A study of Ann Berthoff’s composition theory

Teresa M. Ludwig
Iowa State University

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A study of Ann Berthoff's composition theory

by

Teresa Marie Ludwig

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Approved:
Signature redacted for privacy

In Charge of Major Work
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Department
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1987
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"... both the M.A. and the Ph.D. candidate should be encouraged to make writing, the theories of writing, and the theories of teaching writing an area of specialization."¹

That bit of advice from John C. Gerber is one of the reasons for this paper because I believe by following this advice, I can become a better teacher. I have tried numerous "methods" for teaching composition at various grade levels, and I have learned something from each. Yet, I always had a nagging feeling that something was missing, and I think I have discovered that missing element: theory. I have been using methods without much theoretical base. Nor do I think I am alone. Many teachers with whom I have come in contact continue with the same method year after year because "it works," or they think their method works. Some do not even have a method they can define, and many do not have a theory on which to base their methods. Sometimes those "methods" can be effective, but it may be wise to consider what two teachers have said about old methods: "[c]onsistency, foolish or otherwise, may become mere persistence when significant trends in one's field are ignored."²

Perhaps students can and do learn to write in spite of our lack of theory and method, but in some cases, teachers of composition may give students some wrongheaded notions about the writing process. Our lack of theory or our confusion about theory can end up confusing students about their own writing process.

Those feelings of inadequacy have prompted me to go on a quest for a
theoretical base. Theory can provide a perspective from which to judge and evaluate assignments and courses. It can also help a teacher recognize and justify the approach she is using. Ann Berthoff's approach to composition has already given me a way to view the composing process, and I believe it is a theory and method that can help any composition teacher who is curious about how we learn, how we know, and how we make meaning.

Berthoff's theory is difficult to summarize because it is presented through a series of lectures and papers. It is presented in such a way that one feels as though she is adding layers of information through each presentation: to summarize her theory is to lose some of the unity. Though her books are easy to read, the concepts they contain are difficult to understand at times because of her circular descriptions such as, "know your knowledge," or "think about your thinking," or "interpret your interpretations." Yet, I am certain that teachers of composition can find useful theory and practice in them. Most of her work in composition is contained in her two books: Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination, her composition textbook; and The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers, a collection of journal articles and papers that form the basis of her philosophy of composition.

Berthoff's approach is by no means the perfect theory of human discourse, but theoretical contributions to the knowledge of the composing process can help teachers form and evaluate their own theories. Analyzing a theory such as Berthoff's can also help teachers choose
textbooks because they will be better able to judge the theory contained in the text.

I would like to say that after doing this analysis of Berthoff's work, I would use her text. I am not certain that I would. I find some of the short readings demanding and perhaps above the reading ability of some senior high or college freshman students. Yet, there are many ideas in her text that can give composition teachers a new perspective from which their own philosophies might evolve.

Her notion of "teacher as REsearcher" is inspiring. So often teachers depend on textbooks to teach students. Teachers can interpret what goes on in their classrooms with particular assignments; they can judge the effectiveness of certain approaches. But it is easy to get stuck and not see the data that are present in the classroom. Theory and practice can easily become separated, but with "teacher as REsearcher," the two should be in constant dialectic.

I appreciate Berthoff's emphasis on revision throughout the process and on the way the dialectical approach encourages revision. One of our goals as composition teachers should be to make students better critics of their own work. Her double-entry notebook and her paragraph glossing exercises will certainly help achieve that goal.

Her ideas about list-making, generating chaos, finding ways out of chaos, naming, renaming, and defining are very useful invention strategies. Generating lists and interpreting those lists to find underlying assumptions and various relationships are simple activities that allow writers to use their natural abilities to come to "know their
knowledge."

But perhaps the most valuable idea that I have taken from her book is that when we write, we are trying to make meaning. In that process of meaning-making, language is our "speculative instrument." Through language, we form concepts to think with and think about, and by simply changing words, we can change meaning. With this idea, we will be focusing on meaning and making our students (and ourselves) better critical thinkers.
INTRODUCTION

The study of composition theory is relatively new, and as a result, there is not an agreed upon paradigm among those in the field. But in order to make the study of composition a more legitimate domain within English departments, there has been more interest in developing a frame for evaluating new ideas. Researchers in rhetoric and composition are writing histories and conceptualizing theories. Writing teachers, it seems, have not been completely satisfied with the various approaches to instruction as evidenced by the number of recent attempts to reform composition pedagogy. I believe this signals the growing awareness that composition is a legitimate discipline worthy of research. If composition classes are to be required at the high school and college levels, there should be concern for how theories and methods for instruction are evaluated.

This paper is a description and evaluation of Ann Berthoff's theory and method of composition instruction. It will be evaluated in light of basic epistemological theories of composing. Berthoff's theory appears to be part of a developing paradigm that intersects with other philosophies in some ways, while offering a unique view of the composing process. Her approach is centrally involved with the way the mind forms meanings and the role language plays in thought processes. She believes that meaning requires more than simply lexical definition; it requires as well, context and perspective. Berthoff's theory and method do not necessarily have students producing 500-word essays about pre-formed
topics. Rather, she is concerned with helping students understand how minds form knowledge of the world: thinking about thinking.

Though she does not acknowledge the precarious nature of her philosophical stance on thought and language, I think it is important to do so. We do not know for sure how thought develops and finds forms; we can only speculate. Thus, basing a method for composition on speculation seems daring. Nonetheless, it is a method that is worth investigating, even if the theory is not empirically verifiable.

The first chapter of this paper outlines Berthoff's conception of the composing process. The second chapter continues the explanation of the process with a focus on Berthoff's definition of imagination. In chapter three, her dialectical method is explained. The paper concludes with a sketch of epistemological positions that will act as sounding boards for evaluating Berthoff's theory and method.
DEFINING BERTHOFF'S COMPOSING PROCESS

At the heart of Berthoff's theory of composition is the philosophical notion that thought and language are interdependent. Berthoff realizes the "metaphysical entanglements" in considering how thought and language are related, but she tries to avoid the argument by saying, "[it] helps in teaching writing to remember that composing is a process of making meaning. Not that 'meaning' is easier to define than 'language' and 'thought,' but we don't need to define it!" Rather than defining "meaning," she suggests designing working concepts of the word. Here is her characteristically circular working concept for meaning: "We need to think of meaning as both an ends and a means: a principal meaning of meaning is that it is a means to the making of meaning." She believes this concept can help us imagine ways of using writing throughout a composition course; others may believe that it is simply a tautological definition to avoid a philosophically vulnerable stance. Yet, it does imply that writing is much more than a means of communicating. Writing is a mode of thinking and a way our knowledge takes form.

Like other scholars in the field, she sees writing as a composing process. But there is only speculation about what really happens in that process. W. Ross Winterowd explains how little we know about the process of composing: "Consider that we are just now beginning to arrive at a precise understanding of the sentence as produced (but how it gets produced is still a mystery), then multiply that ignorance by a quantum
leap, and you will have some idea of how little we know about the process whereby the discourserr generates discourse." The only real agreement among teachers and theorists about what happens during the writing process is that it continues to change in time—a kind of organic, natural change. Though most may agree with the notion of process, the way the elements of the process—language, writer, audience, reality—are put together can result in various theories. Thus, it is important to understand how Berthoff perceives the process in order to understand the roots of her theory.

Berthoff does not conceive of the composing process as a step-by-step activity such as cooking, though it may be similar in some phases. Nor is this process comparable to learning a game or developing motor skills. These processes do not use language as more than a behavior or a tool. Language is much more than that in Berthoff's theory: it is a means of making meaning, a notion which is woven throughout her books. We can only study language through language. Language as a maker of meaning cannot be measured and quantified, and she often criticizes empirical scientists for their failure to recognize that all data, all knowledge, is mediated. Humans use language to interpret and formulate—to make meaning. She likes to think of language not as a code, but in I. A. Richards' terms: "[A]n organ—the supreme organ of the mind's self-ordering growth."

Since language is the means of composing, any theory of composition should include a theory of language and its relation to thought. Berthoff has drawn on the work of Lev Vygotsky, Kenneth Burke, Susanne
Langer, and C. S. Pierce to form her theory of the interdependence of thought and language. She believes thought and language do not follow one another in a linear fashion; they are simultaneous, that is, thoughts find words and words find thoughts. To illustrate the importance of language as meaning-maker, she compares two communication triangles. The first is the standard model of discourse represented by an equilateral triangle pointing upward with "encoder" written in the southeast corner, "decoder" written at the top, and "message" in the last corner. Berthoff says this model is flawed because it fails to account for purpose, meaning, and intention in discourse, and it confuses the message with the signal.

Her second model is borrowed from C. S. Pierce's discussion of semiotics; this model is also an equilateral triangle pointing upward with the base a dotted line. "Word" is written in the southwest corner, "reference" at the top, and "referent" is written in the last corner. The important difference between these two models is the dotted line which shows there are no immediate, direct relationships between words and things. What we know, we know through mediation, and in composing (and reading) we are constantly interpreting and making meaning.

This view of language and thought can only be useful if teachers understand how to transfer it to the classroom. What are the implications of such a theory for teachers? Berthoff suggests we share this notion of thought and language with students by making them conscious of how language and thought work in their own processes. Making them conscious of how they form meanings can help them learn to
step back from their interpretations and look at them from another perspective. We do not need to teach them how to form meanings because that is a natural activity. By showing students that they do form meanings, we will be teaching them how they form them through generalization, abstraction, and interpretation. Being aware of what we are doing will help us understand how to do it. Underlying this theory is the notion that we acquire knowledge in a circular fashion: we generalize from particular instances, we make interpretations from the generalizations as we have more experiences and generalize again, and so on. Berthoff suggests that what we are really trying to do is know our knowledge of reality and that we cannot get through the net of language. She suggests using the "double-entry notebook" to show students how their minds work. This exercise is one of the first in her textbook. She is trying to show students that they do not begin from scratch when they set out to form meanings because they have their imaginations. The double-entry notebook shows them how their minds work so they can begin to see the connections between thought and language. Writing down observations and then writing about them is a good way to see that interdependence. Berthoff explains to the students that observing their observations makes them more self-aware, and concentration on one's own process is the best way to learn to write.

Students are asked to record their observations of an organic object for about ten minutes a day for about seven days. She brings in such things as feathers, shells, seed-pods, but she suggests it is better to observe organic objects with which they are less familiar. She stresses
that the object be organic because the exercise is intended to demonstrate something about organization and forming. A spiral notebook bound on the side is best for this assignment. As they observe, the students might carry on a kind of dialogue with the object in which they ask and answer the questions. She wants them to concentrate on the process. The major difference between this notebook and other journals is that they use one page to write their observations and the facing page to interpret what they have written. Perhaps they will find themselves making comparisons or classifying the object. A sense of dialogue then develops between the facing pages. She warns that the process may become tedious but encourages students to persist to see where their thinking takes them.

The same approach could be used in other observation activities in composition classes where students visit museums of art or natural history, observe human behavior, or just take class notes. The important element in the exercise is to go beyond simple observation to interpreting the observations. Berthoff says the ability to do that will improve students' abilities to think and write.

The exercise may be a bit frustrating at first for students because observation seems so simple and obvious. Observing and thinking are such pedestrian activities and natural processes that we seem almost to take them for granted. The double-entry notebook makes us focus on the process and slowly realize that we can become more responsible for our own thinking. Students are somewhat conditioned to turn to the teacher or text for "solutions" rather than depending on and having confidence in
their own natural abilities.

Through the double-entry notebook exercise, students can see how language and thought work together to form meanings. They see how looking again at what they have written can bring new thoughts, new interpretations. Berthoff theorizes that language has two main roles as meaning-maker—the "hypostatic" and the "discursive." Freezing our experiences by naming them allows us to go beyond a particular point in time:

By naming the world, we hold images in mind; we can remember; we can return to our experience and reflect on it. In reflecting, we can change, we can transform, we can envisage. Language thus becomes the very type of social activity by which we might move towards changing our lives. The hypostatic power of language to fix and stabilize frees us from the prison of the moment. Language recreates us as historical beings. In its discursive aspect language runs along and brings thought with it. . . . Discourse grows from inner dialogue.

We can react to experiences just as any organism can, but we can reflect on those experiences and interpret them again and again. This ability to reflect upon and reinterpret our thoughts and words means we can think about our thinking. Berthoff's dotted-line-based triangle allows for the hypostatic power of language and its interdependence with thought.

The next chapter will explore the power of thought and language. Berthoff refers to this "power" as the imagination, and thinks it is perhaps the greatest resource writers have if they can learn how to tap it.
THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN THE COMPOSING PROCESS

In Berthoff's theory, the product of thought and language is meaning, the result of an active mind. She defines imagination as the active mind, the "shaping power" in which "perception works by forming--finding forms, creating forms, recognizing forms, interpreting forms." Abstraction is the natural way humans make sense of the world through our perceptions, dreams, all imagining. If teachers can develop a theory of imagination, they might become more aware of the mind's natural forming ability and how that ability might be applied to the writing process. Berthoff suggests that with a theory of imagination, teachers may be better equipped to explain why the "back to basics" movement will not help students become better writers. Drill will help students correct faulty sentences in a workbook, but it will not help them create their own sentences. A theory of imagination can encourage teachers to think of language as more than a code; language becomes part of the form-finding power of the mind, a vehicle for the imagination.

Imagination is usually thought of as the power to create an image of something that has not been experienced. We usually hear the word imagination in connection with creative projects such as fiction, poetry, or works of art. I am certain I have said to my students at one time or another, "Use your imagination," as if it were something in storage that we can blow the dust from and use every now and then. But Berthoff thinks imagination is much more useful than that, and she believes it "must be rescued from the creativity corner and returned to the center of
all that we do." She does not think it is useful to separate critical and creative writing, which has been done in many current rhetorical theories. Critical writing, it seems, belongs to the cognitive domain while creative writing belongs to the affective. To "reclaim" the imagination, then, Berthoff suggests that teachers form a theory of imagination.

To develop such a theory, Berthoff first asks what imagination does. Since imagination is such a complex concept, and since teachers of composition do not usually use the term in situations other than "creative writing," we might consider what others have said about imagination; then we might have a clearer picture of Berthoff's definition.

In a study of imagination, Riley Holman and V. K. Kumar classified the definitions of imagination written by 120 teachers enrolled in a graduate class in creativity. The teachers were given ten minutes to write down how they perceived imagination. Riley and Kumar classified the definitions into the following eight categories: 1) a thought process or mental activity; 2) dreaming, fantasy, visualizing, and mind-wandering; 3) basis of creative thinking, originality of ideas; 4) beyond ordinary thinking (not limited by reality, personal inhibition, or logic), originality of ideas; 5) an ability; 6) an expression of individuality; 7) ideating; and 8) a problem-solving or inventing process. Perhaps all of these are included in the definition of imagination, and these responses show the problems in trying to define it. Yet, there is one thing that nearly all of these categories seem to
have in common: imagination appears to be something within each of us that moves, changes, or grows—an organic process.

Coleridge, too, saw imagination as an organic process. He called it "the true, inward creatrix" which "instantly out of the chaos of elements or shattered fragments of memory, puts together some form to fit it." Berthoff refers to Coleridge's views of imagination a number of times in her essays, especially his definition of imagination as "the living power and prime agent of all human perception." In fact, Coleridge's description of what imagination does seems to be a precursor to Berthoff's description of dialectic and the processes of an active mind. In Biographia Literaria, Coleridge writes that imagination is controlled by the "will and understanding" and "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual with the representative..." With Coleridge, too, there is the impression that imagination is the power to form. But what are the "chaos" and "shattered fragments" that constitute the form?

Jacob Bronowski helps us here. In his book The Origins of Imagination and Knowledge, he equates this "chaos" with our visions (and conceptions), images, and perceptions—all the things that we see in the external and internal worlds. He writes, "Almost all the words that we use about experiences of the kind that go into visions or images are words connected to the eye or sense of sight." We often say "I see" when we mean we understand. These images, visions, perceptions, and conceptions that we "see" through what Wordsworth calls our "inward eye"
make up the "shattered fragments" with which we form meanings. It is as though the imagination were taking on a reproductive function by giving birth to our knowledge and producing and reproducing our perceptions into conceptions.

Unfortunately, we can only speculate and hypothesize when it comes to defining imagination; yet I believe, as Berthoff does, that it is valuable for teachers to consider both what imagination is and what it does in order to find ways to make it a valuable instrument in the classroom. Berthoff's method of dialectic follows what seem to be the natural thinking processes. She wants students and teachers to recognize the processes of the imagination, the active mind, so they can take advantage of it in the composition class. Understanding the active mind can enhance students' abilities to generalize and construct their own knowledge of reality.

If the imagination is an instrument, a "speculative instrument" as I. A. Richards more precisely defines it, then we can use it to explore and discover. Isn't that what we do when we write? Some may argue that we write to communicate. Yet, if we do not explore and discover our knowledge first, there is nothing to communicate. If we teach writing only from the pedagogical point of view of simply communicating, we may be missing the chance to help our students learn to tap their richest resources—their imaginations. We may also keep getting compositions that do not say much. Writing gives us the chance to see our imaginations on paper; our meanings are, in a sense, frozen there so we can look at them carefully, interpret them, and change them if we want.
Experimenting with our words is experimenting with what we know. By using writing as a kind of "freeze-frame" for our meanings, we can see what words fit best and begin to think about our thinking. In many composition classrooms, students just do not get to practice using this instrument. I suggest that this is due to teachers who have not considered the workings of language, thought, and imagination. Teachers may also lack a method for using these resources the students already have. The next section explores the dialectical method that incorporates thought and language and illustrates Berthoff's theory of the imagination.
Berthoff's notions of thought, language, and imagination—the essential elements of making meaning—will remain as abstract as the terms if there is not some kind of method that unifies and transforms them from theory to practice. Her method offers teachers and students a way to relate writing to the ways we make sense of the world, and the dialectic, which we can trace back to Socrates, is the basis of that method.

The method attempts to follow the natural form-finding abilities of the "imagination": opposing, defining, renaming, classifying, dividing. One can learn more about the dialectical method by studying the dialogues of Plato. In the Gorgias, for example, Socrates challenges his interlocuters to take responsibility for what they say, especially in their discussion of Sophistic rhetoric. He uses a deliberate question and answer technique, listens to what the others in the discussion have said, defines Sophistic rhetoric by putting it in opposition to other "arts," and then classifies it. Socrates says this method is necessary in argument because "it is not easy for people to define to each other the matters which they take in hand to discuss."¹⁹

Similarly, in the Phaedrus, Socrates says definitions can make meanings "clear and self-consistent."²⁰ His ability to define, combined with the ability to "divide into species" without shattering the unity of the whole, enables him to think and speak. He gives the name "dialecticians" to those who can concentrate their vision on a unity that
is natural and "extend it to multiplicities that are natural." 21

Inherent in the dialectical method is the notion of responsibility—responsibility for forming and presenting ideas. Berthoff challenges teachers and students to make connections between what they think and what they say and write. For teachers, this means becoming what she calls a "REseacher." She puts the emphasis on the RE because she wants to stress the importance of looking and looking again. Teachers become "REseachers" not necessarily by gathering new information, but by thinking about the information we have in our classrooms: "We need to interpret what goes on when students respond to one kind of assignment and not to another, or when some respond to an assignment and others do not. We need to interpret things like that—and then to interpret our interpretations." 22 She says teachers do not always need to look first at the kind of research we can get from educational research foundations for solutions to our problems. That information can be useful only after we have done a thorough evaluation of what we are doing and judge the results. Based on such evaluation, we can form questions that maybe theory can answer. In other words, there must be a constant dialectic between theory and practice.

Since the study of meaning is essential to her theory, she encourages teachers to become philosophers by considering and reconsidering what they do and what they think: to understand the nature of the things that are right in front of them. Becoming a "REseacher" in this sense allows the teacher to take responsibility for what she says and does in the classroom; thus, the teacher rather than the textbook
teaches the class.

In addition to the dialectic between theory and practice is the dialogue that goes on among teachers. Unfortunately, this is sometimes in the form of "recipe-swapping." Often we give our students a writing assignment without really considering what that assignment should do; we think if it worked great for someone else, it should work great for our own classes. One wonders if the "ends" are evaluated in terms of the "means."

It is sometimes difficult for teachers to change their perspectives about what goes on in their classrooms, but once they begin interpreting what goes on, they can begin to enhance the literacy of their students by helping them see how their own forming processes work. Students can become better thinkers and better evaluators of their own discourse when they begin to see the dialectic that can go on between thought and language. Berthoff does this in her text by offering students what she calls "assisted invitations" rather than assignments. The difference may be a matter of semantics, but it may also be a matter of interpretation. How does the meaning change by renaming assignments "assisted invitations"? It implies a sense of giving up authority from the teacher's point of view. In Berthoff's method, teachers are experienced, knowledgeable guides rather than supreme classroom authorities who hold the "truths" that the students are crying to find.

Berthoff believes students can use dialectic as a means of forming and gaining knowledge and communicating their realities. She defines dialectic as "the mutual dependence of language and thought, all the ways
in which a word finds a thought and a thought, a word."\(^{24}\) She often refers to I. A. Richards' definition of dialectic: "[A] containing audit of meaning."\(^{25}\) Obviously, this method relies on some kind of conversation; however, in composition the conversation is usually limited to an internal dialogue because, when we write, we must do the "talking" and the "responding" to what we have written. Listening is also an essential ingredient in a dialectical method. Real listening means being involved, and when a person is really engaged in what she is thinking, writing, or saying, she can more easily internalize, paraphrase, or rethink. In a dialectical process of writing, one must be responsible for listening to the internal dialogue and making the words mean what the writer really wants them to mean. As Berthoff says, "Learning to write is making that inner dialogue make sense to others."\(^{26}\)

As in every method of composing, unity is essential. Every part of composing—naming, defining, opposing, classifying, generalizing, specifying—involve the other parts. Berthoff says, "[W]e recreate wholes by establishing the relationships between the parts."\(^{27}\) Some writers can keep that unity in their heads while auditing meaning, but Berthoff suggests that less experienced writers continually write down what they are saying so they can recognize the inner dialogue and keep the dialectic going.

This dialectical system of collecting, naming, defining, dividing, generalizing, and specifying, at least the awareness of those natural abilities, is essential to understanding and implementing Berthoff's pedagogy. The method seems a bit confusing and chaotic at first, which
may be why some teachers are reluctant to learn about dialectic and use it in their classrooms. The system of "thinking about thinking" and "interpreting interpretations" can have a dizzying effect, but Berthoff believes that writers can find meaning through chaos. Chaos is not really something to fear in the dialectical method because language is a way to generate and order chaos. Through language, writers and thinkers can explore their knowledge and form, substantiate, and present their ideas.

Her textbook lists fourteen points that explain how dialectic can help writers. To highlight briefly, those include naming from different perspectives; developing criteria for judging degree and kind of specification; forming oppositions to identify relationships; and specifying and substantiating the terms of relationships. She sees a connection between this dialectical process and the way the mind works, and she will not let language and thinking be separated. She challenges students to analyze the names they give ideas by asking them to keep in mind this single study question: "How does who do what and why (HDWDWW?)?" She thinks this study question reflects the mind's natural ordering process. "Questioning," she says, "is the life of thought."

The following is an example of an "assisted invitation" from Berthoff's text that comes after she had worked through her HDWDWW? process of composing. She asks the students to write a paragraph about expressways. These are her guidelines:

1. Generate a chaos of names by considering spatial, temporal, and causal aspects of an expressway from different points of view.
2. Using your chaos, adding to it when necessary, substantiate—give substance to—the terms of HDWDWW?. Name various **whos** and **whats** and the **actions**; etc.

3. Make a statement explaining either **agent**, **action**, **manner**, or **purpose**. Decide how specific you want your terms.

4. Make other statements until you have substantiated all the terms of HDWDWW?. Do you have a paragraph?

She also presents her method to students through an analogy that illustrates the dialectic in the writing process:

> Our method works like a Scottish sheep dog bringing in the sheep: she races back and forth, driving the flock in one direction signaled by the shepherd, but acting in response to the developing occasions, nudging here, circling there; rushing back to round up a stray, dashing ahead to cut off an advance in the wrong direction. When you compose, you are the shepherd and the sheep dog, and it's up to you to decide whether you want the sheep in fold, flank, or field, and to know how to get them there.

The first step in her method is generating chaos through lists, which is accomplished by naming in response to something. The teacher's job is to give the students a purpose to generate a list. She suggests they generate lists in response to images and ideas in order to see how their own processes work. By naming, they begin the process of making meaning. This chaos should not be in the form of an outline because that form can limit possibilities and force the writer to draw conclusions too soon.

Once they generate lists, they can begin to order the chaos and form concepts. To form concepts, they must explore the relationships of the names on their lists by opposing those names. When they oppose names,
they naturally begin to group them; they are classifying and ordering chaos. The writer names and renames (the continuing audit of meaning) to establish the degree of generalization or specification, and this is the dialectic in action—the formation of a concept.

Throughout her textbook, Berthoff reminds students to continuously audit their meanings as they write. She explains that they do not just have a fully formed concept, then write it down. Instead, writing down the sentences guides the concept formation. She says, "You discover what you mean by responding critically to what you have said."34

To summarize, Berthoff's method for forming concepts consists of naming to generate chaos; renaming in terms of the study question "How does who do what and why?"; exploring relationships through opposition and classification to form concepts; making statements about the relationships; and making adjustments in the relationships.

The writer's purpose must be constantly reviewed because it determines how one names and renames the classification. In her text, Berthoff writes, "The way a writer names the classes is one of his or her chief means of expressing judgment, of implying evaluation; the naming of classes is an essential phase in the making of meaning."35 The name the writer finally gives to a concept controls the concept she wants her reader to form. As writers carry on inner dialogue, they judge the ambiguities that arise in their own concept and interpret them according to their purposes. Ambiguities give writers the chance to explore different names and develop new concepts. For example, if writers find themselves using the word "art" in one or another of their
classifications or names, they will soon discover how problematic the word is. That does not mean they should avoid the word; but it cannot be used in Berthoff's method without considering its meaning in regard to interpreter, writer's purpose, and context.

Naming, renaming, classifying, and opposing concepts do not complete their development in Berthoff's dialectical method. Our natural capacity for making analogies can help us in the composing process by clearly showing relationships. When we make analogies, we see one thing in terms of another. Analogy helps clarify the relationship and form a concept.

Berthoff explains the importance of analogy:

... analogy is a form that finds form: a form of comparison that helps discover likenesses; a form of argument that helps you discover implications; a form of statement that helps find the form of feeling and thought you intend to express and represent.

The dialectic makes meaning by renaming, defining, classifying, opposing, or comparing. The method helps writers generalize and synthesize the abstractions of their imaginations so they can realize their knowledge. The next section reviews writing exercises that show how the dialectic can become a reality in the classroom.
PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This chapter contains some exercises that illustrate how the dialectical method can be used in the classroom. They do not all necessarily lead to the 500 word essay that has become a staple of freshman English classes. Rather, they teach students about the dialectic between thought and language, and Berthoff believes that nearly any writing assignment can be adapted to the dialectical method.

The Uses of Lists

Before examining a specific assignment in terms of the dialectical method, it is necessary to review some of the ways of using dialectic. List-making is an integral part of the dialectical method because lists are common uses of language that contain underlying assumptions and show the connections between thought and language. Lists are forms of chaos with purpose behind them, whose parts can be opposed, defined, renamed, generalized, classified, or divided. Through lists, chaos can be generated and ordered.

Berthoff devotes a great deal of her text to the way lists can be used to generate and order chaos. The following is an exercise in list-making developed by Dr. Kate Ronald at the University of Nebraska that illustrates the way dialectic can be used. She asks her students to make a list of ten famous people living or dead whom they would invite to a dinner party. Then she has them exchange their lists, study them, and apply the operations of definition, division, and opposition to them. The first step in studying the lists is to define the people by renaming
them. David Letterman, for example, was renamed as a man who found success through his sense of humor. Next, the students group the names on the lists according to similarities and oppositions. Then, students are asked to consider how they could reconcile inviting both Nancy Reagan and Madonna to the same party. Further, they are asked what the oppositions say about the writers of the lists. Students are challenged to consider and write about the implications of their own and other students' lists; they have to "think about their thinking."

The Significant Person Paper

This paper is a common topic for beginning writing classes, which could be adapted to the dialectic method. The students first consider the purpose of the assignment: to conduct a thorough investigation into a particular person's influence and importance in the student's life. Having had practice with list-making, defining, renaming, generalizing, dividing, and classifying, they should be able to transfer those skills to this paper.

For example, a student has chosen a coach as his significant person. First, the student might generate chaos by making a list of the coach's traits, both positive and negative. He might include in this list any particular incidents that illustrate a trait. One entry on such a list might be: "the big game—we tried our best but lost—coach did not make us run laps after the loss as he usually did—we were surprised." The list item above could be renamed into a trait such as "compassionate."

Another list item might refer to a time when the coach was almost
relentlessly demanding. What can be said about the coach? About the writer? How is the opposition to "compassionate" significant to the writer?

Such an approach can give students a starting place and allow them to see what they think—to "know their knowledge." In addition, it challenges the students to take responsibility for what they think through the careful examination of their word choices. They can see the ambiguities in their thinking and realize those ambiguities are not monsters but, as I. A. Richards defines them, "hinges of thought." Perhaps by using this dialectical process, students will be able to compose "significant person" papers that have some substance, rather than papers that simply restate (over and over) how "this person is really important to me." But more importantly, they will be working with a method that helps them form their knowledge.

Understanding Paragraphs

My students have often had a difficult time with paragraphing; for some, paragraphing was arbitrary—just a place to make a break in the copy. Berthoff offers some suggestions for using the dialectic in paragraphs that might help students better understand how paragraphs work.

She uses an organic metaphor to describe how a paragraph works: "A paragraph gathers like a hand . . . because of the opposable thumb. A paragraph gathers by opposing a concept and the elements that develop and substantiate it."³⁷ The human hand can gather because the thumb can
oppose the fingers. In a paragraph, sentences are bundled into a rhetorical form. After students have gathered their sentences, they can name or "gloss" the bundle. Berthoff suggests composing the gloss in the form of an opposition (the "opposable thumb") or an abbreviated sentence that identifies the "who," "what," and "does." The gloss gives them a concept to think with so they are better able to judge what they have written. The gloss acts as a "handle" for the bundle of sentences, and it is a way to judge if the parts can hold together.

When students gloss their paragraphs, they are defining, naming, and renaming, which are activities in the dialectical method. The analogy of the gathering hand with the "opposable thumb" might help students understand the paragraph as a logical, rhetorical form that can gather sentences. If the sentences can be gathered into clusters, they can be named. Berthoff says, "Composing a gloss is a way of stabilizing a cluster of sentences so that you can consider them collectively as well as individually." Students can use the gloss as a way of revising, and they can even rewrite the gloss into the paragraph if they choose. This simple exercise can help students review their work more critically and help them see ways of making real revisions.
When reviewing any theory of composition, it is useful for educators to put the theory in perspective—to compare it to other theories, to see how it relates to what has been tried in the past and what its potential effectiveness might be. Is Ann Berthoff's theory simply an old idea in new attire, or is there something in it that can make a difference in the way we have been perceiving composition instruction?

Before pursuing this question, it is necessary to point out the possible dangers of categorizing pedagogical theories of composition. By putting a theory in a certain group and naming it, there is a chance that we might miss some of the implications of the theory and become misinformed about it. In his review of composition theories, Richard Fulkerson admits that he fell into that trap with his initial label for Peter Elbow's approach. Based on Elbow's methods, he is often labeled "expressionist." But Fulkerson found that based on Elbow's means of evaluating student writing, he was actually closer to the "rhetorical" approach. Elbow judged student writing by its effect on an audience. Fulkerson concluded that to label a theory correctly, both the method and evaluative criteria—the means and ends—must be considered.

Kenneth Dowst, in his essay "The Epistemic Approach: Writing, Knowing, and Learning," also warns about the problems of classifying theories. He wrote a brief review of the major theories with the following hesitation: "To classify is to simplify. In suggesting the essential features of an approach I will have to ignore at first many of
its subtleties and the ways in which, if pursued far enough, it begins to intersect with other approaches."  

Though it is wise to be aware of those problems, dividing pedagogies into various classifications gives us a way to put theories in opposition to one another to see what they offer and what they lack. Even more importantly, as James Berlin points out in his review of theory, each approach argues for a version of reality. In his view, the way writer, reader, language, and reality are related in the composing process will determine "different rules about what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated." Now it is not necessary to have considered one's view of reality before teaching composition, but since composition teachers do seem to be dealing with the world of epistemology, such a consideration might be one way to clarify what composing process one is teaching and how it is taught.

The following review of some of the major composition theories focuses on the way people form the knowledge and truths from which their writing springs. Various teaching methods can evolve from each epistemological stance. The descriptions of these stances are based primarily on the research of Richard Fulkerson and James Berlin. It is important to keep in mind the way these philosophies can overlap in the composition classroom, and it might be worthwhile for teachers to realize how their views of the relationship among writer, reader, language, and reality shape their pedagogy. I will outline the methods and goals of four theories in order to see where Berthoff's approach fits in the philosophies of composition. I hope to show that although there are
similarities between Berthoff and other theorists, her approach is really part of a new way of thinking about composition that may have some interesting possibilities. Her pedagogy, as well as that of other theorists who are operating in this new paradigm, has helped advance our understanding of the composing process.

The term "expressionist" is often found among the array of names for various approaches. The expressionist approach is based on a Platonic epistemological stance. The term is taken from literary criticism—specifically, from M. H. Abram's Mirror and the Lamp. As it is used in composition, it defines a type of writing which emphasizes the personal views of the writer and the honest expression of those views. The roots of this viewpoint stretch as far back as Socrates and wind through the Romantics and the Transcendentalists. With this approach, there is not a strong attempt to influence an audience. What is important is that the writer comes to the truth through some private, inward apprehension. Language is used to correct the road blocks on the way to that "vision"; thus, writing is a very personal activity in which the writer explores and discovers her knowledge. Dialogue may be encouraged among students in the classroom to help each other correct errors in their thinking; the respondents can help the writer remove errors, but ultimately, the individual must come to truth. Metaphor is often taught in this method of composition as a way of conveying the discovered truths.

Some teachers of composition who follow the expressionist model do not grade the students' writing. Many provide time for heavy doses of journal writing. The instructor comments on the journals in a sort of
dialogue, but does not grade or correct mechanics. Those who do grade do so on the basis of whether or not the writing conveys a sense of the writer's response to particular experiences. It may also be judged by whether or not the reader empathized with the writer's feelings. It is the writer's ability to use language to explore and discover that is the focus of the expressionist approach.

Another approach, which seems to be included in many composition classrooms, is the formalist approach. In this model, the students study errors in syntax, paragraphing, and mechanics; in other words, the characteristics of the language are the focus. Students also practice forming sentences and judging which are most effective. Style, content, and structure are evaluated in terms of conventional rules. If one adheres strictly to this method, there is really no place for invention in the writing process. Students may compare sentences which are similar in content to decide which is better stated, but the writing class based on this approach is not concerned with how those sentences evolved. Knowledge is discovered outside the rhetorical process.

A third possible approach to composition instruction is the neo-Aristotelian. Put simply, the goal of this model is for the writing to have the desired effect on the audience. Truth and knowledge are arrived at through formal, deductive logic. Unlike the expressionist approach, the neo-Aristotelian approach says that the sign is equal to the thing it represents, and that reality, which exists separately from the observer, can be known through sense perceptions and eventually communicated. Those sense perceptions are tested for validity through syllogistic
reasoning. Invention is essential to finding the means of persuading the
readers of the discovered probable truths rather than simply a way of
gathering and sorting knowledge. It is the writer's obligation to shape
the discourse to the reader. According to Berlin, this approach is not
used much in composition classrooms. Though many teachers may think they
are teaching from this model, they may be teaching from, in James
Berlin's terms, the Positivist or Current-Traditional model. 45

This approach has its epistemological base in eighteenth century
Common Sense Realism. Only scientific, empirically verifiable truth is
acceptable in this approach, truth that is based on inductive rather than
deductive logic. Experience is understood only through inductive
reasoning, and knowledge is built on the individual's sense perception
alone. Here, truth is discovered outside of the writing situation
through the scientific method of the particular discipline or through
genius (in the arts). This method assumes we can plug our thoughts into
language. If the writer observes the world carefully, the world will
yield its truths, and to communicate those truths the writer only needs
to provide the words that correspond to the thing being observed or the
idea; language and thought are in a one-to-one correspondence. As in the
Aristotelian approach, the writer wants to adapt the discourse to the
minds of the readers. This epistemology seems similar to neo-
Aristotelian, but the difference is that induction rather than deduction
is the means of arriving at knowledge.

In the previously discussed views of knowledge, truth has been a
"product" that can be found in a certain place—rational thinking,
correct sense-perceptions, within the individual. In the epistemic approach, truth is arrived at through dialectical relationships. In this approach, the way we use language reflects and determines what we know, what we can do, and who we are. This is not to say that the only truths that exist are those for which we have language. Dowst writes, "It is rather to say that our manipulation of language shapes our conceptions of the world and of ourselves." The hypostatic power of language allows us to fix our ideas so we can see what we think. This approach assumes that we do not know the world until we compose our knowledge of it through language, and that experimenting with words is experimenting with our knowledge and maybe finding different or better truths. Truth is dynamic and dialectical.

What contribution can this approach make to composition instruction? Young, Becker, and Pike, who have also developed an epistemic approach, can give at least part of the answer to that with an idea they borrow from Kenneth Burke: "We have sought to develop a rhetoric that implies that we are all citizens of an extraordinarily diverse and disturbed world, that the 'truths' we live by are tentative and subject to change, that we must be discoverers of new truths as well as preservers and transmitters of old, and that enlightened cooperation is that preeminent goal of communication."
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Berthoff is obviously most closely associated with the epistemic approach, though her theory and method seem also to intersect with the others in some respects.

She is like the expressionists because she believes that writers must explore their knowledge through language. Journal writing is an important part of her method. But observation plays a larger role for Berthoff than for the expressionists, who do not have as much faith in their perceptions as they do in their "inward eye." The major difference between Berthoff and the expressionists is the way each perceives truth. For Berthoff, language forms truth, and because of that, truth may change. Her method helps students form their knowledge of reality. Expressionists believe there is ultimate, static truth, and that language, though it cannot communicate truth, can help sort it out.

Though she would not condone a formalist approach to composition instruction, she does not dismiss the importance of form and correctness. In her text, she gives students practice in using various syntactical forms because, as she explains, "The reason for having sentence patterns on hand is not to have 'variety' but to provide yourself with linguistic forms that can help find conceptual and expressive forms. A repertory of sentence patterns provides you with ways of putting meanings together."48 The mechanics of writing are not ignored by Berthoff. She insists that students edit to meet the expectations of their readers. Correcting errors is intertwined with making meaning. If a modifier is misplaced,
the meaning is going to get muddled. Berthoff uses syntactical forms as a way of finding expressive forms—part of invention. But to a formalist, the use of studying sentence patterns cannot be stretched that far.

The neo-Aristotelian and current-traditional theories would seem to differ from Berthoff's approach because in her books there is no obvious mention of adjusting the prose to the audience. In his essay "Composition Textbooks and Pedagogical Theory," William F. Woods writes, "Berthoff seldom mentions the need for adapting something to a certain audience for a particular purpose (when or where?), and omissions like this may account for the book's curious air of detachment from ordinary writing problems." Wood is right about the lack of direct reference to audience in Berthoff's text. Yet, it may be that the whole notion of a dialectical approach implies an audience. Berthoff says numerous times in her text that the writer must learn to hear that inner dialogue because the writer must be both the writer and the reader. Writers must learn to make the inner dialogue make sense to others.

Her text deals specifically with using the natural ability to make language and thought work interdependently to form concepts. She does not depend on formal logic for knowledge; yet, with her emphasis on the forms of thinking as the most important aspect of the composing process, her text could be considered logic-based. But her concern is that writers learn to form, identify, and articulate relationships, rather than study formal logic. Invention is ongoing in her approach, and her HDWDWW? is only a part of that invention process.
But Berthoff cannot accept a pedagogy that deals only with empirical truth. In *The Making of Meaning*, she writes, "Underlying all positivist methods and models is a notion of language as, alternately, a set of slots into which we cram or pour our meanings or as a veil that must be torn asunder to reveal reality directly, without the distorting mediation of form." Her theory is based on the dotted-line triangle which shows that everything coming through us is interpreted, mediated. Language cannot be a mold into which we place our thoughts, because in Berthoff's pedagogy language is the shaper of reality. In essence, this is the philosophy of the New Rhetoric or the Epistemic approach.

In Berthoff's approach, meanings are made when we see things in relationship to other things; that is how we make sense of the world. It is a fairly high-minded approach that attempts to incorporate all the best of rhetoric and present a model that does not dwell on correct answers but deals with particular contexts, which may be a much more valuable approach in a world where science and the scientific method have not been able to solve all our problems.

What are some of the implications for evaluation in Berthoff's theory and method? This approach would seem to make evaluation difficult. But if we go along with Fulkerson's idea of matching the ends to the means--evaluation in view of method and goals--then there must be some alternative to grades in a system that seems very contextual and subjective. Berthoff writes, "Whether papers are read by the instructor or not, they should not be 'graded'." But that is not to say that writing should not be evaluated. She suggests a system which includes
progress reports prepared in conferences with the student, a final review of the folder, and perhaps evaluations of papers from other classes or a competency exam read by the instructors or their colleagues. Grades would be on a pass/incomplete basis.

Berthoff does offer some helpful evaluative strategies. Instead of a marginal comment such as "What are you trying to say?", she suggests a comment such as, "How does your meaning change if you put it this way?" or "How does X compare to Y?" which illustrate the dialectic in action. These sorts of comments are much more useful to students who are expected to do meaningful revision because they give them a comment to think with. Just writing "Awkward" or "Unclear" does not give the student a direction.

But what about her epistemological stance? Is it valid? Can it work? If we say that we can, through writing, change our knowledge of reality and replace old truths with new truths, this approach can offer many possibilities for individuals and for the community. In a composition class where students could be, for example, forming their views of life in the country or life in the city, and where they are sharing that evolving knowledge with each other in small groups, they may be able to come to a better understanding of how others form their knowledge—what cultural, environmental, and familial influences have helped shape their views of reality. The dialectical interchange of ideas will help them form their knowledge. Perhaps as they begin to see how they form, they will understand how others form. And if they understand how others form, they may be able to move toward acceptance of
the multiplicities in the world.

Such is the hope of the epistemological view of composition instruction. Berthoff and others who hold similar epistemological views give to composition a mission that is much more far-reaching than other views. Ultimately, and perhaps ideally, composition in the Berthoffian sense can give us a means of fostering interpersonal and global understanding. If one can come to understand the underlying assumptions that form knowledge, one may have more insight into how others form their views. Of course, that does not guarantee acceptance, but it moves toward it.

Can composition instruction do all that? Should it attempt to? Maybe her approach offers another possible goal for composition, but I believe it offers hope for students and teachers because composition becomes more than just a means of communicating or persuading. Her method may help students—especially students in beginning composition classes—relax about their writing. Her nonjudgmental approach could also help get rid of the "English teacher as dragon" stereotype. It may be an approach that gives composition instructors at all grade levels a way to make writing more significant, and it may give further legitimacy to composition instruction and research at the college level.
ENDNOTES


9 Berthoff, The Making of Meaning, p. 43.


12 Berthoff, The Making of Meaning, p. 64.


21 Plato, Phaedrus, p. 55.


24 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 47.


26 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 48.


28 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 188.

29 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 71.

30 Berthoff, The Making of Meaning, p. 75.

31 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 74.

32 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 49.

33 See page 22 in this paper.

34 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 111.

35 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 112.

36 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 136.

37 Berthoff, Forming, Thinking, Writing, p. 158.
38 Berthoff, *Forming, Thinking, Writing*, p. 162.


41 Dowst, p. 66.

42 Berlin, p. 766.

43 Berlin, p. 766.


45 Berlin, p. 769.

46 Dowst, p. 69.


51 Berthoff, *Forming, Thinking, Writing*, p. 4.
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