

A Response to Monique Shetayh

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In her article “Wrapped Up in the Online World: Technology, Communication, Blogging and Youth Today,” featured in volume 7 of *Young Scholars in Writing*, Monique Shetayh considers how technology, by promoting multimodal literacy, has influenced the writing process. While Shetayh focuses specifically on how blogging has impacted young writers’ processes and what that impact implies for the writing classroom, she does not consider comprehensively the writing theory pertinent to her insights and the implications for more formal essay writing. Therefore, in response to her article, I will approach the nexus between technology and composition from a theoretical perspective in order to consider how composition teachers and tutors can adapt traditional writing theory to reflect technology’s role in a young writer’s composition process.

In her article, Shetayh focuses on the impacts of technology as a medium for expression. However, technology is not just a medium for expression but also a means of gathering evidence. I contend that this latter role of technology has also impacted young writers’ composition processes due to the nonlinear nature of today’s principal sources. Gunther Kress, a professor of English and education at the University of London, and Theo Van Leeuwen, a professor of communications at the London College of Printing, make the distinction between linear and nonlinear texts. Whereas linear texts dictate the order in which a reader must read, nonlinear texts allow a reader to choose his or her own reading path (208). Today’s research methods are primarily nonlinear. Most notably, the Internet, with its myriad links and, as Shetayh notes, its multimodal aspects, constitutes a nonlinear text. Since most writers absorb their information through the nonlinear format of such sources, the knowledge a writer retains about a subject reflects this nonlinear form.

The difficulty arises when young writers attempt to translate the nonlinear knowledge that they have obtained from their research into the linear form of an essay. The writing theory traditionally taught in secondary schools complicates this conversion from the nonlinear to the linear. Conventionally, secondary schools teach linear composition theory, particularly the stage-process model, which consigns planning, writing, and revising to distinct, separate stages (Flower and Hayes 367). Students who feel obligated to adhere to this process often experience writer’s block due to the rigidity of the progression and due to difficulties arranging their nonlinear thoughts into a linear form. As T. R. Johnson summarizes Mike Rose’s observations concerning writer’s block, “Students are often blocked by rigid ‘dos and don’ts’ that they have internalized from past teachers and textbooks, and what they finally painstakingly produce inevitably never matches their inflexible plans” (148). Shetayh presents blogging as a nontraditional form of composition that helps young writers to overcome writer’s block, or the “intimidation of the blank Word document” (87), because it provides an “authentic purpose” (85) for writing and connects young writers direct-

ly with an audience. However, although blogging may provide a student with an impetus to write, it does not directly bridge the gap between nonlinear technology and linear essays.

Instead, I contend that Shetayh's argument can be distilled down to a more universal writing theory that is more applicable than blogging to formal, analytical writing—recursion. The recursive theory of composition recognizes that writers deviate from a linear path by returning to certain aspects of their writing process, such as planning, writing, and revising, as they compose. According to Sondra Perl's theory of recursiveness, "throughout the process of writing, writers return to substrands of the overall process, or subroutines . . . to keep the process moving forward" (141). Unlike traditional writing theories, recursiveness models the inner process of the writer instead of the finished product, the essay (Flower and Hayes 367). Recursiveness, since it is more flexible and allows students to backtrack and revise as they write, simulates the thought processes of writers as they translate their nonlinear thoughts on their topics into the linear form of an essay. Thus, teaching and promoting awareness of recursiveness as a theory of composition may help dispel the plague of writer's block for contemporary young writers because, as a nonlinear writing theory, it helps to bridge the gap between nonlinear sources and linear essays.

Therefore, the ever-increasing role of technology in modern society necessitates an examination of how we teach composition. The flexibility of word processing and technology in general allows writers to abandon traditional, rigid theories of composition in favor of nontraditional, adaptable writing theories, such as recursion. While recursion is not the acme of all writing theories, perhaps if we combine nontraditional, formal writing theories like recursion with informal forms of composition such as blogging, we can help students to alleviate writer's block when faced with formal writing and encourage them to make the composition process their own.

Works Cited

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