

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Chase, Geoffrey W. (1987) "Problem-Solving in the Writing Center: From Theory to Practice," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1119>

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Problem-Solving in the Writing Center: From Theory to Practice

Geoffrey W. Chase

There are moments when I feel as though I'm just going through the motions of tutoring writing. A while ago, for example, a student came into the Writing Center, placed a paper in front of me and said, "Read this and tell me what you think." Without a second thought I picked up the piece and tried to focus as the words blurred past my eyes. When I finally set the paper down the student was quick to ask, "Well?" What could I say? I had already started to go through the motions of tutoring writing, but I wasn't ready to follow through.

—Donna Jo Stewart,
Writing Center Tutor

We ask a lot of tutors. We want them to respond to many students from a variety of disciplines, working on a variety of assignments for teachers and instructors who have wildly different demands and expectations. We want them to help students with immediate problems, and, at the same time, we want them to help students become more aware of their own writing processes. We want them to diagnose and suggest strategies rather than to edit and to proofread. We want them to treat writing as a mode of inquiry. And, we want them to do all of this very quickly.

If tutors are going to help students with immediate problems, help students think about their own composing processes, and do all of this coherently, they need to have more at their disposal than a set of exercises and a grab bag of strategies. They also need some understanding of the composing process and of how those various strategies and techniques work within a larger framework. Tutors need to constantly move back and forth from practice to theory, from attention to detail, to larger questions about the writing process. They need specific strategies and techniques to offer student writers, but they also need an overarching framework that guides

them as they deal with the many problems that can, and often do, arise in the course of tutoring.

When I first began training tutors, in order to give them such a framework, I introduced them to the cognitive model of the writing process described by Linda Flower and John Hayes (365-387). This model is particularly important to writing centers because (1) it affirms the idea of agency (“putting an important part of creativity where it belongs—in the hands of the working, thinking writer”), and (2) because it talks about the writing process as a goal-directed process that is not linear but that is complex and embedded. The first point is important because it reinforces the notion that the students who come into the writing center have control and can develop as writers, tutors don’t have to do it for them. The second point, that writing is not a strictly linear activity, is important because it suggests to all of us that we need to help students where they are rather than to tell them where they should be. Further, it suggests that writing is not a mysterious, hocus-pocus process, but a process for which students can learn to set their own goals.

I found it difficult, however, as did the tutors with whom I worked, to translate Flower and Hayes’ complex writing model with its embedded structure, various processes, and constraints into practice in the writing center. Nevertheless, it still seemed to me an important theory in terms of writing center philosophy, and as I searched for an alternative model, I looked for one that was compatible and yet would provide more specifics for undergraduate peer tutors. I would like to describe one such model, discuss briefly its connections to the cognitive model developed by Flower and Hayes, and then suggest how the various stages of the model might be used by tutors.

The Model

The model I want to describe has been drawn together and constructed from a number of different sources by Don Koberg and Jim Bagnall, professors of design at California Polytechnic State University. According to Koberg and Bagnall, problem-solving can best be described in seven stages. It is important that the problem-solver (1) accept the situation, (2) analyze, (3) define, (4) ideate, (5) select, (6) implement and (7) evaluate. These stages presented in this fashion suggest linearity, but the problem-solving process is seldom linear. It is a circular feedback system, in which everything one does at any one stage feeds back into another stage. It is also a branching system in which stages overlap and occur at nearly the same time, and it is a spiral that never really ends (Koberg and Bagnall 20-21). Donald Murray has noted much the same thing about the writing process he describes in *Write to Learn*. Although I will discuss these seven stages in a

certain order, and as separate and distinct, I want to stress that they can be reconfigured and embedded, their order altered in any number of ways.

Koberg and Bagnall's generic, seven-stage model can be used to talk about any number of problem-solving processes, not just writing. I have found it useful precisely because it stands as a corollary to the theory described by Flower and Hayes, but it is less a theory, and therefore less abstract. I have also found it useful because, being a generic model, it is not as limiting as a more specific model might be. Students in a variety of fields can relate to problem-solving when it is removed, at least temporarily, from the realm of composition. And, as with Flower and Hayes' model, this one has at its core the notion that the problem-solving process is determined, ultimately, by the problem-solver. Finally, this model provides tutors with a coherent framework and with a way of breaking that larger framework down into smaller, more discrete problem-solving processes. Thus tutors familiar with this model can be more effective because their responses, questions, suggestions and ideas exist as part of a larger framework rather than as reactions that are epiphenomenal.

Acceptance

The problem-solving process begins with acceptance. It is perhaps self-evident, but no less important because it is so, to recognize that, if we do not take a problem seriously, it is unlikely that we will solve the problem very effectively. If students write papers half-heartedly, it is likely that their half-hearted efforts will show up in any number of ways. If students don't see writing as a *real* problem, they won't put much into it. All tutors, at some points, have sessions with students who do not, for one reason or another, see writing as a real problem. These sessions can be debilitating for tutors and useless for the students. It is important for the tutor to lead the discussion to the point where she can ask the student, "Why are you writing this paper? What will happen if you don't write it? If you do?" so that the student becomes conscious of the choices of accepting, or not accepting, the task of writing.

Some students do not accept writing as a real problem because they are overwhelmed by the enormity of the writing task before them, others because they have never heard anything positive about their writing, and still others because they have no practiced strategies or techniques to draw upon as they write. Tutors may need to suggest ways that the writing task can be broken into more manageable parts, to give positive feedback, or to help students acquire techniques that will help them. In short, tutors need to use a variety of strategies to help students accept the problem at hand. Accordingly, tutors are better able to do this if they have thought about acceptance as an important stage in the writing (problem-solving) process.

Analysis

The second stage, analysis, is the stage at which students need to take apart the problem presented by the writing task at hand, to examine its parts in relation to each other, and then to examine its parts in relation to the whole problem. It is also the stage at which students need to generate enough information so that the writing task loses its vague qualities and becomes clearer and sharper. The idea is to open up the process at this point, and to encourage students to ask themselves, "What exactly am I being asked to do in this assignment? Compare? Define? Analyze? Argue? Persuade? Express myself creatively?" Tutors can help students at this stage by asking them to think about content goals, by asking them to consider the assignment more carefully, or to think about their audience and any other constraints they may have. The important thing at this stage is that tutors learn to ask open-ended questions so that students are led to ask questions themselves.

Definition

Once students have analyzed a writing problem, they can define it more concretely. Tutors can help at this stage by getting students to narrow their focus and to articulate concisely the problem at hand. If students cannot define their problem clearly, it may be necessary for tutors to ask them for more analysis. Definition is a crucial step because definition of the writing task, articulated or not, identifies the ways in which the remainder of the process can be carried out. It is the stage at which the primary goal of a particular task is established.

Definition, like all stages in a composing process, can take place many times and on many different levels. Thus, here again, tutors need to be flexible and to think about definition as a larger idea that can be used in a variety of contexts. Some students will need to define a problem in terms of a single paragraph: others will define problems in terms of whole essays or in terms of a specific audience. In each case, definition is a crucial step that grows out of a student's acceptance of a writing task and is the result of analysis of that task.

Ideation

Many students believe that there is only one way to write, and that "born writers" have at some point been given a formula everyone else does not have. Thus, many students entirely neglect ideation, the fourth stage of the problem-solving process, the stage at which they consider the various ways they might reach the goal(s) they have set for themselves. Students may also not have been exposed to the whole idea of invention and may not be aware of the array of possibilities for generating ideas such as freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering.

At this stage tutors should encourage students to take the blue skies approach and not to cut off any avenue for solving the task and completing the writing assignment they have just defined. For some, this will be the most difficult stage of all because they will be anxious to get on with the task they have defined, and they will be unwilling to consider options that seem different or unfamiliar. Many students, for example, who have never tried clustering do not believe it will help and see it as a detour away from finishing the paper on which they are working.

Students are often rewarded for what they know, not for the ability to ask questions or to search for things that cannot be verified (Lauer). Teachers, teaching assistants, and college instructors often expect students to come up with the right answer (perhaps an answer that has already been supplied in one way or another in the classroom) and the right way of saying it (perhaps in an essay with a specified number of paragraphs). Students sense this, of course, and often when they come into the writing center for the first time they are bent on finding someone who can tell them whether or not what they have written is right or wrong. They are not interested in options that might not “pay off.” It is thus especially important that tutors be aware of this stage and of the importance of helping students generate alternatives and choices.

Selection

Once students have generated an array of options they can move onto the fifth stage of the problem-solving process in which they select a plan and map out a means for dealing with the situation as they have defined it. For many students this means deciding to write immediately, for others it may mean deciding to write an outline first, to do more research, or to write an abstract of what they plan to write. Students engaged in longer projects, such as term papers, may need to think about the kinds of activities they will need to undertake if they are to complete their paper on time. If students have committed themselves to the task, analyzed the problem thoroughly, and defined it well, they will most likely have a fairly simple decision to make about how to carry out the writing task. If students have difficulty deciding how to proceed with a paper, or even with a particular paragraph, tutors can take that as a sign that more work needs to be done in some of the earlier stages of the process. Specifically, students may need to be encouraged to return to the first and second stages of the process, those of acceptance and analysis, in order to remind themselves of their criteria and goals.

Implementation

Here, students put everything together and set out to accomplish the tasks—researching, note-taking, writing, rewriting, or whatever is necessary—that will allow them to complete their essays or papers. Like the previous stage, this is

one that goes relatively smoothly if the preceding work has been done thoroughly enough. Students who have trouble implementing a plan may never have committed themselves fully to the problem in the first place, or may not have done enough analysis to know what the problem entails. Students may also have trouble at this stage if they are weak at managing their time or if they have unrealistic expectations about how much they can complete in a given period. Tutors can help these students by describing time-management techniques or by encouraging them to set more realistic goals.

Evaluation

The seventh and final stage of the problem-solving process is the stage at which evaluation takes place. It is the point at which writers step back from what they have written and decide if it does what they want it to do. Evaluation can take place on any level and at any time. Sometimes all a tutor needs to do is help a student find one word that is a particularly good word to use because it does just what the student wants it to do. At other times a tutor will sit down with a student after a paper has been handed back and go over a professor's comments, helping the student consider how the writing could be stronger next time around.

From a tutor's perspective, the most important objective of this stage is to help students become their own evaluators. Tutors can do this by asking students to consider how well they met the goals they set out originally. Perhaps even more important, tutors can ask students to think about their composing processes and ask them which parts of it are "easier" than others and which facets of it need work.

Even though the problem-solving process is not linear, breaking it down in this way makes it more accessible and useful. Once tutors are familiar with these stages, they can diagnose problems and difficulties more quickly, and they can ask appropriate questions at appropriate times. Furthermore, seeing writing as a problem-solving process helps tutors become more conscious of the various tasks involved in writing and provides them with a vocabulary to describe that process. Finally, it provides a bridge between theory and practice that allows undergraduate peer tutors to be more effective because they are more knowledgeable and consequently better able to work with a variety of students with diverse problems.

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