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The Contextual Reshaping of Beliefs about L2 Writing: Three Teachers' Practical Process of Theory Construction

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[Sima Sengupta](#)
Department of English, Hong Kong Polytechnic University
<egsima@polyu.edu.hk>

[Maida Kennedy Xiao](#)
Shanghai
<maida_xiao@yahoo.com>

Abstract

In the last two decades there have been discussions of the theoretical knowledge base for ESL writing pedagogy. This paper focuses on how teaching experience at a newly implemented L2 writing center contributed towards personal theory development of ESL writing for three teachers. By combining the literature on teacher knowledge with ESL writing, we studied teachers' changing beliefs about ESL writers, readers, texts and contexts. With data from planned collegial experience-sharing activities and writing centre feedback we created a story of each teacher's orientation. We then conducted open-ended interviews to gather responses from the protagonists of the stories. Through inductive analyses of the data we found that all three have critically examined and somewhat revised their content and pedagogic content knowledge of ESL writing. Using these stories we question whether programme and curriculum developers should devise strategies to help teachers consciously see the theory-practice connection in ESL writing.

Introduction

The impact of experience on teachers' knowledge development is a thorny issue as one may question whether "ten years' experience is only one year experienced ten times" (Bowen & Marks, 1994, p. 168). Bowen and Marks (1994, p. 173) suggest that through critical reflection, self-observation, experimentation and risk-taking every week of teaching can build teachers' knowledge base. In this process of making every week of experience into practical knowledge, we can see teacher knowledge development as spiraling cycles consisting of "innovate-reflect-adjust" moves (see for example, Grodjan, 1991; Pennington, 1995) that essentially indicate a complex interaction between the teaching context and teaching experience. In this exploratory article, we attempt to narrate three English teachers' journey through the interactive loop that Schцn (1983) calls reflection-in-action as they take part in a new pedagogic experience of teaching at a newly implemented L2 writing center. We focus on teachers' images of the four elements in writing: the writer, the reader, the context and the text. We trace how these images were enriched, revised and re-conceptualized as a result of the teachers' involvement in a pilot writing center started in the department of English in the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong. Through the narrative, we attempt to demonstrate how both the context and the practitioner's

views of it continually change and influence each other especially if reflection and collegial interaction is built into everyday teaching enabling constant engagement "in a process of sense-making" (Johnson, 1996, p. 770). [-1-]

At the outset however, we need to clarify certain ideas. First, theory building is not top priority in the ordinary classroom teacher's agenda (Clarke, 1994). Yet when we look at theory building, the natural starting place is the teacher whose experience and understanding of the students, the teaching context, the subject matter and the ever-changing relationship between these facets form the knowledge base of both the individual teacher as well as TESOL teaching community. Richards, 1996; Bailey & Nunan, 1995; Freeman & Johnson, 1999). One potential source of influence on teachers' developing knowledge base is the nature of the teaching experience. Johnson (2000, p. 5) calls this the "professional landscape" that shapes teachers' situated action. Although experience does not necessarily guarantee rethinking and re-conceptualization, we need to know how and under what circumstances new experiences, in the course of teaching, shape and refine a teacher's knowledge base.

Intuitively, as teachers ourselves, we know that teachers continually extend their knowledge base and personal theories all the time. Certainly this is the case in areas such as second language writing where we are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory (Silva, 1993; Cumming, 1998; Matsuda, 1999). At this stage of theory development for TESOL, insider perspective or intuitive theory can advance the shaping of the knowledge base of L2 writing and its pedagogy in many ways (Krischner et al., 1996). In other words, we can and should consciously make the theory-practice connection in the ESL context to see how individual theory construction contributes to the understanding of L2 writing in general and writing teachers' collective knowledge base in particular. This paper attempts to show how the developing knowledge base of the teachers in this study was a synthesis of various types of activities, deliberately planned by the curriculum developers to create an atmosphere of collegial experience-sharing—all leading to practitioner theory building. These activities consisted of a common core of reading, discussion of issues arising from the reading versus practice/practical knowledge, and regular meetings to relate learning experiences of individual teachers through their involvement with the writing center.

What exactly is knowledge in the context of L2 writing? Research into teacher knowledge encompasses a variety of models (see for example, Shulman, 1986; Grossman 1990; Calderhead & Shorrock, 1994). Shulman (1986) and Wilson, Shulman and Richert (1987) often make a distinction between content knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge. The idea of separate categories of knowledge, however, is problematic because the boundaries are fuzzy (Borko & Putnam, 1994; Wu & Sengupta, 1998).

The theoretical framework for studying teacher knowledge construction arose from the literature. Silva (1990) states that the 1940s to mid-1960s was the phase of controlled composition in ESL writing pedagogy with focus on form (syntactic level), which soon gave way to the "current traditional paradigm," in which the emphasis was on rhetorical drills [1] (Young, 1978; Silva, 1990). Then in the late 1970s/early 1980s, process-centered ideas took shape (Raimes, 1985, 1987; Zamel, 1984). The eighties focused on the social aspects of writing, bringing to the forefront the academic community as the reader with the gradual rise to prominence of English for academic purposes and later genre analysis. [-2-]

The differences between approaches lie in the way these views regard the four components of composing: the writer, the reader, the text and the context (Silva, 1990). Table 1 summarizes the theoretical framework used for studying the four elements as conceptualized within the formalist, process theory and social constructionist theories (see for example, Silva, 1990; Johns, 1990; Nystrand et al., 1993). The reader will notice that the table is an amalgamation of various camps. For the ease of analysis, there are many theoretical stances that are subsumed under broad terms based on the major focus of the theory. Thus, for example, formalists and current traditionalists are put together because their focus is on the text, though very different aspects of the text.

Table 1: The theoretical framework

Theoretical orientation	Reader	Writer	Text	Context
Formalism/ Current traditional rhetoric	Receiver of meaning– playing a largely passive role	The transmitter of meaning, entirely responsible for creating a "good" text	Generally seen as an autonomous embodiment of meaning– at the grammatical or rhetorical level	Focuses on features of "good" text Meaning is to a great extent univocal

Process theory	Active interpreter of meaning–as readers of others' as well as own text	A kind of rhetorical problem-solver relying on individual recursive process to gradually build meaning	Gradual and recursive translation of writers' goals and thoughts into a evolving text	The individual's act of writing and reading is the focus Directed by individual's purposive meaning-making
Social constructionism	A member (or aspiring member) of a interpretative community who have specific expectations	As a member (or aspiring member) of the community who recognizes/knows/uses the codes and conventions	A sophisticated manipulation of discourse conventions and expectations of the community	The social context is extremely powerful–meaning-making is always with reference to a context of many similar texts

[-3-]

The approaches described above, one could argue, mainly come from the field of composition. The field of L2 writing is dynamically related to both composition (L1) and ESL (Matsuda, 1998). Thus, Matsuda (1998) argues that the knowledge of L2 writing is essential for both ESL teachers and writing teachers in the U.S. higher education. This observation is particularly appropriate for a context such as Hong Kong (and other South East Asian contexts) where L2 writing is subsumed under ESL and thus ESL teachers need to develop a distinct knowledge base of L2 writing that can enable them to place L2 writing within a cross-disciplinary context. Indeed, the required reading for the Writing Assistance Program (WAP) pilot staff development workshops included papers from L2 writing in general as well as the rich literature that exists on writing center practice so that teachers could see a global picture of writing. Before examining the impact of the experience on teachers' knowledge, some background is needed on the program itself.

Background

The Writing Assistance Program was planned for almost two years before the pilot project was finally approved. The Writing Assistance Program was established with the aim of providing one-to-one writing assistance to undergraduates at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, an English-medium tertiary institution. (For a detailed program description, see Xiao, 2001.) The program provides one-to-one assistance to students on their writing in the form of half-hour or one-hour writing conferences. Students are encouraged to seek assistance with any writing assignment or writing-related questions they have. Typically, the texts students bring in range from application letters and out-of-class essays to final year theses. Each student after initially registering, books a convenient time, comes to a session at the designated time with their texts and fills in a pre-session form which asks for background information and a description of the kind of help needed. At the end of each session, students are asked to give feedback while teachers also fill in a feedback sheet indicating what was done, the problems encountered and a brief overall evaluation. The aim of WAP conferences is not to solve all problems that face the writer but to assist writers to begin to think critically about their texts. Systematic documentation protocols are observed which consist of pre-session forms and post-session feedback forms filled in by students and documentation forms filled in by teachers as well as a photocopy of the text. Consent for using these documents for research purposes is sought from all parties.

In developing the program, a number of interrelated issues were addressed. One issue was the question of how to orient and then support the twelve original staff members, who were drawn from a larger group of existing English Department teachers, to work as writing consultants. Only some of the twelve, who were all qualified and experienced ESL teachers, had a familiarity with the current literature on writing theory and practice–indeed some had only limited experience with one-to-one conferencing.

The issue of how to offer staff development and hands-on training was addressed very seriously at WAP. Outside experts were brought in to discuss writing theory and pedagogy as well as writing center theory and practice. A reading list of relevant literature was circulated among the teachers (see Appendix B) and formal and informal seminars and discussions were held to critically examine issues arising from them as well as those arising from the actual writing conferences. Teachers were encouraged to maintain teaching journals in order to reflect on their work and interaction with writers. The pilot's coordinator (the second author of this paper) kept teachers informed on issues that arose each week as well as administrative matters through weekly e-mails. Subscription and back issues of the Writing Lab Newsletter and the Writing Centre Journal were purchased and teachers were encouraged to read them. Meetings were held throughout the semester pilot to discuss the

dynamics of WAP writing conferences and teachers engaged in many informal conversations about their experiences throughout the period. These efforts and activities created program synergy as well as an ethos that valued reflective practice and collegial support. [-4-]

Thus the WAP was piloted within an environment where active knowledge development was not only possible but also inevitable. Within this backdrop the following stories need to be interpreted.

Procedures

This narrative starts at the time when the teachers were getting ready for teaching in a pilot writing center started at their university in Hong Kong. We first examined the ways in which these three teachers expressed their understanding and assumptions about the nature of L2 writing in meetings and collegial interactions. From the audio taped data, we constructed a narrative for each teacher–a narrative of our interpretation of the individual teacher's views about writing, his or her overall theoretical orientation, and the changes that are apparent. In total, there were three audio taped meetings and field notes taken at the meetings from which this narrative was created. The first meeting was held before the WAP was started. In this meeting, each teacher was asked to read and present one or two papers in order to enable the whole group to discuss the central issues of each reading. The second meeting, held after a few weeks, was aimed towards the issues arising from experience with a visiting U.S. expert. The last meeting was held at the end of the pilot semester to debrief and develop action plans.

From these sources, three randomly chosen individual narratives were then tabulated on the theoretical framework in terms of the ways in which these teachers seemed to perceive reader, writer, text, and context. This interpretation was then crosschecked with the feedback forms of the sessions the three had conducted at the WAP. The aim of creating this narrative or case record was not to label instructors as belonging to a particular camp (although we could not always avoid such labeling), but to record clearly the ways in which each teacher talked of writing and the ways in which this "talk" had changed over time.

We then gave each teacher a summary of this narrative and asked for an interpretation of the narrative and expansion on how they saw their own knowledge development of L2 writing (see Appendix A) [2]. Through this process, we attempted to ensure that the teachers had some power ultimately to shape their stories. These interviews were taped, transcribed and the incoming data were fitted into the original narrative.

In the following, we report how individual teachers see their own experiences as a process of theory building in L2 writing and its pedagogy. Although ultimately the reader hears our voices in this paper, included in the story are the teachers' voices–sometimes dissenting, sometimes questioning, and often blurring the distinction between teachers and researchers. (The three names used are not the instructors' real names.) [-5-]

Teacher 1: Peter

Peter, a Western male, had spent a number of years teaching second languages. He is an intensely private person who does not take things lightly. He reflects on his work and is eager to read and discuss issues that pertain to meeting the needs of his students. Although a native English speaker, Peter obviously recognizes the difficulties both teachers and students may have and expect in L2 writing. This stems partially from his background. Since he majored in a second language, he feels that he understands the pains and pitfalls of using a second language in an academic setting to express complex ideas.

From listening to Peter in the first meeting, it was clear that Peter was essentially an **expressivist.** We came to this conclusion for two reasons. First, in the initial WAP meeting, Peter questioned assumptions about an ever-present reader and expressed the opinion that writing is "essentially personal–any kind of writing", indeed "therapeutic". However, in a later meeting, discussing genre-specific writing, he expressed the belief that writing probably needs to be seen more globally.

Hand in hand with the expressivist beliefs, we also detected other orientations in his practice. His feedback to students showed an element of formalism in that he often focused on accuracy and did not seem to discuss the reader or the context at all initially. Yet in his later feedback, there were comments on readership and purpose.

He reacted to this labeling of essentially "expressivist" in orientation with his usual equanimity. He admitted that his own background (in an Ivy League institution) might have partly shaped his ideas. He believes that stereotypes such as "formalist" or "expressivist" are essentially flawed since writing is a "broad umbrella." He admitted that in his feedback, personal expression was often relegated to a less important place,

as basic accuracy seemed to be thwarting students' ability to express themselves. Yet he was concerned with our pigeonholing him to into the expressivist camp. However, he contended that his notions have broadened. He felt that through his close contact with the WAP writers, he has developed a deeper understanding of writing in context. Although he continues to see writing as "personal," even in an academic setting where creativity, originality and personal interpretation go a long way in determining the quality of a piece, he admitted that more and more he realizes the role of the reader in an academic setting–especially for L2 writers in a ESP situation. He felt that the background reading and the input from visiting experts had made him more conscious of readership issues.

His discussion of reader at the time of the interview was inextricably linked with the context where the reader holds the power, and the text has to meet this powerful reader's expectations. Thus, the writers that come in clinging to their texts had made him see a "production-oriented" relationship between writer and reader–quite unlike the expository writing that had meant "writing" to him. In this production line, he said that he had realized that there are a variety of personalized approaches and a constant tension between a number of concerns ranging from global meaning to the "nitty-gritty" of grammatical forms. [-6-]

Initially, he questioned whether genre-specific writing instruction was problematic since English language teachers do not have the necessary information and background to teach discipline-specific discourse. But in his interview, he agreed that there has been a gradual transformation in his thinking. He pointed out the very nature of the encounters he had experienced as a WAP teacher allowed him to change gradually towards a social-interactive perspective, because the experiences involved "seeing students writing papers for a specific community." This product-centered context, he believed, had allowed him to understand why the writer's focus might be on grammar or lower-level concerns–he realized that these concerns enable student writers to address reader expectation–especially when they seek the help of a language teacher. This synergy between reader, writer, text, and context was becoming apparent in his feedback as well as in the views he expressed at the last meeting. Below are some of the points he made in this meeting:

> _Peter_: So how do we distinguish between accuracy and fluency in writing?
>
> _Colleague 1_: I think we are not trying to do that at all–are we?
>
> _Colleague 2_: _Yes we are–we are discussing HOCs and LOCs [higher-order concerns and lower-order concerns]–so we are making a distinction._
>
> _Peter_: How are we going to address higher-level concerns if the lower level concerns are not taken into account first?

In another exchange:

> _Colleague_: . . . But we have to think of the reader and purpose when we think of how to deal with grammar.
>
> _Peter_: I think that we have to remember that these students are writing for teachers who are not looking for anything beyond accurate information.

In the interpretation sheet, the following three major changes were noted in the way Peter spoke of writing. Although agreeing with these changes, he saw them within the broader pedagogic landscape, as we will discuss below.

As a result of reflecting on the WAP experience, the change in Peter seems to consist of:

- Seeing the importance of the reader;
- Recognizing a social dimension of writing; and
- Questioning the divide between lower and higher-level concerns as the lower-level concerns often generate from higher-level meaning-related issues.

So, how has this practitioner built his theory? There are two aspects that are worth mentioning. One conspicuous element was that in all the discussion of writing, there were very few instances of talking about writing without any reference to its teaching. In voicing his own change towards a more social model of writing, the focus of all his observation is the student writer who has come to the writing center (WAP)–a knowledge base that is wholly student-centered as the following excerpt indicates: [-7-]

> "I think the reading we'd done was useful but I liked the later meetings where we shared experiences. We all seemed to agree

that the challenge was in meeting the needs of each student coming to us. It was the encounter with individual students that shaped my feedback and‹maybe–my understanding of the readings. In a way–it all starts with the students–their writing, their concerns, their expectations . . . "

In addition, in his ever-extending knowledge base, there is much more evidence of reflective pragmatism in that he adopts a rational combination of different approaches to suit the specific situation of individual student writers.

Teacher 2: Paula

Paula, a native Cantonese-speaking female teacher, is able to invoke her own experiences as a second language writer when she talks about her students' writing. Paula readily admitted that she had found writing effectively and critically in a second language quite demanding when she was a university student. As a teacher, she is quiet but reflective, often posing questions that are central to any discussion of writing.

In her comments about writing in the first meeting, Paula expressed the opinion that:

> *Paula:* . . . the most important thing is [that students] be able to talk about their writing.

> *Colleague:* Yes but how would they do that?

> *Paula:* . . . by discussing their difficulties like why they are not sure whether to use "a" or "the" or no article... Something like that.

In the first meeting, Paula the teacher looked back on her experience as a student, where she had no access to the processes of other writers and thus did not know "how other writers process information." She seemed to foresee an encounter in the WAP where the student writer would get to see how a teacher-evaluator's process worked, and thus understand the nature of teacher expectation. In the subsequent meetings, Paula's voice seemed to have changed. Although Paula was quiet in meetings and was not comfortable expressing her opinions, she said in the last meeting:

> Yes I keep thinking about this discussion of LOCs and HOCs–ever since I read that article and our last meeting with xxx [US expert]. But I think it is not a good distinction. ...For someone like a student writing an assignment, he is trying to make himself clear and every concern is to make that–I mean make my meaning clear–they are all higher level–even whether they are using the wrong or correct tense . . . maybe I have not understood the ideas yet.

In her feedback, Paula focused on accuracy. She discussed errors and wrote her comments on errors with no mention of the writing context, such as the purpose of writing or readers in her written comments. [-8-]

In the interpretation sheet we had written:

Paula is essentially a believer in the process. However, this belief in the importance of the process is not one where form is ignored but seen as part of the process. So she is the kind of process proponent that Raimes (1986) recommends–one who takes into account both form and rhetorical concerns. Although in Paula's case it is form that seemed to be more important.

Questioning the implied "formalist" labeling that we were assigning her, she disagreed that to her, personally, form is more important. However, once we explained why we came to that conclusion–the number of times we found her talking about "correct" and "grammar" when discussing writing–even when discussing the process, she partially agreed. She conceded that when the discussion of writing is framed in terms of pedagogy as the WAP meetings were–it was the student writers and their needs that were uppermost in her mind–and within that L2 context, she believes, formal accuracy is an extremely important need. In the interview she mentioned that although she thought that making the student writer aware of the process was essential–she could better understand now why students go for lower-order concerns at the level of simplistic grammatical rules instead of the more complex problems of ideas and their development. In the past she saw a distinction between content and form and believed that lower-order concerns were the "easiest" to deal with because there is a "correct" answer. As a result of her experience with the WAP, she was able to rethink these lower-order needs because hidden behind these needs she increasingly saw the need to express complex ideas to a reader "who knows these ideas but still wants to read about them". When asked how her ideas about writing had changed, she said in the interview:

P: Oh I think I have learnt a lot–I now have a kind of much broader understanding. I used to be very concerned about accuracy and thought accuracy was the most important thing– but now I can explain why it is so important.

S: So are you saying that you still obsess over accuracy?

P: No–not obsessed but I still think that accuracy is the most important aspect of writing because if my reader does not understand my points or the purpose for saying something–then as a writer I am failing.

S: You are able to see why accuracy is important?

P: I mean because many students bring assignments–the information is known to their teachers–so they are trying to show if they have understood the ideas–so their readers have to see that the ideas are clear–it is not like writing an essay in secondary school.

She seems to have broadened her understanding of the writer and built-into this breadth is, by her own admission, a concern about the reader. In the first meeting, Paula, as a result of reading Silva's (1990) chapter, questioned whether the unknown reader was a necessary construct within L2 pedagogy. Yet by the time of the interview, she felt that even a non-expert reader is important. She admitted that the reader had become an important element in formulating her pedagogy. She also expressed doubts as to whether the focus of writing center [-9-] pedagogy can be the process or if it is inevitably the product alone. She said that within the writing center experience at the university, where students have generally come in with first drafts, the product or the text brought in naturally plays a pivotal role. In this text, the writer is only able to see lower-level problems. Paula felt that every time students started to talk about writing, these lower-level concerns were the only ones that they were able to articulate. She believed two factors explained this focus: First, the writers' educational context constantly emphasizes sentence-level grammar rather than the text as a whole. Second, as a teacher, she had started to question the dichotomies such as process and product or content and form. At the end of the interview, she argued:

I don't know but I think that all these things like LOCs and HOCs and process and product are sort of unnecessary–they make everything complicated. I think in our context it is the product that is important–and in WAP–I think our students want us to correct their grammar–not talk about reader and purpose and organization–so I try to talk about these things–like organization–by correcting the grammar and telling them how their teachers can easily understand their ideas if they use the correct tense or the correct prepositions or articles.

So, how does Paula see the writing center experience changing the way she views writing? First, she believed that the writing center experience had helped her understand the L2 writer better and had broadened her notions beyond the writer's writing process to the writer as a struggling undergraduate, desperately trying to cater to an unknown and slightly intimidating reader. Her notion of the writer now encompassed a number of perspectives including the social role played by the disciplinary community. In that sense there was a move towards a social-interactive view. Second, she felt that she had learned to understand writing within the context having seen the hindrances in the student writer's path more clearly (i.e., beyond her own experience as a student) and having understood how the context shapes the writer's concerns and needs.

The change in her knowledge base is an interesting example of practitioner theory construction. She now seemed to see a false dichotomy between process and product, form and ideas, and lower and higher-order concerns. She was, like Peter, moving towards a context-enriched, student-centered knowledge base arising from the close encounter with troubled writers who arrived at the WAP seeking help. As a result of the experience, she felt more empowered to provide students an opportunity to see a real reader in action and understand "the expectations of a "Western teacher" as well as a "local" teacher–a distinction that Paula saw as crucial in her discussion of readers.

Teacher 3: Mary

Mary, a Western female, sees education as a process of nurturing individuals to achieve their full potential. She comes from a counseling background and brought to the WAP an understanding of how to create a safe and stress-free environment to foster learning. For Mary, writing has not been something that she has tried to know about. By nature, she is actively reflective in that she attends staff developmental seminars and questions what she is told. So the ideas of the reader and the academic discourse community are not new to her. In the first meeting, she talked about issues of disciplinary writing and importance of audience awareness: [-10-]

Colleague: But the reader is always the teacher–and we do not really know what the teacher expects.

Mary: Yes I think I agree–in our context the audience is the teacher who will give students a grade. But each teacher is looking for specific ideas–written in a particular way. Also for each assignment the expectation is different–we can infer some of these expectations from the writing assignment.

With respect to feedback, she commented on purpose and reader expectation from the very outset. Many of her comments also related to logical organization. It was difficult to find a consistent pattern in her feedback, unlike that of Peter and Paula.

In the interpretation sheet, we had wrote, "Her approach seems to be an amalgamation between process and current traditional." Although she agreed that it was a "fair interpretation," she felt that there were tensions that went beyond such simple interpretations.

The first of these tensions was between the paradigms. Discussions and seminars organized by the WAP, according to Mary, helped her see the different paradigms within which a writing teacher operates and how context and individual needs shape what we teach and do. The needs based support offered at the WAP, she felt, had made her realize that as a writing teacher she needed to rethink her broader notions of readership to incorporate a specific reader for whom the text is being prepared. She saw herself as a reader, in partnership with the writer, getting a text ready for a third unknown reader. Often she felt that since she did not know the reader, she had to accept student writers' assurances that their teacher-reader would understand what they had written. Thus, there was a constant battle between the reader and the text at the WAP because:

> *Mary:* . . . the "real" reader (the teacher for whom the text is prepared) and the general informed readership often have different needs. . . . In the WAP sessions the text takes center stage because it is there — needing attention–and even a simple lower-level grammatical error correction–like crossing a "T" or dotting an "I"– might lead to a neater text and a better grade. I felt that a discussion of readership with students is superficial–sometimes I felt I was wasting my time.

> *S:* But did you abandon these discussions?

> *Mary:* No–I continued–but there was this tension–often the feeling that the student did not get what she wanted.

A dilemma, according to Mary, was to focus on appropriate needs. Student's felt needs were often lower-order proof reading while the teacher perceived needs were global. She said at the interview:

Sometimes texts brought in for grammar correction were crying out for discourse-level rhetorical rethinking about the purpose and focus. I felt I had to point that out–but often saw that the student writer was much more interested when I was talking about a common error rather than logic or reader expectation. [-11-]

Mary felt that within a nurturing environment, teachers have a moral obligation to meet the felt need of the student. Yet, as the teacher, it was her responsibility to take the student writer beyond the sentence and ultimately beyond the text so that one "*is a teacher of writing and not a proofreader for one* [particular text]."

Mary herself saw an extension of her pedagogic content knowledge in that she felt that she had become a more effective writing teacher as a result of the experience. However, she pointed out that it would be difficult to attribute the changes in her thinking solely as the product of a semester long involvement with the WAP pilot, although the WAP did make her view student concerns, however low-level, more sympathetically. The involvement with the WAP, the readings, the collegial interaction with colleagues and visiting experts, she felt, had made her more interested in second language writing and more aware of the approaches available. Indeed, she believed that working with a variety of students one-on-one has helped her understand the challenges that teachers of L2 writing face in enabling their student writers to see other facets of writing such as the process, the reader and the global context. As a practitioner, therefore, she now sees an emerging theory of writing–a theory that she never attempted to develop earlier, although she taught writing to all her students as part of general ELT. In response to the question of whether the WAP experience had changed and influenced her views of writing, she asserted:

> Of course–I have not read so much about writing and never had the opportunity to apply the readings directly to my teaching. But WAP discussions sort of situated the reading within the context–a sort of situated learning. None of the ideas were new–but they seemed new in light of our discussions and arguments. I started to realise how important reading and collegial supportive environments are for developing all of us–even the most experienced of teachers.

Discussion and Implications

These brief stories of three L2 teachers in a writing center offer an opportunity to see how teachers were able to build a knowledge base as a result of their involvement with a writing assistance program (WAP). One might question whether such refining and revising of knowledge would have taken place even if the teachers were not part of the WAP. Indeed, this was a question that was posed at the interviews. Only Mary conceded that her rethinking might have been influenced by factors beyond the WAP. However, all three asserted that their involvement with the WAP had extended their knowledge of teaching writing (pedagogic content) and enabled them to integrate that with new knowledge of writing (content knowledge) as a result of the readings and discussion sessions.

This knowledge base was not simply shaped by the encounters with the students coming to WAP. Without a doubt, the very nature of the WAP encounters with students at different developmental levels coming in with a variety of texts–ranging from "excellent" to "Oh no!"–had a profound effect on theory development. However, the collegial environment that the WAP had created and the ways in which the organizers had provided a forum for teachers to reflect actively and learn from experience also fostered this development. We feel such a move has important implications for the classroom; as teams working with specific groups, we can together build in explicit reflective encounters of teams based on reading and experience-sharing so that every week of teaching experience also became a learning experience for a teacher (Bowen & Marks, 1994). [-12-]

Another aspect of knowledge development was the more varied approach that all three were ready to adopt at the time interviews were conducted at the end of the pilot. This allowed them to take into account the four elements of writing from a variety of rational options. Thus, all three questioned certain dichotomies, though in different ways. We had a peek into how teachers develop "ways of knowing and doing that represent the socially constructed, perceptual, and interpretative nature of real teaching" (Johnson, 1996, p. 770). Indeed, this ability to focus on different elements of writing at different points could probably be seen as situated theories (Freeman & Johnson, 1999).

The final theory building was in the way the teachers developed an understanding of ESL student concerns. As teachers of writing, they had all seen the importance of lower-level mechanical accuracy but as members of the WAP teaching team, they may have started to question the narrow focus on these lower-level concerns. The WAP pilot experience may have helped them see that such concerns often arose from higher-level linguistic needs that students were unable to articulate.

Further research is necessary to see whether the introduction of teaching initiatives, especially those in alternative teaching environments, such as writing centers, legitimize the examination and discussion of theory-practice connection for many teachers who might otherwise feel it unnecessary. The WAP seemed to be a catalyst in teacher reflection and development, and these teachers, who had together developed the WAP, mentioned this reciprocal nature of the context being shaped by their experiences while inexorably shaping their experiences in the process.

Conclusion

This paper is written with the belief that in order to value teacher theories as more than "practitioner lore" (North, 1987), we need to see the nature of developing knowledge base within the context in and by which such theory is shaped. We have tried to show how three teachers have developed their pedagogic understanding of second language writing and the kinds of contextual influences that shaped their development. We are, however, not suggesting that all innovative moves should follow the route we took. We only suggest that unless collegial and intellectual support is provided to anchor our teaching experiences as active reflection on action, experience may well become mere repetition because critical interactive opportunities, which encourage teachers to "innovate-reflect-adjust", need to be created–they may not just happen.

Notes

1The focus of teaching was on the product in terms of analyzing discourse in word, sentence and paragraph; classifying discourse into rhetorical patterns, such as, description, narration, exposition.

2 At this stage, we had started drafting the first draft of the paper. Our plans changed since then. For example, we could only interview three teachers. [-13-]

About the authors

Sima Sengupta teaches English language at the Department of English, in the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong. Her research interests lie in literacy development at the tertiary level and teacher education. She is currently involved in providing and researching language support to university teachers.

Maida Kennedy Xiao has taught English in the US, China and Hong Kong. While teaching at the English Department & English Language Centre in the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, she set up and managed the writing programme described in this paper. Her scholarly interest is in rhetoric, composition and teacher education. She now resides in Shanghai where she is engaged in teacher training and educational and ELT consulting.

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Appendix A

To: Peter

Re: Interview: details

Dear Peter

*I wish to tell you a little about this study and the interview. I am trying to see how the experience of WAP has made all of us develop a deeper understanding of second language writing. I have chosen four teachers specifically because from the tapes of the meetings (I have heard them all) I have made some assumptions about the ways in which you conceptualized writing and the rethinking that seems to have taken place. I have then had a quick look at some of the sessions you have taught at WAP. However, this is my interpretation of you from two sources of data: audio taped data where many other voices were present and a quick look at your teaching records in the WAP files. I feel that as a researcher, **I have no right to interpret your words and actions without confirming my interpretation with you.**

*Therefore, the aim of today's interview (30–40 minutes) is to start with my interpretation (enclosed)–and then taking that beyond to **your interpretation** of the ways in which WAP has added to your knowledge base about writing.*

This interview is for a paper I am writing. In this paper, I will not use your name and it will not be possible to identify you as I will interview a number of people and only choose four people. The theme of the paper is to argue that teacher knowledge is constructed through experience and WAP provides an ideal experience for developing teachers' knowledge of writing. Here is an extract from the paper:

> "I focus on teachers' images and understanding of the four elements in writing: the writer, the reader, the context and the text. I trace whether these images were enriched, revised and re-conceptualized as a result of the teachers' involvement in a pilot writing center started in the department of English in the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong. My purpose within the confines of this paper, as a teacher and writer of this piece, is not simply to narrate changing images but to examine practitioner theory building in context–within and beyond the writing center".
> [-16-]

If you have any concerns about this paper, please feel free to voice them. All I can say is that there will be no judgment or evaluation in this paper!

I look forward to seeing you at 1:00 on Monday.

Thanks a lot

Sima

Enclosure: My interpretation sheet

I agree to allow this data to be used provided my name and identity is kept confidential.

Signature _____   Date_____

Peter:

Initial ideas: Peter seems to be a person who does not take things lightly. Although a native English speaker, Peter obviously recognizes the difficulties both teachers and students may have and expect in L2 writing. He sees writing as an intensely

personal act at the broadest level. He sees the therapeutic, thought-provoking nature of personal writing and feels that within certain contexts the reader is not an issue. In that sense Peter is an expressivist–seeing personal writing as an act acceptable on its own merit. Within this view of writing, Peter does not see the student writer as someone who ought to be constrained by reader concerns at all times and sees unknown teacher/reader in a writing center as someone who needs to keep in mind the goals that drive students to seek assistance in the first place.

He seems to see a definite contradiction between focus on form and focus on meaning. He comments that it would be good to throw form out but it quite unrealistic to expect teachers to be able to teach everything about structure. In the first two meetings Peter's approach is pragmatic. He started off with the student in mind and felt that most students would come with partly composed texts. These students, he felt, may not want help beyond the immediate needs of the text and thus may not necessarily wish the teacher to take an approach that covers the process but may expressly wish to focus on the product.

In Peter's mind the discourse community is not a great issue. He feels that he himself knows little about genres of other disciplines and thus does not feel comfortable about dealing with genre-related concerns. However, a few meetings later, Peter does mention conventions–I get the distinct feeling that Peter has started to see the social nature of writing. But this is a cautious step and not a zealous conversion. I also feel that Peter has started to re-think the role of the reader as often his sessions bring the reader in. Although all the sessions Peter taught were those in which students came with a product–Peter does not ignore the process as his sessions progress. Towards the end of the pilot he often focuses on meaning even when students come for lower-level proofreading help. The change in Peter seems to consist of: [-17-]

- *Seeing the role of the reader slightly differently as a result of reflecting on the WAP experience*
- *Recognizing a social dimension of writing*
- *Not seeing a great divide between lower and higher-level concerns as the lower-level concerns often generate from higher-level meaning-related issues.*

Appendix B

WAP Reading List: Given to all teachers and discussed in meetings

1. Brannon, Lil, and C.H. Knoblauch. "A Philosophical Perspective on Writing Centers and the Teaching Writing." Writing Centers: Theory and Administration. Editor Gary A. Olson. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1984. 36-47.

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13. Hayward, Kathy. "Writing Centres in Self-Access Centres." *Modern English Teacher 5.3 (1996): 57-63.*

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16. —. "The Writing Center and Social Constructionist Theory." *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center. Editors Joan A. Mullin and Ray Wallace. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994. 25-38.*

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18. North, Stephen M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers. Editors Christine Murphy and Joe Law. Davis, California: Harmagoras Press, 1995. 71-85.*

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Editor's Note: Dashed numbers in square brackets indicate the end of each page for purposes of citation.

[-19-]