

Inspiration or Invention: Against Romantic Models of Composing

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A student from Nancy Sommers's (1980) seminal case study on revision articulates a persistent obstacle for teachers of composition. Sommers's student attests: "I like to write like Fitzgerald did by inspiration, and if I feel inspired then I don't need to slash and throw much out."¹ Sommers discerns a key problem with this kind of revision: students gauge the quality of their writing by the speed and ease with which they can produce it. Little to no revision is necessary when the words flow easily and freely through "inspiration." Inspiration's place in the writing process has proved onerous for composition instructors. Sommers proposes it curtails effective revision, but other rhetoricians like Linda Flower, James Berlin, John Gage, W. Ross Winterrowd, and Richard Young examine the consequences of this approach in closer detail. Critics of the "inspired" model of invention often locate its faults within romantic writing traditions that misconstrue writing as an individualistic, passive, and/or spontaneous process.

This thesis closely examines the pedagogical difficulties of romantic myths of composition, like the image reflexively rehearsed by both Sommers's student and contemporary student writers alike. Romantic approaches to writing were most explicitly formalized in composition studies during the expressivist movement of the 1960's, a pedagogy thoroughly criticized for its romantic influence. While plenty of critics excavate expressivism's romantic flaws and lingering repercussions, fewer articulate concrete strategies to help students move beyond this pervasive myth of inspiration.

This project offers explores inventional alternatives to this model of "inspiration," and will proceed in three sections. First, I contextualize the rise of expressivism's romantic value system in reaction to rigid composition pedagogies like current-traditional rhetoric. The following section analyzes common criticisms of expressivism's romantic approach to invention

¹ Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," 381.

and demonstrates its disempowering influence on student writers. As Sharon Crowley (1990) articulates, the ultimate issue with the inspirational model is that it sacrificed the rhetorical tradition of treating invention as a trainable skill, accessible to all through practice.² Thus, my final section encourages writing instructors to emphasize accessible invention strategies like those found in these earlier traditions. This section offers concrete avenues for instruction in the writing classroom as an alternative to these romantic models of composing. These strategies consider both expressivism's critics and pay homage to the pedagogy's essential contributions to field of writing instruction.

² Sharon Crowley, *The Methodical Memory*, 1.

I. From Product to Process: Current-Traditional Rhetoric to Process Theories

The start of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented surge in college enrollment and rapid changes to the field of composition. Increased student populations and rapid economic growth prompted schools to cater to the masses rather than just the privileged elite.³ Pressured to prepare students for productive citizenship in democracy, society, and the workplace, colleges adjusted their curriculums to meet the economy's demands, a movement that Kenneth Kantor (1975) labels "social efficiency."⁴

Harvard was the first of many schools to abandon classical studies for this "social efficiency" model that prioritized concrete, practical, and vocational knowledge. According to Kantor, Harvard President Charles W. Eliot was one of the first to articulate this pedagogical shift:

With respect to the teaching of English, Eliot (1913) contended that students ought to make 'incessant applications' of their acquisitions from literature to their own speaking and writing. Addressing the question of whether such an emphasis meant that instruction would be more utilitarian than inspirational, he argued that students of the 'present generation' desired sound knowledge of reality rather than myth, fable, or dream.⁵

Harvard's president affirmed English's value as a field of study, so long as it yields practical knowledge and results. As a result, English courses began to prioritize teaching vocational skills that were useful for post-graduation careers in business, advertising, and salesmanship.⁶

³ David Gold and J.W. Hammond, "Writing Instruction in U.S. Colleges and Schools: The Twentieth Century and the New Millennium," 273-274.

⁴ Kenneth J. Kantor, "Creative Expression in the English Curriculum: An Historical Perspective," 10.

⁵ Kantor, 7.

⁶ Gold and Hammond, 278.

In writing instruction, this pragmatic shift made way for what is now referred to as current-traditional rhetoric. Enrollment increased once again when waves of military veterans began attending college on the GI bill. Under the guidelines of social efficiency, writing instruction in the early nineteenth century only had to ensure that these students could write well enough to pass their classes and participate in postwar American society.⁷ Increased student populations also meant increased course loads, grading, and responsibilities for instructors of all disciplines; efficiency became central to the writing instructor's life as well. The formulaic lessons and easily graded assignments of current-traditional rhetoric helped composition instructors manage this increased workload.⁸ This strain on faculty, combined with social efficiency's pervasive pragmatism, helped current-traditional rhetoric gain traction during its time.

A formalist mode of writing instruction, current-traditional rhetoric emphasized objective prose that accurately demonstrates reality. Writing was a medium for communicating information—nothing more.⁹ Concerned with correctness of form, syntax, spelling, and grammar, instructors assigned the highest value to a student's final written product. Class time was usually spent completing the repetitive grammatical drills that are now widely infamous in contemporary discussions of current-traditional rhetoric. Learning happened in the textbooks, not the classroom. These textbooks were mostly full of rigid prescriptions about grammar, style, and form that students had to memorize and rehearse in their own writing.¹⁰ Students rarely wrote in the classroom and even then, only wrote in four “modes of discourse:” exposition, description,

⁷ Gold and Hammond, 284.

⁸ E. A. Wright et al., “‘Available Means’ of Writing Instruction,” 269-270.

⁹ Christopher Burnham, “Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice,” 22.

¹⁰ Sharon Crowley, *The Methodical Memory*, 147.

narration, and argument.¹¹ These formulaic essays paid little attention to audience, context, or the writing process in general, but functioned to make lessons and assessment significantly easier for instructors and their growing student populations.

In 1980, James Berlin combed current-traditional rhetoric textbooks to explore the consequences of such a formulaic instruction. He also offers us a glimpse into the current-traditional classroom. When modelling the “descriptive” essay in the classroom, for example, textbooks usually presented students two different descriptions of the same event: one from a novice writer and the other from a professional. Students then had to evaluate why the professional’s description was better; most of the textbooks cited the writer’s patience and attention to detail. Berlin evaluates the implications of this exercise:

The underlying assumption of this presentation is that both the experienced and inexperienced writers are responding to an identical experience, and that they should perceive the same events, in the same way, because the material world is uniform to all who make the effort to attend to it.¹²

In other words, this exercise equated successful writing with homogenous and diligent observation.

Current-traditional rhetoric’s dogmatic values did not come without lasting consequence. E. A. Wright et al. (2020) suggest that the pedagogy’s “formulaic, unimaginative lessons and rigid grammatical prescriptions”¹³ contributed to its current infamy. Christopher Burnham adds to these critiques and suggests that the movement’s obsession with correctness in both form and grammar “reinforced middle-class values, such as social stability and cultural homogeneity, and

¹¹ Janice Lauer, *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition*, 43.

¹² James Berlin, “Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice,” 3.

¹³ Burnham 22.

supported the meritocracy associated with the military-industrial complex.”¹⁴ Every student was assessed on their ability to conform and adhere to strict writing codes. Experimenting with style, language, form, or content was not possible. Although college became slightly more accessible during this time, Burnham argues that this emphasis on conformity in the writing classroom “assumed the gate-keeping role class and economics had previously played” in higher education.¹⁵ In current-traditional rhetoric, the writing classroom became a convenient site to assimilate immigrants and promote cultural homogeneity under the veil of assessing student performance.¹⁶ For these reasons and more, current-traditional rhetoric remains widely unpopular in contemporary composition studies, even though this approach is still alive and well in many high schools across the United States.¹⁷

James Berlin articulates another critical consequence of this approach: current-traditional rhetoric’s attention to product sacrificed the rhetorical canon of invention to prioritize surface correctness.¹⁸ Although initially useful for meeting the demands of its time, Berlin, Burnham, and Wright were few of many to criticize current-traditional rhetoric’s failure to propose an equitable and comprehensive approach to writing. Its discomfoting demand for obedience and its dismissal of the writing process, however, was a critical catalyst for the formation of alternative pedagogies that valued the individual and their unique writing process.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Burnham, 22.

¹⁶ Irene Clark, *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practices in the Teaching of Writing*, 2.

¹⁷ Crowley, 139.

¹⁸ James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 9.

A new emphasis on process

By the mid 1960's, frustrations with social efficiency came to a head alongside pervasive demands for radical change in American society. Growing resentment for the Vietnam War, rising anti-corporatism, and the emergence of early feminist and civil rights movements contributed to a widespread culture of resistance.¹⁹ Sherrie Gradin speaks to this pervasive desire for social change specifically among college students:

Social upheaval was everywhere and many counter-cultures flourished... College campuses were riotous. Students burned ROTC buildings, took over administrative offices, and demanded to play a role in university policy making. Four students died by National Guard rifle fire at Kent State.²⁰

Gradin notes that colleges became central locations for protests and various “counter-cultures.” Students began to interrogate conformity on both the social and educational levels and insist that they take an active role in their education. It was only a matter of time until current-traditional rhetoric’s rigid value system came under scrutiny as well.

Current-traditional rhetoric’s dominance in composition theory began to waver around the early 1960's under these persistent demands for reform at the cultural, social, political, and educational levels. Their colleges now hotbeds for social protests, instructors began to interrogate their own pedagogies. Composition instructors called into question current-traditional rhetoric’s dominance in the field, its social-efficiency values, and its utilitarian emphasis on product. Irene Clark suggests that this pedagogical shift sparked at the 1963 Conference of College Composition and Communication. Clark claims:

¹⁹ Gold and Hammond, 280.

²⁰ Sherrie L. Gradin, *Romancing Rhetorics*, 22.

...it is reported that there was a different feeling in the air, a feeling that the field had changed. That conference signaled a renewal of interest in Rhetoric and Composition theory, a revival that generated the “process” approach to Composition and a new research area that focused on understanding how people write and learn to write.²¹

This renewed attention to composition theory naturally incited alternative pedagogies to form that responded to current-traditional rhetoric’s numerous shortcomings and rigid emphasis on product. Revolutionary “process” pedagogies that value the writer’s unique writing process (rather than just their final product) unsurprisingly gained traction as a result.

Process writing pedagogies also found support at the Dartmouth conference of 1966, where about fifty American and British writing instructors assembled to discuss common writing problems in the classroom. These conversations quickly revealed substantial differences in composition instruction between the two countries. For American instructors, English was a subject with a fixed canon of material to memorize—success in the American English classroom meant mastery of content. For the British, the educational value of studying English occurred *during* the process of engaging with the literature itself. American educators started to reconsider how they taught English and composition at the college level. They began to consider the educational merits of individualized instruction and investigating the writing process.²²

An increased attention to psychology also contributed to the formation of process-focused pedagogies and a renewed emphasis on the individual. Psychologist Jerome Bruner advocated for pedagogies which prioritized the inner workings of a student’s mind. His work valued:

²¹ Clark, 5.

²² Clark, 5-6.

engaging in composing activities so as to discover their own composing process—rather than in analyzing someone else’s text—and on teachers creating a facilitative learning environment to enable students to do so—rather than focusing on assigning grades or correcting grammar”²³

Bruner’s work became critical to the development of the New Education Movement, a progressive movement which advocated for the educational freedom of students and encouraged them to take an active role in their education.

Overall, the 1960’s was characterized by turbulent change on all levels. In response to current-traditional rhetoric’s product-oriented pedagogy, process approaches gained momentum alongside the decade’s revolutionary spirit. In 1988, James Berlin designates three distinct approaches that emerged out of current-traditional rhetoric: expressivist, cognitivist, and social epistemic pedagogies.²⁴ All pursued a new (but incomplete) attention to the writing process, which up to this point was largely neglected under current-traditional rhetoric. Influenced by progressive educational movements and emergent developmental and psychological theories, process pedagogies brought focus back to the individual.

Of the three, however, expressivism has arguably received the most criticism. Sherrie Gradin (1995) offers a thorough defense of expressivism and claims most of these critics targeted expressivism’s romantic legacy. She offers a contemporary defense of expressivism’s infamous romantic influence, and that most critics fault expressivism only based on its romantic roots, and leverage critiques that target it’s “romantic myth” of invention.

The rise of expressivism

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” 478.

Equal parts a resistance to current-traditional rhetoric and a byproduct of the decade's revolutionary spirit, expressivism entered the burgeoning field of composition studies with a romantic bent that rapidly incited radical changes in contemporary writing instruction. Expressivist pedagogy's emphasis on individuality, freedom, voice, and self-discovery unsurprisingly gained traction in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. While current-traditional rhetoric valued conformity, expressivism emphasized the unique experience of each individual writer. Expressivism resisted current-traditional rhetoric's myopic fixation on product and directed focus back to the "unique individuality and creative potential of each student."²⁵ The movement celebrated—and even necessitated—the presence of a writer's personal voice in all kinds of writing and treated the writing process as an outlet for both self-expression and self-discovery.

Students were also encouraged to draw from and write about their personal experiences, a dramatic divergence from the academy's traditional insistence on objective prose. Expressivists like Ken Macrorie even explicitly criticized this bland, cryptic, and elitist writing style. In his *Telling Writing* (1970), Macrorie pejoratively dubs this kind of language "Engfish"²⁶ and advocates for free writing as a creative alternative. Under expressivism, decontextualized modes of discourse were replaced with free-writing, journaling, and personal and reflective writing.

The pervasive culture of protest in the 1960s and 1970s fortified expressivism's insistence that students should write about topics that embolden and interest them. Donald Murray, a key figure of expressivism, spoke directly to this social climate and asserted writing's ability to enact change. In "Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Composition in an Age of Dissent" (1969), Murray encouraged students to capture "their yearnings for social change into

²⁵ Gold and Hammond, 280.

²⁶ Burnham, 23.

the most powerful of all agents of change—the written word.”²⁷ Peter Elbow similarly establishes expressivism’s characteristic esteem for a writer’s powerful individuality. In “A Method for Teaching Writing” (1968), Elbow claims that voice empowers writers to enact tangible change; his later *Writing with Power* (1981) suggests effective writing rouses its audience into action. According to Christopher Burnham, expressivism’s reverence for voice illustrates its value system of social and educational resistance: “Elbow and the expressivists, anticipating feminist pedagogy, work to subvert teaching practices and institutional structures that oppress, appropriate, or silence an individual’s voice.”²⁸ Expressivist pedagogy and its empowering value system unsurprisingly gained traction during this time.

Expressivism, of course, also brought a renewed attention back to the composing process like other process pedagogies of the time. For the expressivists, the writing process was not simply a string of tasks required to arrive at polished product; it was a rewarding venture for “imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development.”²⁹ Knowledge could be constructed during the composition process, and the process was in fact necessary for making meaning. Murray underpins this epistemology in *Language and Learning* (1970) and claims, “The writer is constantly learning from the writing what it intends to say. The writer listens for evolving meaning... The writing itself helps the writer see the subject.”³⁰

This renewed emphasis on the writing process simultaneously encouraged students to take a more active role in their education. Elbow articulated his famous “teacherless classroom” in *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), a pedagogy that shifts control of learning over to students.

²⁷ Gradin, 22.

²⁸ Burnham, 23.

²⁹ Burnham, 19.

³⁰ Donald Murray qtd. in Burnham, 24.

Because the expressivists believed that it was the writing process—not the instructors—that generated knowledge, Elbow proposes that students can actively construct their own abilities through practice, invention strategies, and other exercises. Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1968) praises the workshop model for similar reasons. Murray attests that feedback from peers and instructors is a helpful form of instruction that still places the responsibility of revision and learning back onto the student.

Widespread demand for social change, growing concern for the individual, and general dissatisfaction with social efficiency's dated values all fueled expressivism's growth in the late 1960s. The work of Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Donald Murray all assigned value and agency back to the individual and their unique writing process. This renewed focus on the individual, however, eventually met its own resistance.

Expressivism's romantic roots

Many critics have traced expressivism's reverence for the individual back to romantic composing traditions. Scholars like James Berlin, W. Ross Winterowd, Linda Flower, John Gage, and Richard Young have thoroughly established—and criticized—expressivism's romantic influence. Expressivism's incriminating classification as a “romantic” pedagogy endures today; most critics who assess expressivism's shortcomings cite this romantic influence as the source. Before turning to these critiques, however, I want to contextualize and make visible just how vital these romantic traditions are to expressivism's approach to writing.

The parallels between romanticism and expressivism are especially discernable if we consider both movements as reactions to their time. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment fueled the rise of a rational, industrial,

and scientific value system. Concerned with the consequences of rapid urbanization and objective reasoning, the British romantics, including Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron, encouraged a return to the individual and championed personal emotion, intuition, and imagination as authentic sources of truth. British romanticism recoiled from modernity and advocated for radical change on all levels of society.³¹

All the romantics took issue with the rigid social structures of their time, and a handful of them advocated specifically for educational reform. Wordsworth and Coleridge were among the few romantics to protest rigid pedagogical practices and demand change in education. Standard curriculums of the time prioritized drills and memorization as primary sources of knowledge; a student's learning ability was measured by their capacity to memorize passages from classical literature. Like the expressivists, the romantics were wary that mechanical exercises trained students to be passive recipients of material rather than active participants in constructing their own knowledge.³² Sherrie Gradin (1995) tracks, confirms, and ultimately defends romanticism and expressivism's shared social impetus:

it is this inclination to favor only the analytical that sparked many of the more Wordsworthian and Coleridgean aspects of later educators such as Mill, Arnold, Dewey, and in our own time, Elbow, Murray, and Berthoff.³³

The expressivists clearly inherited Romanticism's revolutionary spirit and distaste for cultural rigidity. To resist this "analytical inclination," Wordsworth and Coleridge advocated for an education that fostered students' unique individuality, an approach that resurfaces in both expressivism and other romantic pedagogies.³⁴ Both expressivism and romanticism materialized

³¹ Crowley, 9.

³² Gradin, 23.

³³ Gradin, 26.

³⁴ Ibid.

to resist a growing preference for objectivity, rationality, and conformity; both promoted personalized education as an alternative.

James Berlin traces expressivism's romantic roots to American romanticism and transcendentalism as well. According to Berlin, the collapse of British colonial rule in America left fertile ground for romantic rhetoric to thrive. This collapse sparked a decline in classical rhetoric because this type of instruction was considered inherently English³⁵ and “defines the real as rational and posits that both the universe and the human mind are guided by rules and reason.”³⁶ Simultaneously an alternative to this rational tradition and an attempt to forge an American national identity, romantic rhetoric flourished under the transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau. Berlin links transcendentalism to expressivism on the basis that both believe truth is “located within the individual subject... [Writing] is an art, a creative act in which the process—the discovery of the true self—is as important as the product—the self discovered and the self expressed.”³⁷ Like expressivism, Emersonian rhetoric emphasized the necessity of discovering meaning and reality through the composing process.

Despite expressivist criticisms of classical learning, W. Ross Winterowd (1994) traces the origin of this shared romantic, transcendentalist, and expressivist value system further back to classical times. Winterowd identifies that these romantic philosophies are all unified by a shared theory about how ideas are generated, a belief system he ultimately credits to Plato. Winterowd claims that all composition pedagogies inherited their theories of invention from one of two classical rhetoricians. Plato, the antecedent for what Winterowd labels the “transcendental

³⁵ Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 4.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology,” 484.

tradition,”³⁸ claimed that ideas exist internally and spawn from an active mind. For Plato, ideas could be found within or discovered through the act of thinking itself. In contrast, Aristotle held that ideas exist externally, outside in the world, waiting to be discovered. Irene Clark elaborates on how Plato and Aristotle’s contrasting theories inform invention: “In the ancient world, the term “invent” was almost synonymous with “discover,” and the focus was on where ideas could be discovered.”³⁹ Winterowd respectively labels this division between internal and external modes of invention as the “idealistic-empiricist dialectic” and labels expressivism an “idealistic” pedagogy.⁴⁰

The effects of Winterowd’s binary were twofold. First, it aligned expressivism with the romantics, an incriminating categorization for the pedagogy and served the basis for the second reason. Secondly, as the following section explores, this categorization also drew scholarly attention—and concern—to expressivism’s assumptions about invention. Like Plato’s idealistic model, invention in expressivism occurred in isolation; ideas formed privately, concealed within an individual’s mind, and were discovered through the thought process. Expressivism’s internal approach to invention manifests in its characteristic attention to the individual and their unique writing process but has garnered quite a bit of scholarly criticism.

³⁸ W. Ross Winterowd and Jack Blum, *A Teacher’s Introduction to Composition in the Rhetorical Tradition*, 2.

³⁹ Clark, 54.

⁴⁰ Winterowd, 2.

II. Inspired Invention: Expressivism's Critics

Before exploring the disadvantages of expressive instruction, I want to consider what Sherrie Gradin describes as “the recent denigration of expressivist theories of composition,”⁴¹ a sentiment which the recent scholarship of Goldblatt has re-articulated and I return to again later in the project. Despite its contributions to the field of rhetoric, expressivism has received an overabundance of criticism for its romantic roots. While this project, of course, rearticulates many of these concerns, I want to contextualize these in the anti-romantic bias both Gradin and Goldblatt articulate.

Although expressivism's return to romantic traditions was a welcome alternative to current-traditional rhetoric for many, other instructors were wary of this romantic revival. In fact, Gradin suggests that a romantic suspicion undergirds most critiques of expressivism. Although expressivism gained momentum in the 1960s for its radical and romantic principles, Gradin claims that the academy still harbored pragmatic values and a latent contempt for romanticism. This sentiment, according to Gradin, is a symptom of our culture as a whole. She claims that “it is not uncommon for our culture to disdain those things it perceives as romantic... we are still a culture that values logic, reason, and hard facts, and that devalues imaginative thinking and intuition.”⁴² She also faults the modernist pessimism of Eliot and Pound for contributing to the academy's distaste for the romantic. This pervasive romantic “disdain” made expressivism—with its signature emphasis on individuality, imagination, creativity, and intuition—an easy target for critics. These inflated criticisms, according to Gradin, tarnished expressivism's reputation as a composition pedagogy.

⁴¹ Gradin, xiv.

⁴² Gradin, 7.

Gradin speculates that popular, yet demeaning caricatures of the Romantics likely nurtured these attitudes. Often perceived as broody and idealistic “nature poets” who isolated themselves from society, parodies of the romantic “personality” were popular during this time.⁴³ These caricatures, or “extreme views of romanticism,” became mainstream and manifest in “unfounded generalizations that romanticism is stupid, anti-intellectual, fanciful, irrational, sentimental, an exaggeration of individuality and overly emotional.”⁴⁴ Gradin concedes that these hyperbolic portraits were not always dishonest; however, her work faithfully maintains that these exaggerations have made thoughtful evaluation of expressivism’s pedagogical merits a comical impossibility.

The Inspired Writer: Cognitive critiques of expressivism

Expressivism was not the only process-focused pedagogy that emerged during this time. Whereas expressivism articulated its pedagogy on romantic traditions, other composition scholars took a particular interest in the growing field of psychology. The cognitive approach to composition formed during the 1970’s to the 1980’s as another process-oriented pedagogy, one that eventually took issue with expressivism’s romantic legacy. Informed by the psychological and developmental theories posited at the time by Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, the cognitive approach paid particular attention to the mental processes that occur during the writing process.⁴⁵ Advocates of this approach asserted that learning to write is a developmental process composed of concrete stages. Cognitive psychologists aspired to identify these psychological stages of the writing process and leverage them as pedagogical tools. In

⁴³ Gradin 6.

⁴⁴ Gradin, 7.

⁴⁵ See Faigley for more on the rise of the cognitive approach.

other words, the cognitive psychologists believed that before effective writing instruction can occur, instructors must first examine how the writing process operates in the mind. Ideally, this approach deconstructs the writing process, making the process replicable and thus more teachable for instructors.

Linda Flower was a key contributor to these efforts. Her approach to the writing process is guided by her definition of writing as a “thinking problem” instead of an “arrangement problem.”⁴⁶ Most cognitivists conceived of writing as a “thinking problem,” but Flower was one of the first to establish a concrete theory that articulated its steps. Her theory was founded on three key points: distinct stages of thinking occur during the writing process; these stages are not linear, but hierarchical; and writing is a goal-based activity wherein the writer’s goals are constantly evolving.⁴⁷ Flower’s theory is an emblem for the cognitivists’ primary concerns. They visualized the writing process as a series of problem-solving tasks, which could be isolated, studied, and taught in the classroom. Flower again echoes these cognitivist values when she later claims: “the heuristic procedures which help us [write] are often surprisingly simple. Such heuristics can often be brought to consciousness and improved by training.”⁴⁸ Bringing the writing process into “consciousness” was the cognitivists’ approach to making the writing process transparent and teachable.

Cognitive pedagogies endeavored to demystify the writing process in order to produce concrete writing strategies for students. These concerns inevitably clashed with expressivism’s romantically ambiguous approach to invention. Flower, thus, was one of expressivism’s central critics. In her “Cognition of Discovery” (1980), Flower interrogates the metaphors and myths

⁴⁶ Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, “Problem Solving Strategies and the Writing Process,” 450.

⁴⁷ Flower and Hayes, “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 366-7.

⁴⁸ Flower and Hayes, “Problem Solving Strategies,” 450.

that help us describe the writing process. She specifically takes issue with what she labels “the popular myth of romantic inspiration” on the premise that it “can lead writers to self-defeating writing strategies.”⁴⁹ Her influential critique claims that this misconception originates from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s introductory notes to his poem “Kubla Khan,” wherein he describes his creative process. Coleridge’s preface establishes three principles of invention: it occurs spontaneously, happens without effort, and originates from the muse.⁵⁰ Invention in Coleridge’s terms is akin to “inspiration,” a vague phenomenon only triggered by external, spontaneous, and transcendent impulses—all of which complicate viable writing pedagogies.

Coleridge, of course, is not the only artist guilty of perpetuating this myth. Mike Rose (1980) claims that “since Plotinus many have viewed the composing process as unexplainable, inspired, infused with the transcendent.”⁵¹ Flower likewise suggests that invention in the romantic tradition “...is often seen as a gift from the gods... Moses received the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone. Athena... an appropriate emblem for creative thought, was said to have sprung fully armed from the head of Zeus.”⁵² Coleridge’s pervasive “myth of inspiration” privileges mystery, spontaneity, and divine intervention, all of which limit effective writing instruction. In consequence, students who inherit this romantic legacy conceive of writing as a passive and uncontrollable process. Moreover, Flower suggests that writers who struggle with invention alarmingly rely on this model the most. Inexperienced writers tend to “depend heavily on inspiration because [they believe] it produces their best, most efficient, and most satisfying writing.”⁵³ This model of invention ultimately fails “for the passively expectant

⁴⁹ Flower and Hayes, “The Cognition of Discovery,” 21.

⁵⁰ Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*, 33.

⁵¹ Rose 393.

⁵² Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*, 33-34.

⁵³ Flower and Hayes, “Problem Solving Strategies,” 451.

writer waiting for the magic flow of ideas.”⁵⁴ Students who idealize the inspirational model assume that successful writing is determined by the speed and volume of their text production. Even if writing efficiently guaranteed quality, this strategy of “inspiration” is inherently passive. Students cannot be inspired whenever they like; they must wait for an external transcendent stimulus. Flower suggests that this unproductive “myth of romantic inspiration” lives on in expressivism’s romantic tradition.

The cognitivists’ desire to articulate logical stages of the writing process also clashed with expressivism’s romantic and ambiguous lexicon. Words like “inspiration” (or even “creativity,” “genius,” and “imagination”) resist easy definition, and are thus difficult to deconstruct as viable invention strategies. This language limits a student’s capacity to visualize and craft a functional approach to the writing process, but it also limits an instructor’s ability to offer transparent writing strategies. Because the cognitivists desired to concretely outline the psychological stages of the writing process, they unsurprisingly found the inspirational approach lacking. Gradin concisely summarizes Flower’s aversion to this romantic model of invention. She claims:

Flower finds the expressivist attempts to cultivate the imaginative intellect ineffective because they result in a model for composing that is too muddled and too dependent on “inspiration.” For her, the expressivists’ rather global approach to the writing process remains unarticulated, and thus unconscious.⁵⁵

Ultimately, expressivism’s romantic pedagogy was untenable to Flower and other cognitivists. Expressivism’s romantic bent not only obscured the writing process, but it also treated invention

⁵⁴ Flower and Hayes, “Problem Solving Strategies,” 451.

⁵⁵ Gradin, 56.

as passive, spontaneous, and divinely inspired. Overall, expressivism's romantic foundation made invention too intangible and obscure to teach.

Cognitive critics illuminated some of expressivism's problems with invention. Because invention occurred privately and introspectively in romantic traditions, expressivism shrouded the writing process in mystery. To the cognitivists, of course, an ambiguous writing process limited the creation of realistic pedagogies. Other critics, however, have considered the implications on student writers directly. Flower's reading of Coleridge's preface extracts the pregnant "myth of inspiration," and she briefly nods to another consequence this myth transmits: inherent talent. Coleridge's reflections suggest his writing was inspired by the muse, a submission that was equally incriminating for expressivism's reputation.

Expressivism's devotion to an individual's private creative capacities has also drawn criticism for glamorizing the writing process. John Gage (1968) anticipates Flower's anxieties about romantic pedagogies, and ultimately faults society's idealized reverence for writers. He claims this misconception is:

...mixed up with another general superstition, perpetuated by the culture, that writers are special people, an ideal that has its origin in the romantic adulation of writers as a class...

The romantic belief is a strong one, and it helps to kill the motivation of students who have struggled with mastery of technique.⁵⁶

Born, not made, the best writers possessed distinct talent. They do not struggle to write because their ideas flow effortlessly from the muse or their own natural gifts. Rather, the "talented" writer is a perfect conduit of inspiration. To Gage, this pervasive misconception unproductively misconstrues writing as a talent rather than a learnable set of skills. Like the cognitivists, Gage

⁵⁶ Gage qtd. in Gradin 8-9.

expresses concern that students who subscribe to these romantic misconceptions may feel disempowered because they lack access to realistic writing strategies. If writing is only accessible to a gifted few, improvement is outside of both student and instructor control.

Richard Young (1978) also contributes to these critiques of expressivism. His work distinguishes between two primary kinds of pedagogies: those that prioritize product and those that prioritize process. Young labels process-focused pedagogies like expressivism as “vitalist” pedagogies. By Young’s definition, all vitalist pedagogies inherit their values from the romantics because they emphasize “the natural powers of the mind and the uniqueness of the creative act.”⁵⁷ To Young, these process-oriented pedagogies were entirely incompatible with product-oriented traditions.⁵⁸ More critically, he maintains that vitalist theories of writing perpetuate the idea that writing is a “natural” function of our mind, one that occurs unconsciously and effortlessly. Although originally intended to democratize writing and treat it as an innate skill accessible to all,⁵⁹ expressivism’s testament that writing is a “natural” skill dismisses those who struggle to write regardless.

The Isolated Inventor: Social constructivist critiques of expressivism

In the late nineteenth century, developing social constructivist pedagogies chimed into this conversation as well. The social constructivists both echoed and diverged from the cognitivists’ thorough critiques of expressivist instruction. Whereas the cognitivists primarily targeted expressivism’s “myth of inspiration,” these emerging social approaches took greater issue with expressivism’s decontextualized attention to the individual. James Berlin’s 1988

⁵⁷ Young qtd. in Gradin 46.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology,” 484.

constructivist critique of what he terms “cognitive rhetoric” sheds light on this fundamental distinction. Berlin claims that under cognitive rhetoric, “the most important features of composing are those which can be analyzed into discrete units and expressed in linear, hierarchical terms.”⁶⁰ The cognitivists’ compulsive desire to extract and organize the processes of the mind, Berlin cautions, is “consistent with the modern college’s commitment to preparing students for the world of corporate capitalism.”⁶¹ Rationalizing the mind and writing process ultimately functioned to expedite an individual’s problem-solving abilities. Although intended to be a productive alternative to expressivism’s distinct lack of structure, Berlin’s reading implies the familiar consequences of imposing rational order onto complex cognitive processes for the sake of student efficiency.

Even though they remained unified against expressivism’s impoverished model of invention, Berlin’s critique highlights his major departure from cognitive models of composition. For the cognitivists, reality was “inscribed in the very nature of things as indisputable scientific facts, rather than being seen as humanly devised social constructions always remaining open to discussion.”⁶² Put more simply, the social epistemic approaches that emerged during the 1980s attested that our ideas are socially constructed; not just a function of the isolated mind.

For Berlin and other social constructivists like Patricia Bizzell, Kenneth Bruffee, Lester Faigley, and David Bartholomae, writing was an inherently social practice, an interpretation neglected by both expressive and cognitive approaches alike. Under the social epistemic model, all ideas are socially constructed to some degree. Expressivism’s approach to invention was thus untenable because it held the assumption that ideas can form in perfect isolation. To even

⁶⁰ Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom,” 482.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology,” 484.

consider the “self” as a hermetically private structure is misleading because the self is “always a creation of a particular historical and cultural moment.”⁶³ In expressivism, however:

The existent is located within. While the reality of the material, the social, and the linguistic are never denied, they are considered significant only insofar as they serve the needs of the individual. All fulfill their true function only when being exploited in the interests of locating the individual’s authentic nature.⁶⁴

Like his critique of the cognitivists, Berlin’s formative essay suggests individuality holds too much authority in expressivism. The ultimate—and only—goal of writing in these individualistic pedagogies is the writer’s own personal growth. Peter Elbow, for example, encouraged students to ignore their audience out of fear that such consideration would inhibit a student’s creative capacities.⁶⁵ Writing could be a powerful tool for advocacy, but success in expressivism occurred at the level of the individual, inside of the student who can adeptly harness their unique voice to profess their own individuality.

According to the social constructivists, the communal nature of writing was largely neglected under expressivism. In 1987, Berlin echoes previous critics and dubs expressivism a “subjective theory” on the basis that it “locate[s] truth either within the individual or within a realm that is accessible” only through an individual’s internal perspective. Berlin’s observation that reality is personal and private in expressivism echoes the cognitivists’ concern about this model’s unteachable ambiguity. He asserts that instructors simply cannot help students learn to write when “finding the truth is a private act of intuition.”⁶⁶ Berlin’s apprehensions about relying upon private “intuition” reinvents Young’s concern about suggesting writing comes “naturally.”

⁶³ Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology,” 489

⁶⁴ Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology,” 484.

⁶⁵ Gold and Hammond, 296.

⁶⁶ Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 11.

Moreover, there is simply no way to teach students how to write if their ideas are only constructed privately.

Later social epistemic scholars contribute to the abundant criticism regarding expressivism's romantic influence. Lester Faigley (1986), for example, affirms that expressivism's values originate in British Romanticism because its "definition of 'good writing' includes the essential qualities of Romantic expressivism—integrity, spontaneity, and originality—the same qualities M. H. Abrams uses to define 'expressive' poetry in *The Mirror and the Lamp*."⁶⁷ Like Flower, Faigley claims that spontaneity, or the quickness with which invention can occur, is an unconscious tenant leftover from romantic rhetoric. Thinking of invention as a spontaneous act suggests the best ideas occur in a moment's notice, without conscious effort or attention. There is no emphasis on incubating ideas.

Social epistemic critic Patricia Bizzell (1986) also addresses the problem with romantic spontaneity. Similarly to Flower, Bizzell notes that her students favor theories of instant and inspired invention: "There is a general notion in our culture, a sort of debased Romantic version of creativity wherein verbal artifacts are supposed to be produced as easily and inevitably as a hen lays eggs... the classical rhetoricians knew better."⁶⁸ Bizzell underscores the well-rehearsed concerns this romantic misconception that the best writing occurs quickly and effortlessly. For the social epistemic critics in the mid 1980s, expressivism's focus on the individual was far too isolated.

⁶⁷ Lester Faigley, "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and Proposal," 529.

⁶⁸ Bizzell qtd in Gradin 9.

The Blocked Writer: Post-process analysis of expressivism's critics

Despite their thorough critiques of expressivism, cognitive and social constructivist pedagogies ultimately failed to propose a completely viable alternative to its romantic image of invention. The cognitivists evaluated writing in structured, rational, and cognitive terms rather than passive abstractions like “inspiration,” but despite their best efforts to illuminate the writing process, however, both pedagogies were unable to establish the lucid and liberating writing strategies they desired.

The recent work of post-process theorists examines these failures to deconstruct the writing process. Many attest that the writing process is simply too complex to define. Gary Olson (1999), for example, asserts that “writing cannot be taught but also that it cannot even be adequately described...”⁶⁹ Others question the validity of structured heuristics altogether. In the spirit of James Berlin, Joseph Harris (1997) suggests that enthusiastic attempts to dissect the writing process into efficient and cognitive terms simply rebrands current traditional rhetoric’s regimented principles. Just as “the older current-traditional approach to teaching writing focused relentlessly on surface correctness, advocates of process focused just as relentlessly on “algorithms, heuristics, and guidelines for composing.”⁷⁰ Although he admits to the valuable contributions of process theories, Harris ultimately concludes that he is “not nearly so sure it ever transformed the actual teaching of writing as dramatically as its advocates have claimed.”⁷¹ Post-process critics like Harris and Olson propose that well-structured approaches to the writing process were just as ineffective as expressivism’s ambiguity—or current-traditional rhetoric’s rigidity.

⁶⁹ Olson qtd. in Clark 19.

⁷⁰ Harris qtd. in Clark 19.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Mike Rose (1980) explores this issue in his pivotal article “Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer’s Block.” Rose leverages the language of “writer’s block” to evaluate the efficacy of structured heuristics like those suggested by expressivism’s critics. Because the cognitivists endeavored to deconstruct the composition process, examinations of writer’s block were also central to their work; Flower (1977) made essential contributions to this effort as well. Unsurprisingly, her investigations propose that writer’s block occurs from a deficit of clear writing strategies. Close examinations of the mind’s patterns, however, could yield lucid steps and strategies to resolve students’ writing difficulties. James Adams’s *Conceptual Blockbusting* (1974) extends process theories of writer’s block to include emotional blockages as well. Those who struggle with writing, according to Adams, often fear the necessary risk-taking and disorganized chaos that is inherent to the early stages of the composition process. Students who experience writer’s block may also neglect thinking long-term about their ideas or demonstrate a preference for judging pre-existing ideas rather than generating their own.⁷² Adams, like Flower, proposes that a sharpened awareness of our mind’s functions in problem-solving scenarios enables a student’s control over the writing process, and his text is rife with flowcharts arranging these cognitive modes into steps and hierarchies.

Mike Rose’s case study anticipates the critiques post-process theorists like Harris and Olson wage against process pedagogies. Rose concludes that his students who struggled the most to write typically approached the writing process with fixed plans and strategies, such as those proposed by the cognitivists. His findings interrogate the cognitivists’ fixation on heuristics to counter vague invention processes. Rose suggests, “as opposed to Flower and Hayes’ students who need more rules and plans, blockers may well be stymied by possessing rigid or

⁷² James L. Adams, *Conceptual Blockbusting*, 45

inappropriate rules, or inflexible or confused plans.”⁷³ Because “composing calls for open, adventurous thinking, not for constrained, no exit cognition,”⁷⁴ Rose concludes that the students who set about writing with malleable strategies and were “more open to information from the outside”⁷⁵ experienced fewer writing blockages. While Rose concedes that we wouldn’t be able to approach any complex problem-solving process without a semblance of rules, he maintains that we should train in our students the capacity to interrogate the usefulness of these strategies rather than reflexively rehearsing them.

Flower, Hayes, and Adams all make valuable contributions to the enduring issue of writer’s block. Adams and Flower maintain that writer’s block stems from a scarcity of well-defined writing or emotional strategies. On the other hand, Rose and other post-process theorists reveal to us how an overabundance of rules sacrifices another essential writing strategy: the ability to write with *flexibility*. Post-process theories, thus, offer us an insightful reading of expressivism’s critics. They reveal that even expressivism’s most ardent opponents were unable to offer a viable alternative to the ambiguous models of invention they condemned. Neither abundant guidelines nor elusive inspiration could solve writer’s block.

Expressivism in the classroom today

Shortcomings and strengths aside, expressivism’s legacy is still alive and well in the minds of students and instructors alike. Despite the sheer volume of criticism its romantic reputation garnered, several critics have excavated both conscious and unconscious retellings of expressivism in the contemporary classroom. Berlin, for one, cautions that expressionist values

⁷³ Rose, 393.

⁷⁴ Rose, 399.

⁷⁵ Rose, 390.

hide in plain sight “under the veil of including ‘creative-expression’ in the English curriculum” more broadly.⁷⁶ Irene Clark even begins her comprehensive *Concepts in Composition* (2019) with a reflection that synthesizes early and contemporary concerns about expressivism:

This lack of attention to the process writers engage in when they write reflected a concept of creativity that to some extent persists in our culture—that is, that a “good” writer is someone who can produce an excellent text as quickly, independently, and effortlessly as a bird learns to fly. This idea suggests that those of us who struggle, for whom writing is a laborious, time-consuming, and often painful process (i.e., most, if not all, of us), are not, by definition, “good” writers. One could either write, or one couldn’t. Such was the fantasy of that time, and even now our culture continues to value speed and ease of production, particularly in reference to the speaking ability of our politicians, who are deemed “good speakers” if they can think on their feet.⁷⁷

Clark’s reflection offers a contemporary yet familiar objection to expressivism’s romantic legacy. Despite being dubbed a “process pedagogy,” expressivism’s romantic legacy left the writing process shrouded in unproductive superstitions that remain today. Her observations also contain echoes of expressivism’s earlier critics: Bizzell’s concern for spontaneity, Gage’s “romantic adulation of writers,” and Young’s natural talent or “vitalist” perspective. Clark’s contemporary iteration of these well-rehearsed concerns cautions that expressivism’s romantic tradition endures even in today’s students.

Others, however, rightfully acknowledge the discipline’s debt to process-oriented pedagogies like expressivism. The expressivist classroom, according to Clark, created

⁷⁶ Berlin, “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories,” 771.

⁷⁷ Clark, 4.

commonplace “activities that are now considered essential components of a writing class” such as conferencing, drafting, and revising.⁷⁸ Eli Goldblatt (2017) also charts expressivism’s recent variations. Similarly to Clark, Goldblatt argues that expressivist values survive in the discipline’s commonplace ideas about writing—even steadfast opponents of expressivism unconsciously harbor expressivist values. Instructors invoke what Goldblatt calls expressivism’s “tacit tradition”⁷⁹ anytime they “encourage students to bring words to bear on their experiences, to ground their writing in their lives, to be responsible for their words, and to be responsible to the community in which they are reading, writing, and responding.”⁸⁰ We pay homage to expressivism anytime we conceive of writing as a vehicle for social expression, personal development, or identity-formation.

As long as we continue to think of writing as a deeply personal process, expressivism’s “tacit tradition” will linger in writing pedagogies. Despite the simple fact that these ideas are virtually unchallenged in current composition studies, Goldblatt recognizes that most instructors would hesitate to align themselves with expressivist pedagogy: “These are the commitments to which writing teachers of most pedagogical orientations could subscribe, just as the word expressivism is left unspoken.”⁸¹ Goldblatt identifies the same intellectual shame about expressivism’s romantic tradition that Gradin outlined in 1995. Read in tandem, both Gradin and Goldblatt encourage us to interrogate our critiques for inflated anti-romantic attitudes and honor how expressivism has shaped our most common assumptions about writing.

Gradin’s *Romancing Rhetorics* thoroughly defends expressivism’s contributions to the field, despite its infamy for “perpetuating the myth of inspiration, based on the generally held

⁷⁸ Clark, 5.

⁷⁹ Eli Goldblatt, “Don’t Call it Expressivism: Legacies of a ‘Tacit Tradition,’” 440.

⁸⁰ Goldblatt, 429.

⁸¹ Goldblatt, 439.

notion that the romantics saw the act of composing as mysterious and inspirational.”⁸² While she maintains that most of expressivism’s critics are unfairly hyperbolic, Gradin concedes that these criticisms “are not completely incorrect”⁸³ and even admits that a composition pedagogy founded on talent and inspiration is hazardous. Although Gradin and Goldblatt urge us to consider writing instruction’s inextricable debt to expressivism, they still invite us to ask valid questions about this approach to invention.

In summary, the central problem of these romantic models is that they misconstrue composition as a passive or inaccessible phenomenon. Imagining the writing process as spontaneous, mysterious, transcendent, private, or worse, the effortless product of “natural talent,” disempowers both a writer’s agency and an instructor’s influence. It is rather difficult to articulate an empowering composition pedagogy on “inspiration” to begin with, adding natural talent and divine intervention to the mix makes it downright impossible.

What, then, can we offer the student from Nancy Sommers’s case study, who likes to write with “inspiration”? Alongside Patricia Bizzell and Irene Clark, Sommers demonstrates that students still casually subscribe to these passive and romantic ideas of invention. The cognitivists proposed formal heuristics to demystify this romantic bent, but the work of post-process critics demonstrate how deciphering the writing process has its own shortcomings. While Rose uncovers the potential for both vague and rigid writing plans to cause writer’s block, he does not articulate strategies to resolve the instructional tension he illuminates. Neither does Gradin who proposes that we refigure expressivism’s traditions into an updated “social-expressivism”⁸⁴ that considers social epistemic critiques. How can we encourage students like Sommers’s to abandon

⁸² Gradin, 9.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Gradin, xiv.

passive and ambiguous approaches to writing that leave them with little sense of direction—
without giving them *too* much direction?

III. From Ambiguity to Accessibility: Toward an Inventor's Toolbox

“The beginnings of writing instruction are mundane and pragmatic rather than artistic and intellectual.”

— Sharon Crowley

Interestingly enough, some proposed alternatives to expressivism's romantic model of invention either explicitly or tacitly gesture to the classical tradition. Bizzell's critique of romantic spontaneity and ease asserts that “the classical rhetoricians knew better”⁸⁵ when it came to invention. Gradin even suggests a re-imagining of inspiration as something that is “accessible to most if not all students through the cultivation of a certain kind of intellect.”⁸⁶ Gradin offers a model of “inspiration” that is an accessible habit of mind, not an elusive gift from the muse. Gradin and Bizzell's readings give us an image of invention that invokes fundamental values of the classical rhetoricians, who thought of writing as an accessible skill that could be mastered through diligent practice.

This project aims to guide student writers beyond disempowering writing myths and toward a more accessible approach to invention, a primary feature of the classical rhetorical tradition. The following strategies synthesize the instructional values of expressivism's major critics and offer techniques that navigate this delicate tension between a scarcity and overabundance of structure. These strategies align with three instructional values informed by expressivism's various critics:

1. **Complexity:** A generous degree of deciphering is necessary to make the writing process legible. This can be most easily achieved, I propose, by making the legacies of invention a central and recurrent topic of the course—or at the very least, a dedicated unit or week. Exploring the complex iterations of invention like those proposed by the social constructivists and engaging in candid conversations about personal invention strategies

⁸⁵ Patricia Bizzell qtd in Clark 1.

⁸⁶ Gradin, 9.

will encourage students to move beyond totalizing mythologies. Moreover, this focus will ideally expose student writers to an abundance of different invention strategies to try.

2. **Accessibility:** Reducing invention to spontaneous “inspiration” invokes a long legacy of treating writing as a passive, mysterious, transcendent, or natural gift. Though the expressivists hoped to make invention accessible by branding “expression” a natural human function, this assumption sends a similar message to the student still struggling with writer’s block: *this should come naturally to you*. In the spirit of the cognitivists, I maintain that a certain degree of transparency and structure is necessary to move beyond muddled metaphors about writing. I propose that classical rhetoric, with its emphasis on practice and habit-formation, can offer instructors and students accessible invention strategies if properly revised.
3. **Flexibility:** Finally, I want to leverage the accessibility of lucid cognitive strategies while also considering the work of post-process critics like Rose, who suggest an overabundance of structures can be equally unproductive to students. Rose concedes that rules have their benefits so long as we foster our students’ ability to interrogate their usefulness based on context: “Dysfunctional rules are easily replaced with or counter-balanced by functional ones... Furthermore, students can be trained to select, to ‘know which rules are appropriate for which problems.’”⁸⁷ Thus, the following strategies consistently prompt students to interrogate their usefulness. The opportunity to study different writing conventions, mythologies, or rules through the course content itself would cultivate students’ flexibility by enabling them to habitually consider the affordances and limitations of various conventions or writing strategies.

Complex Encounters with Creativity

Explicitly exploring the complex histories of invention in the classroom would function to both demystify invention and encourage students to consider the multiple sites where invention can occur. Teaching students about invention as a *tradition* to which the romantics, classicists, and contemporary rhetoricians all contribute will encourage students to interrogate their dominant definitions of invention. Thus, in the following materials I make invention—and its often-neglected history—central to classroom conversation.

⁸⁷ Even if the writing process proves to be as indecipherable as post-process critics suggest, the class would likely still arrive at a productive conclusion: invention is simply too complex to reduce or mythologize.

⁸⁷ Rose, 400.

As the social constructivists eventually demonstrate, a fundamental aspect of invention's legacy, that is often minimized by romantic pedagogies, is that invention is inevitably tied up in our cultural moment. Educating students that invention is not exclusively an internal, private phenomenon will help students locate invention in both their internal and external worlds. The classical tradition, for one, draws attention to the social nature of invention and composing. The following short reading elucidates this romantic shift of invention from a social to a private phenomenon to encourage students to reconsider the dominance of romantic images of invention:

From Public to Private: Invention in the Classical Tradition and the Eighteenth Century

Invention didn't always happen in isolation. For the classical rhetoricians, rhetoric was primarily intended to persuade, but was always inextricably tied to the community. Sharon Crowley (2004) suggests that "the study of rhetoric was equivalent to the study of citizenship."⁸⁸ Ultimately, studying rhetoric was meant to train the skills necessary for interrogating ideas. Being able to identify faulty logic was a civil service; it helped the community assemble a more accurate pool of collective knowledge. Invention in the classical tradition was based on an epistemology, or theory that "knowledge was contained in the collected wisdom of the community... Teaching and learning began with what people already knew and proceeded toward new discoveries by testing them against the collective wisdom."⁸⁹ Rhetoric in the classical tradition was an inherently public discourse: the classical rhetoricians always had something to write about because they were always responding to current debates occurring in the community.

Classical traditions maintained dominance in the classroom up until the eighteenth century, when the rise of modernity sparked what Sharon Crowley dubs an "individualistic epistemology."⁹⁰ This modern worldview privileged "human reason as the primary source and foundation of knowledge."⁹¹ In other words, the individual became prioritized above all else. For rhetoric, this epistemology characterized invention as a deeply private (and eventually romantic) function.

Most rhetoricians concur that George Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) epitomizes this shift. Campbell's work took seriously the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences

⁸⁸ Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, 1.

⁸⁹ Crowley, *The Methodical Memory*, 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Crowley, *The Methodical Memory*, 5.

of the individual as a valid source of knowledge. His treatise also proposed that rhetoric's primary purposes are to stir the emotions and imagination.⁹² Hugh Blair contributed to this individualistic shift as well—his *Lectures on Rhetorical and Belles Lettres* (1783) contended that knowledge is ultimately intended to benefit an individual's growth, taste, and creative abilities. According to Irene Clark, Campbell and Blair's treatises marked the moment when “the individual writer [began] to occupy a position of greater prominence in education.”⁹³

This new emphasis on the individual turned invention inward. Sharon Crowley (1990) claimed that “for the first time in the history of rhetoric, the inventional process was focused solely on the individual creative mind of a rhetor working in relative isolation.”⁹⁴ In the classical tradition, W. Ross Winterowd articulates how rhetoric was an inherently social process:

Before the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the rhetorician-humanist conversed in the agora and spoke in the senate; after this period, the humanist was no longer a rhetorician in the traditional sense, and he tended to ponder alone, withdrawing from the parlor to his upstairs room.⁹⁵

According to Irene Clark, this value “resulted in the exaltation of self-expression, and the privileging of imagination and inspiration over invention.”⁹⁶

This reading should be paired with guiding questions similar to the following, which encourage students to consider various models of invention and the common assumptions they create:

- What is the difference between “imagination,” “inspiration,” and “invention?” Which is a better model for coming up with ideas?
- Where do ideas come from? Are they out in the external world, waiting to be found, or do they come from within?
- What might be the pitfalls—or benefits—of moving invention from the public to private?
- What might be problematic with what Clark calls “the privileging of imagination and inspiration over invention?”
- Can you practice “creativity?”

The topics above also ought to be coupled with reflective questions that encourage students to interrogate the assumptions of their own writing process:

- What strategies help you write best? What does your “best” writing look and feel like?
- How do you deal with writer's block?

⁹² Linda Ferreria-Buckley, “Continuity and Change in Writing Instruction in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Great Britain,” 5.

⁹³ Clark, 59.

⁹⁴ Crowley, *The Methodical Memory*, 32.

⁹⁵ Winterowd, 19-20.

⁹⁶ Clark, 59.

- How do you come up with ideas when you write?

To cultivate further metacognition about invention, instructors could consider discussing and incorporating the following multimodal readings into their syllabus:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”
- Anne Lammott, *Bird by Bird*
- Susan McCain, “When Collaboration Kills Creativity: The Rise of New Groupthink and the Power of Working Alone”
- Interviews with artists on their creative process
- Various hackneyed inspirational posters

Overall, embedding narratives about invention into the course content itself would afford both instructor and student alike the frequent opportunity to reexamine the nature of invention, and familiarize themselves with multiple techniques of creation.

Accessibility through Practice

Despite the prevalence of romantic myths of talent or passive inspiration, there is a long history of treating invention as a process accessible to those who commit to practice. Around fifth century BCE until roughly fifth century CE, classical rhetoric flourished in Athens and Rome, and while these approaches came with their host of fundamental issues,⁹⁷ they valuably maintained that rhetoric was a learnable skill. Aristotle characterized rhetoric—and by extension, invention—as a skill “such as physical strength, or the ability to decipher codes, that can be used for either noble or ignoble purposes.”⁹⁸ Improvement was made possible through practicing and developing habits (*hexis*) of effective rhetoric. *Hexis* did not denote an unconsciously ingrained habit, but rather a “deep-rooted capacity... to employ language wherever needed, on whatever

⁹⁷ The program was of course primarily intended for white upper class citizens.

⁹⁸ Aristotle qtd. in Clark 58.

subject, in whatever circumstances.”⁹⁹ These habits were formed by engaging in repetitive exercises. All rhetors—even those with “talent”—engaged in the same five step process of composing: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.¹⁰⁰ Similarly structured, the *progymnasmata* was a series of composition exercises designed to sequentially build upon skills of the previous exercise. James J. Murphy (2020) offers us a condensed glimpse of twelve common exercises:

- a Re-telling a fable
- b Re-telling an episode from a poet or a historian
- c *Chreia*, or amplification of a moral theme
- d Amplification of an aphorism (*sententia*) or proverb
- e Refutation or confirmation of an allegation
- f Commonplace, or confirmation of a thing admitted
- g Encomium, or eulogy (or dispraise) of a person or thing
- h Comparison of things or persons
- i Impersonation (*prosopopeia*), or speaking or writing in the character of a given person
- j Description (*ecphrasis*), or vivid presentation of details
- k Thesis, or argument for/against an answer to a general question (*quaestio infinita*) not involving individuals
- l Laws, or arguments for or against a law

Murphy, “Roman Writing Instruction,” 81.

Though fashioned to be routinely repeated and completed only in sequence, this does not mean we cannot glean some otherwise useful invention strategies. Comparisons, retellings, descriptions, and impersonations can all function as individual points of entry into a topic—or at the very least, get students writing. Although each technique is designed to synthesize the strategies of the previous, Murphy’s *progymnasmata* nonetheless presents twelve starting points to choose from. This series could also be modified into a series of short assignments or, perhaps

⁹⁹ Murphy, 41.

¹⁰⁰ Crowley and Hawhee, 1.

more effectively, brief ten-minute warm-up exercises in class that both simulates this sequential practice but also primes students to engage with the course readings more thoughtfully.

Aphorisms and fables about creative inspiration are plentiful, and invention even holds a place in the law under the umbrella of intellectual property. Dedicating a brief portion of class time each day to practicing one of these strategies would, at the very least, desensitize students to the often-daunting task of invention.

Toward Flexibility, or Teaching Students How to Be Their Own Teachers

Frequent class discussions about the difficulty, pleasure, or ease of generating ideas will help deflate invention's romantic mystery, validate student struggles with composing, and make explicit a wide variety of invention strategies for students to attempt. Perhaps the paramount point of this instruction, however, is that students learn to habitually identify and evaluate the usefulness of various writing conventions or approaches, rather than unconsciously replicating them. Flexibility and accessibility in the classroom can be achieved with the following:

- Compile a readily accessible, running classroom list of invention “strategies” gleaned from both peers and course readings.
- Consistently evaluate the affordances and limitations of each new strategy, approach, or convention introduced.
- Work toward new metaphors (such as a “toolbox,” for example) that adequately capture the adaptable nature of various writing conventions and strategies.
- Encourage students to practice the *progymnasmata* across a variety of different genres beyond just the essay: tweets, podcasts, journal entries, blog posts, and speeches, to name just a few, all transmit different conventions. Prompting students to articulate what strategies might be best suited for different genres cultivates a student's flexibility.
- Normalize easily altered or discarded writing “plans.”
- Empower students to become familiar with their writing process and the kinds of strategies that work best for them.

While we can offer our students plenty of accessible and well-structured invention strategies, as Mike Rose perceptively points out, without the capacity to evaluate the situational efficacy of these techniques, students may find themselves struggling with writer's block just the same.

IV. Conclusion

Invention and writer's block remain vexed issues for students, and romantic models of composing inevitably compounded these issues. Prior to the Romantics, however, invention was an accessible tradition. The methods I suggest endeavor to return invention back to this original approachability to empower students to abandon passive myths of composition. The flexible and accessible "toolbox" of strategies I propose here function for both students and instructors alike. Both new and seasoned composition instructors can adapt these flexible methods to fit various course subjects and content. Moreover, centering the exploration of invention in the writing classroom can operate as a powerful lens of inquiry into the writing process.

Goldblatt reminds us, however, that writers are inherently compelled by the ability to connect with communities and speak their minds or intimate experiences: "Without an urgency that is felt as personal, a writer will always be looking to the teacher, the boss, the arbiter, for both permission to begin and approval to desist. This doesn't mean students must always write autobiographically, but they must learn how to find the motive spark..."¹⁰¹ Goldblatt suggests one value we should maintain from the romantics and expressivists, however, is the *delight* we can take in writing. Perhaps we are so eager to rehearse the difficulties of writing that we neglect, in expressivism's optimistic attitude, the pleasure one can also take in that "magic flow of ideas."

¹⁰¹ Goldblatt 460.

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