WHY A DRAFT? THE COMPOSITION PROCESS OF EXPERIENCED ACADEMIC WRITERS

Writing is one of the best tools for engaging in sustained critical thinking. The underlying premise of the writing you do in this class is that asking learners to grapple with significant problems through writing will promote cognitive and intellectual growth (Bean 1996: xiii).

A crucial but often neglected part of the writing process is what Bean (1996: xiii) calls “the intellectual struggle of revision.” It is in revision that the craft of good writing is learned, and it is through practice that we master the writing process. Thus, I want to provide opportunities for you to receive feedback on your work before it is due.

Before we engage deeply in the writing process for many years, many of us believe that great writers easily produce excellent writing in their first attempt. This is similar to the idea that we should think, and then write (as if thinking and writing are separate activities). This view of writing, fortunately for all of us, is far from how the best writing actually takes place. Experienced writers, who we could call expert writers, constantly revise and rethink their work. They follow a writing process similar to that described by Bean (1996: 30-31) and noted below:

1. Starting point: perception of a problem. Expert writers feel an uncertainty, doubt a theory, note a piece of unexplained data, puzzle over an observation, confront a view that seems mistaken, or otherwise articulate a question or a problem.

2. Exploration. The expert writer gathers data through library or laboratory and field research and through probing of memory; explores ideas in a journal or research log, in the margins of texts, or on note cards or the backs of envelopes; analyzes, compares, puzzles, talks with others, writes to self; focuses intensely on the problem. The expert writer often and explores ideas by rapid drafting of potential pieces of the essay or by making notes, doodles, or tentative outlines.

3. Incubation. The writer takes time off from the problem, does other things, and lets ideas cook in the subconscious. These first three stages are all recursive (characterized by recurrence, repetition, or moving circularly as one moves between the tasks) — as writers alternate between exploration and incubation, their perception of the problem may change.

4. Writing the first draft. Expert writers try to get ideas down on paper in preliminary form. Some writers make an informal outline prior to writing; others discover direction as they write, often pursuing different branches of ideas without worrying about order or coherence. To avoid writer’s block, expert writers lower expectations. They do no try to make first drafts perfect as they go.

5. Reformulation or revision. Having gone once through the territory, expert writers take another look at the problem and think it through again. Many writers report dismantling their first drafts and starting afresh, often discovering their true thesis at the conclusion of their first draft. At this point, writers often make new outlines; they begin considering audience; they clarify their rhetorical purpose (what they are trying to persuade others to believe); they try to make the essay work for readers. Several drafts are often necessary as writer-based prose is gradually converted to reader-based prose.

6. Editing. At this point, craftsmanship takes over from initial creativity. Writers worry about unity, coherence, paragraphing, sentence structure. Finally, writers begin to polish by correcting spelling and punctuation. Often, the recursive nature of the process is again felt as a writer, working on sentence structure, discovers new meanings or new intentions that require the rethinking of minor or even major parts of the essay.