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## SHARING THE STRUGGLE: USING PROTOCOL ANALYSIS TO MODEL THE WRITING PROCESS IN INTRODUCTORY COMPOSITION

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### INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

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Composition researchers have been using protocol analysis since at least the early 1980s to gather data on how students approach the writing process (Flowers and Hayes). Some of these early studies also suggest the feasibility of writing instructors sharing their own think-aloud protocols with students to show how the instructors approach writing tasks (Harris, Rubin).

I first heard about protocol analysis as a teaching tool several years ago when Professor Darrell Fike gave a conference presentation on how he modeled the writing of court briefs in an advanced writing class at Valdosta State University. Subsequently published in the 2015 edition of the *Journal of the Georgia Philological Association*, Fike's address inspired me to experiment with protocol analysis as a way to teach various aspects of the writing process to students in the required introductory composition courses at my institution.

ENGL 1102: Composition II is the second half of the freshman writing sequence in our university system's core curriculum. As a literature-based writing course, it includes written responses to the genres of short fiction, poetry, and drama. Many students find the poetry unit particularly challenging; not only is poetic analysis an unfamiliar task for them, but transforming the complex ideas of poetic interpretation into an essay developed around a central thesis seems difficult to some and almost impossible to others.

In an effort to show students how a process-oriented approach can help them develop a focus for a poetry essay, I model my own writing process for generating ideas and creating a working thesis statement.

### PROTOCOL ANALYSIS ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

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At least one class period before this activity, I will have introduced students to the major assessment for the unit—a written analysis of one of the texts we have read and discussed as a class. On the day of the activity, we spend a good portion of the class time discussing the texts they were assigned to read for that particular day. Towards the end of the period (I like to reserve about fifteen to twenty minutes for the activity), I tell students we are going to workshop an idea for a poetry paper. I then use the class computer to create a blank document that is projected for all the students to see.

To make sure that my think-aloud protocol is as spontaneous as possible, I ask a random student to select a poem from the class discussion based on something unique or memorable about the text. At this point, I begin typing and talking out loud, responding to the student's comments and explaining what is appearing on the computer screen. A transcript of the process might look something like this:

*INSTRUCTOR: Okay, John, so you were impressed by Komunyakaa's use of symbolism in "Facing It." If I'm going to write a paper on that topic, the first thing I want to do is get that down so that I have something to look at and remind me what I am doing. [Typing: Yusef Komunyakaa, "Facing It," Symbolism.]*

*What was it about his use of symbol that you found so memorable?*

*JOHN: I think it was how the emotions were connected to that symbol.*

*INSTRUCTOR: That's an interesting insight. Why do you think Komunyakaa's speaker decides to use the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial as a symbol for the war and all that that represents for him? Why doesn't he just write something like, "I went to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial the other day and looking at it brought back some really painful, difficult memories that I'm not sure I'm ready to deal with yet"?*

*JOHN: Well, it probably wouldn't have the same emotional impact on his readers.*

*INSTRUCTOR: I think you're right; it wouldn't have the same impact, especially on those readers who don't know much about this war, in particular, or even about war in general and how it affects those who are involved in it. Let's get some more thoughts and ideas from the rest of the class about the impact of symbols in this poem.*

After additional discussion and typing, students might see a rough list of potential topics:

*Yusef Komunyakaa, "Facing It," Symbolism:*

- emotional impact*
- vet's emotions about war*
- dark imagery: fear, guilt, confusion, frustration, anger*
- reflection of reality: misinterpretation of others' actions*
- window to the past: flashbacks*

*INSTRUCTOR: Now that we have listed some more specific ideas, we might be ready to generate a working thesis for a paper on the general topic of symbolism in the poem. Remember that a thesis should be a statement of opinion, an arguable claim, so in this case I'm going to try and share a unique insight about the symbolism of the Wall. Something I definitely want to avoid is a thesis that is too obvious or too self-evident. If I come up with [typing Yusef Komunyakaa's poem, "Facing It," uses symbolism to discuss the author's feelings about the Vietnam War], I'm sort of making a claim but it isn't very controversial or even insightful.*

*As I look at some of these other ideas from our list, I'm drawn to the dark imagery that suggests guilt and other negative emotions for the speaker. I wonder if I can combine these insights with the next bullet point about how the Wall reflects a kind of distorted reality that causes the speaker to misinterpret others' actions as they too look at the memorial.*

*I suppose I could delete this not-so-great thesis but I'm going to keep it there for now as a reference point. So, I hit enter and start a new line that says something like this: [typing: Komunyakaa's poem complicates the symbolism of the Wall for its speaker; not only does the dark imagery suggest his fear, guilt, confusion, and anger about the war, but it also indicates his distorted view of reality as he misinterprets others' actions on the mirror-like surface.]*

*Now we have a statement that meets the requirements for a thesis: it makes an arguable claim (in other words, another person might reasonably disagree with it) that practically obligates me to provide additional supporting evidence. It also presents a more interesting insight about the symbolism in the poem than the original thesis.*

Depending on the amount of time remaining in the class period, I might assign students to create their own working thesis statements for one of the other poems we have discussed. Students could then share those statements with peers or several volunteers could read them aloud to the rest of the class.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

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In general, I have noticed an improvement in students' thesis statements since I began using protocol analysis as part of my teaching toolkit for the core composition courses. However, a review of the grades on the poetry analysis assignment for the past several years indicates very little change: the class average on this assignment still hovers somewhere between a C plus and a B minus with only a slight variation in the grade spread (more students seem to be achieving B and C grades instead of D averages since the implementation of modeling thesis statements). One conclusion suggested by the data is that modeling does have a slight, positive impact on students' writing; however, modeling how to generate a thesis statement is insufficient. Demonstrating other aspects of the writing process—introductory paragraphs, organization of ideas, integration of research source material, conclusions, etc.—is also important.

Of course, the possibility remains that protocol analysis has little to no effect on helping composition students to better meet the basic requirements of college-level writing. Nevertheless, for now I will continue to use this think-aloud approach as part of my teaching method for the simple reason that it seems to contribute to a more positive classroom environment: students are more engaged and attentive during these exercises and apparently enjoy watching someone else struggle with the process of transferring ideas and feelings into written text.

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