, only six years into the program, reflecting on its “past”—a past that is both long and short for CUNY.

Basic writing at CUNY was created out of the needs of a changing public. But this WAC program was generated out of a change in public policy and a student public *and* propelled by a group of faculty members who are of mixed generational and theoretical “paradigms.” Indeed many of us would argue that our mix means we don’t belong in a paradigm at all, but in a reflexive system of constant change. These forces, taken together, enable this WAC program to be the material with which the university can see change, as it is being conceived and composed for students and faculty alike.

Present-Process

How can we describe such a program? What makes up its composition of change? While the program sorts itself out, there is a systematic shift in what writing and public education mean at CUNY: it is no longer one thing—process, basic, a paradigm, or “interdisciplinary”—it is all of these things. And I believe this sends a message to students and faculty about communication and about change: that it cannot happen in any one-dimensional scheme, whether that dimension was shaped by government action or university administration.

Hairston, quoting Kuhn, found the possibilities of paradigms to be revolutionary and enlightening. Paradigms, according to Kuhn, cluster or embody the suppositions of a group of scientists and determine the revolutions that set the field in motion. But what they can't do is describe a field *in* motion, which in my mind is a pretty accurate description of what it is like to teach writing at this particular moment in time. What is happening at CUNY, and, no doubt elsewhere, is the simultaneous emergence of a common activity built for and with students but without the accompanying “body” of beliefs. Rather what we have is an outward acknowledgment of our differences and the need to carry on despite and because of them. It is the mix that matters and the uncertainty of our paradigmatic identity propels us forward.

This does not mean that we cannot record, cannot know, cannot be convinced or convince others about the worthiness of our pedagogies or programs. Rather, it implies that we do so with the knowledge that even as we write our new present, it is moving, connecting with the public and philosophical processes of our time. At CUNY, I don't see revolution. But neither is there paralysis. No prescription for the future then, just a process for coming to know, and change, the emerging present.

Notes

1. In composition studies, Robert Zoellner's essay on behaviorism in writing is considered the first essay to cite paradigms (1969) followed by Young (1978) and Bizzell (1979). While these theorists were first to use “process” and “paradigms,” Hairston's pairing of the terms offered composition a more radical argument about the relationship between the two. Her suggestion was that, within composition studies, paradigms could not exist without process.

2. See Kent, Berlin, and Crowley for this. See also Lu's critique of Shaughnessy's work and Sirc's discussion of the problems with expressivist philosophy (80-91).
3. Thomas E. Blom's critique of Hairston's article directly addressed what he saw as a misuse of Kuhn. Robert Connors and Patricia Bizzell discuss composition's use of paradigms in terms of an overt or covert "scientism" and Susan Miller finds fault with "paradigms" as a measure of the activities of the field. Gesa E. Kirsch offers an insightful summary of perspectives on paradigms.
4. In Bloom's essay in *Composition Studies in the New Millennium*, she defines her understanding of paradigm, a term brought up in many chapters in this influential collection.
5. Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* (especially pages 114-17) provides additional historical background for the emergence of process and offers an alternative view of dominant histories of this movement.
6. For discussions of Kuhn's theory in the fields of sociology and science studies, see in particular Phillips and Jones.
7. For a discussion of how Kuhn highlighted the sociological or group-oriented elements of knowledge see Zammito, chapter five.
8. N. Katherine Hayles, whose focus is on literary theory, is one the few humanities scholars to engage in this area. See Blackman for discussions of complexity theory and Livingston for a discussion of the relevance of autopoiesis for the humanities.
9. In the CCC journal's 50th anniversary edition one of the featured articles concerned the emergence of composition as part of the open admission project. See Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers. The very fact that the *Journal of Basic Writing* is housed at CUNY speaks volumes about this connection.
10. CUNY's central website offers particular demographics. See <http://portal.cuny.edu/portal/site/cuny/>.

11. See David Stocum's work, especially pages 10-19. Stocum discusses the demographics of urban colleges and universities and reveals how diverse populations and the "non-traditional" students are increasingly features of a variety of regions in the United States. See also Andy Hargreaves's recent book about the fate of teaching in what he calls "the Age of Insecurity."

12. For a description of the history of CUNY's WAC program see: <[http://humanities.lehman.cuny.edu/WACAC/WAC\(CUNY\).html](http://humanities.lehman.cuny.edu/WACAC/WAC(CUNY).html)>

13. Sondra Perl's "Guidelines for Composing" is just one example of the kind of heuristic we used in the workshop. It is a good example of the influence of the process era on how we framed a post-process program in WAC. And it reveals the influence of particular persons and situations. Pioneers of basic writing, like Sondra Perl, returned in the early years of 2000 as leaders of this new program.

14. Articles by Peter Elbow, Mike Rose, and Toby Fulwiler were commonly used in the first two years.

15. For a different discussion of this program, see my essay in *ATD* where the focus is on Writing Across the Curriculum and its particular suitability for a "knowledge society."

16. Indeed many campuses, like my own at Lehman College, are now undergoing assessments of our programs, to gauge how or if WAC has become part of the culture of the colleges.

17. The history of this new WAC program at CUNY is now being researched and reflected on. For thoughtful work that has emerged from CUNY see Hirsch and DeLuca and Soliday. Conversations with Sondra Perl, Marcie Wolfe, Elaine Avidon, Peter Gray, Hugh English, Mark McBeth, and the editors and reviewers of *JBW* have also been useful in articulating my thinking about WAC.

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The Composition of Change

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