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## Process vs. Product: A Settled Debate

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## Process vs. Product: A Settled Debate?

9/24/2018



Our focus this week was on process theory and its frictions. We read two foundational texts in process theory, Donald Murray's "[Teaching Writing as a Process not a Product](#)" and Peter Elbow's "[Freewriting Exercises](#)," alongside Lisa Delpit's book *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. Murray and Elbow's essays are part of the [expressivist movement](#) that shifted from professors teaching students to students teaching each other.

Delpit's book asks us to reconsider process theory by looking at the different learning needs and cultural interactions with authority that students bring to the classroom. These needs and interactions are often misinterpreted by well-meaning teachers as problems instead of as a call for a blended pedagogy. Delpit argues that problems generated by a process-heavy classroom arise from a lack of both

awareness and diversity within educators that creates a homogenous, unquestioned set of teaching practices (40).

Reading these texts together evoked an emotional response from me. I have used freewriting exercises each semester since my first composition theory class during my MFA where I learned the technique. As a creative writer who spends most of her time in product-focused workshop classes, I have embraced process pedagogy when I teach composition. It is a practice I have valued and never questioned until I read Delpit's work, and I felt angry – both at myself and frankly, at Elbow, for not recognizing the layers of privilege inherent in favoring a process pedagogy.

### "In Order to Teach You I Must Know You"

The 2006 edition of Delpit's book begins with two of her most well-known essays: "[Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator](#)" and "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." Delpit's main argument is that "teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a nonthreatening, real communicative context" (53). In conversation one classmate pointed out that in this way teachers can honor what students bring to the classroom while recognizing the skills students need to take away (DK).

We considered the practices of valuing interactions with students' home languages in the classroom and framing class discussions on how home/heritage and academic/Standard Edited English (SEE) both have important rhetorical roles in society. In order to do this, teachers need to overcome their fear of articulating differences, for as Delpit argues "pretending that gatekeeping points don't exist is to ensure that many students will not pass through them" (39). Children are already aware of codeswitching in action. Teachers can use this awareness as an opportunity to discuss these linguistic changes and why they happen. We might ask children how they speak, then write their language on the board, and have a parallel, SEE version so students can see the differences as choices. By doing this we remember as teachers how much knowledge students already have.

There is a false dichotomy that pedagogy is either teaching grammar or “letting them do whatever they want.” Delpit argues for a balance that takes into consideration the learning needs and goals of each particular community of students.

### **Reviewing Process Pedagogy**

Our critiques of Murray were filtered through Delpit’s eyes. We connected Murray’s advice for teachers to “shut-up” with students not feeling helped, and questioned the value of “unfinished” work in the reality of deadlines both in academia and professional careers.

Delpit’s work highlights how well-meaning teachers may seek to give power to students as part of a process pedagogy, but in doing so they must also consider how this removes the teacher as a resource, and unequally influences students during assessment. Students believe grammar is important, and want clear instruction on how to fix their mistakes, because this is how they are graded.

We considered Elbow’s “babbling... jabbering exercises” and how students might perceive these as teacher laziness or a lack of authority (3). Elbow also presupposes a level of grammatical fluency where in revision the student can focus on higher order concerns.

### **Key Points from Our Discussion:**

- Some well-meaning pedagogies continue to privilege certain students over others
- We need to consider who is seen as other in academic settings
- The academic workforce reflects their own ideologies in their classrooms
- There are no universal answers. There are diverse needs geographically, and there is a lot of unseen/unpaid work involved in asking educators to get to know their students’ communities.

### **Questions Moving Forward:**

Intersections with other fields’ pedagogies have already started appearing in our class discussions, and I’m interested to see how both Writing Center and Creative Writing pedagogies might complicate and inform our future discussions.

Murray expresses concerns over the term “teacher” by giving a litany of alternatives and Elbow’s essay appears in the book *Writing Without Teachers*. Writing Center scholars have also considered alternate terminology than “tutor,” worrying it will lead to an assumption of prescriptive suggestions. How might our pedagogies be different if we were to shift more towards claiming these titles? How is this complicated by graduate student identities where neither “Instructor” nor “Professor” feels quite right?