Reflective Writing’s Synecdochic Imperative: Process Descriptions Redescribed

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Perhaps there is an evasion, a shirking of responsibility, in becoming too certain too quickly, particularly when our certainties involve reversions to an ideology which has the deceptive allurement of tradition.

—Kenneth Burke (Counter-Statement 105)

Scholars and teachers within the field of composition have long heralded the merits of reflective writing, so much so that it has become one of the field’s sacred pieties. Whether written intermittently throughout a course or near the end (typically in the genre of portfolio cover letter), reflective writing assignments are thought to promote cognitive development by helping students become more aware of their own writing processes.¹ As a metacognitive act, reflection “fosters skepticism, rigor, and control” (Weaver 145), attributes characteristic of skilled writers. Additionally, reflecting on their own writing and revision processes is thought to empower students as learners: rather than simply implement their teachers’ suggestions for improvement, students, through reflection, analyze their rhetorical choices, claim authority as writers, and take responsibility for their own learning (Huot; O’Neill, “From” 61).² More broadly, reflective writing is thought to help learners connect the specifics of their actions to those actions’ more general effects. By “facilitat[ing] the continuous integration of knowledge, experience, and action,” reflective writing enables learners to theorize their practice so that they can apply and revise old knowledge in new situations as needed (McGuire, Lay, and Peters 3; see also Yancey 7). Indeed, in my own work I have extolled reflective writing as

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a rhetorical strategy necessary for the development of a revisionary consciousness (see *Revisionary*).

However, teacher-scholars within and beyond the field have also examined problems associated with reflective writing, most notably its tendency to legitimize liberal constructions of the writer as a single, unified self (Conway; Emmons; Kinsella, “Toward”) and to perform ideological work that deserves further analysis (Bradbury et al.; Yancey and Huot; Erlandson; Orland-Barak). With respect to this latter problem, scholars have argued that when written and read within contexts of high-stakes assessment, all reflective writing is, in fact, rhetorical argument—discursive appeals targeted to external audiences for specific purposes (see Yancey; Mirtz; Newton et al.; O’Neill, “Constructed”; Schendel and O’Neill).

In this article, I seek to extend these ideological critiques by examining the rhetoric of one popular genre of reflective writing: the process description, which, following Kathleen Blake Yancey, I define as “first-person accounts” of writing in which students make visible the invisible processes of what happened during their production of a single text and why (26). Specifically, I identify and contest commonplace assumptions about what these descriptions *are* in order to deepen existing critiques of what they *do*. Consider, for example, the following excerpted process description, written by “Maria” and published in Reynolds and Rice’s *Portfolio Keeping*:

> I think I’m trying to do too much in this version. By the time I get to the conclusion, I’m having to summarize too much and cover the same territory again, which may be a sign that I’ve been over-ambitious. Vicky [a peer reviewer] hinted that my thesis was too broad, but I didn’t want to hear it because I was still very excited about the ideas and still finding plenty to say. Now that I’ve found more examples and developed most of the major points, I see that I need to go back and sharpen the thesis by dropping my reference to the past views of computers and education. I think my paper will work better without the historical overview, and I’ll just concentrate on current uses of computers in education. (qtd. in Reynolds and Rice 19)

I argue that process descriptions like Maria’s are deemed “good” because they anticipate effectively teacher-readers’ expectations of what *should* have happened in acts of writing. To explain this dynamic and identify its potential drawbacks, I draw on work by Hayden White to reconceptualize process descriptions as historical narratives that account for “what happened” in different explanatory modes. I argue that to be persuasive, process descriptions must describe what *did* happen in what White terms the *synecdochic mode*. This synecdochic imperative, I continue, naturalizes the work of writing, thereby making it difficult for teachers to interpret “bad” process descriptions as anything other than unsatisfactory demonstrations of student learning. To counter this interpretation, I analyze as historical narratives sample descriptions that fail to meet teachers’ expectations, arguing that by interpreting them differently, we can develop new ways to learn from them even as we interrogate and perhaps
revise the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions that rendered their descriptions “bad” in the first place.

**Process Descriptions: A Theoretical Justification**

Reflective writing genres like process descriptions deserve careful attention because they provide the raw materials with which theorists build their models of learning. The theoretical soundness of such models is buttressed by the work of Donald A. Schön, whose hugely influential books *The Reflective Practitioner* and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* conceptualize an epistemology of practice that, among other things, helps legitimize as “properly” academic “instrumentalist” and “vocationalist” fields such as composition studies (*Educating* 3–4, 12–13). Of particular significance to reflective writing theories and pedagogies are Schön’s conjoined claims that (1) there exists in the intelligent actions of skilled practitioners a kind of how-to knowledge—what he terms *knowing-in-action*—and (2) this knowledge can be observed in the intelligent actions of skilled practitioners working to solve problems that occur during the “messy, indeterminate situations” constitutive of “real-world practice” (*Educating* 4). Drawing on Michael Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge and referencing work by Chester Barnard, Schön explains that knowing-in-action refers to the skillful judgments, decisions, and actions we undertake spontaneously, without being able to state the rules or procedures we follow. A boy who has learned how to throw a ball, for example, makes immediate judgments of distance and coordinates them with the bodily movements involved in the act of throwing, although he cannot say how he does so. [..] (*Educating* 24)

Because it is spontaneous and unconscious, tacit knowledge—understood as enacted knowledge (or knowing-in-action)—cannot be fully represented in language, because any attempt to describe that knowledge would inevitably distance the practitioner from the immediacy of her own knowing-in-action (*Educating* 25; see also Brown and McCartney 21). However, Schön continues, practitioners can glimpse this knowledge—it can be partially revealed to them—by observing and then attempting to make explicit the tacit knowledge embedded in their own intelligent actions, those “publicly observable, physical performances like riding a bicycle” as well as “private operations like instant analysis of a balance sheet” (*Educating* 25; see also Kinsella, “Embodied” 400–01). By constructing discursive accounts of how they perform such actions, practitioners can, as Schön explains, begin to “mak[e] explicit what they already know how to do” (*Educating* 87).

According to Schön, it is this inarticulable tacit knowledge that directs the movement of *reflection-in-action*, the process by which a practitioner makes new knowledge through her ability to be both “sensitive and responsive to variations in
the immediate context” (Kyle et al. 33). Every skilled practitioner, Schön explains, enters a new situation with a preexisting tacit knowledge base that governs her actions. Inevitably, however, a new situation will present problems that the practitioner’s existing knowledge cannot solve. As she experiences this new problem, the practitioner attempts to solve it by conducting on-the-spot thought experiments, assessing the efficacy of a new action against its effects and revising future action accordingly. Through this real-time process of testing, hypothesizing, and evaluating, a practitioner engaged in practice builds knowledge through its revision.

For an example, Schön turns to jazz improvisation, explaining how musicians’ interpretative decisions are guided by an emerging sense of a whole, which is perceived through tacit knowledge: “Listening to one another, listening to themselves, [the musicians] ‘feel’ where the music is going and adjust their playing accordingly [. . .]” (Educating 30). Like a boy throwing a ball—or, as Schön explains through another sports metaphor, the tennis player who knows “the feeling of hitting the ball right”—practitioners intuitively sense the “rightness” or ‘wrongness” of an action and adjust future actions accordingly (Educating 24, 110). In short, reflection-in-action produces knowledge through its revision.

In her influential work Reflection in the Writing Classroom, Yancey yokes Schön’s concept of reflection-in-action to the genre of process descriptions, explaining that the latter is one “method” of the former (27). For Yancey, reflection-in-action signifies both process and product: it refers to the generative, recursive, and developmental processes writers engage in as they write and revise a single product (24, 26–27). Reflective writing genres like process descriptions make these processes visible, requiring that we as writers explain our actions to others “so that in explaining to others, we explain to ourselves” (24). This self-explanatory function, which Maria’s process description cited earlier illustrates so well, suggests why Yancey posits process descriptions as “a good place” from which student-writers can “begin knowing [their own] work” (27). Appealing directly to writing teachers, Yancey explains:

Descriptions of process [. . .] can be useful precisely because as first-person accounts, they provide a record of what happened; the record begins to make visible what heretofore was invisible. As important, in making this record, students begin to know their own processes, a first and necessary step for reflection of any kind. The principle here seems obvious, but it bears articulation: We cannot reflect upon what we do not know. And finally, as teachers, we can use that account in the same way a mathematician uses a student’s development of a proof, to inquire into how a learner moved from process to product [. . .] . (26–27)4

The important role that descriptions of process play in Yancey’s model of reflective learning, which she terms constructive reflection, becomes apparent when she delineates its four steps: specifically, while engaged in constructive reflection, writers
1. observe and examine [their] own practice 
2. make hypotheses about successes and failures there, as well as the reasons for each 
3. shape the next iteration of similar experience according to what [they] have learned, when 
4. [they] begin the cycle again. (126–27)

A cyclical model of learning, Yancey’s constructive reflection bridges the gap between doing writing and learning how to write. As such, step one—the observation and examination of practice—is indispensable in a learning-by-doing pedagogy. Put differently, because learning in a reflective writing classroom requires that students examine what they did while writing, that doing must be made visible. That is, their processes must first be described.

**Process Descriptions: A Critique**

One obvious critique of process descriptions as defined and theorized earlier in this article is their tendency to legitimate problematic assumptions regarding the origin and objectivity of knowledge. As a method of reflection-in-action, for example, Yancey’s process description purports to make invisible knowledge known. Specifically, in moving so quickly from description to knowledge, Yancey risks positioning personal experience as foundational: students’ descriptions of their processes—understood as accurate accounts of what happened while writing—emerge as both the origin of and basis for her model of learning. Although Yancey’s thoughtful discussion should deter such reductive readings of her learning theory, which does indeed acknowledge the partiality and contingency of knowledge-making, certain word choices (descriptions are “records” that provide a good place to “begin knowing”) bestow upon process descriptions a kind of epistemic certainty. Though I’m confident that Yancey herself would contest such certainty, the enticement to embrace process descriptions as authentic conduits to knowledge is strengthened when she likens students’ accounts to mathematical proofs, thereby imbuing the genre with an objectivity that locates it, the student, and the teacher beyond ideology.

This same critique might also be leveled at Schön, whose theory of reflection-in-action informs Yancey’s process descriptions specifically and her model of learning more generally. Throughout his discussion of reflection-in-action, Schön relies on a vocabulary of intuition that repeats commonplaces regarding the authentic origins of knowledge. Specifically, Schön posits that understanding occurs as a consequence of “right feeling”: a skilled practitioner selects a particular problem to solve and a specific way to act in response to it based on what feels right; she then tests the “rightness” or “wrongness” of that action by assessing the degree to which her understanding of what she is doing now accurately represents her felt sense of what she should be doing. This ability to assess emerges from the practitioner’s
embodied base of tacit knowledge. Schön explains, referencing Plato: a practitioner engaged in intelligent action “spontaneously recovers knowledge that is in him but forgotten” (qtd. in Educating 85). Thus, it seems that although a skilled practitioner cannot fully articulate tacit knowledge in language, she can feel it—and this feeling is what directs its revision.

Although I agree with Sue Clegg that Schönean reflection is a complex epistemology of practice that “require[s] a theorization of experience that is not reducible to discourse” (176), my purpose here is to underscore the ways in which Schön’s own discursive moves imbue observations of self-action with an indisputability that transfers over to discursive representations of those observations. In her review of critiques of Schön’s work, Elizabeth Ann Kinsella points to this very problem, arguing that in it,

[p]ractitioner accounts are non-problematically viewed as “true,” and no effort is made to foster practitioner reflection on language use, or on the manner in which discursive systems construct what can be talked about. […] While reflective practice brings practitioner accounts to the table as a counterbalance to a traditional emphasis on technical rationality, the question of whether those accounts can be taken as non-problematic reflections of reality is never posed. (“Toward”)

Schön himself seems to anticipate Kinsella’s critique with his acknowledgement that reflection-in-action is a situated, and therefore ideological, process. In his discussion of how problems are named and framed, for example, Schön explains that we pay attention to, select, and organize specific parts of practice based on our values and belief systems (Educating 5), thereby foregrounding the ways in which “[c]ulturally available information and values […] act as tacit schema to guide human intention and response” (Phelps 13). In other words, ideology both affects and defines the contours of tacit knowledge. Extending this logic to Schön’s earlier claims about right feeling, it follows that the feelings supplied by tacit knowledge are also ideological: an action feels right not because it comes from some authentic place of knowing, but rather because it legitimates the ideology that framed and organized that action in the first place. The boy throwing the ball, for example, may indeed rely on muscle memory to throw in a way that feels right to him; however, we must ask how and why he (and not his sister) came to possess such embodied knowledge in the first place. Viewed in these terms, the boy’s experience of throwing the ball emerges not as an authentic origin of right feeling, but rather as an effect of the ideology that grants him access to it. Similarly, the “fact” that I have never “felt right” throwing a ball evinces how dominant ideologies circulating within cultural discourses pay attention to, select, and organize action—and create subjects—in ways that serve their interests.

Despite Schön’s apparent recognition that all action is inevitably influenced by ideology and the discourses that shape and sustain it, and despite reflective writing
theorists’ respect for and reliance on Schön’s work, I would argue that many writing scholar-teachers continue to regard process descriptions as foundational to students’ learning to write, and their persuasive force is due in part to their apparent sensorial origins. As ethnographic historian James Clifford explains, firsthand historical accounts appear irrefutable because they confer authority through the evocation of an observer’s “concreteness of perception” (37). In other words, discursive representations of an observer’s own sensory experience resist critique because they remain yoked to the following self-affirming logic: an observer’s firsthand account of what happened is true because her senses don’t lie, and her senses don’t lie because they are true (see also Scott 780). Thus, for example, Maria’s comment that her peer reviewer “hinted” that her thesis was “too broad” rings true because this is how Maria perceived and assigned meaning to her peer reviewer’s words and actions. Applying this logic in the context of the writing classroom, students’ descriptions of their own writing processes, which typically include recounted memories of sensory experiences of what happened while they wrote, carry the same sort of rhetorical weight as firsthand historical accounts. The student was there: she saw, she experienced, she knows.

One final critique of process descriptions concerns the way in which “good” process descriptions fix and naturalize what it means to be a writer. That is, descriptions wherein student-writers satisfactorily describe their purposes, their experiences participating in activities designed to help them better understand how they were being understood (for example, peer review), and the insights and revisions those activities motivated, tend to legitimate writing teachers’ assumptions regarding how “real” writers write. However, it is precisely because reflective learning “is always grounded in prior experience and [...] any attempt to promote new learning must take into account that experience” that we must carefully consider how the term experience is invoked in reflective writing teaching and research (Boud, qtd. in McGuire, Lay, and Peters 3). Specifically, when experience is conceptualized reductively as something certain categories of people have (for example, students, writers), then those categories are “treat[ed] as given characteristics of individuals” rather than as discursive and ideologically inflected constructions that can be contested and revised (Scott 782). As historian Joan Scott explains, the problem with experiential evidence (such as that believed to be provided by descriptions of one’s own writing processes) is that it too often

works as a foundation providing both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation, beyond which few questions can or need to be asked. And yet it is precisely the questions precluded—questions about discourse, difference, and subjectivity, as well as about what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination—that would enable us to historicize experience, and to reflect critically on the history we write about it, rather than to premise our history on it. (790)
Applying this critique to process descriptions, we can see the ways in which students’ “good” descriptions of their experiences as writers can fix and naturalize the category of student-writer by conferring authority on descriptions that best represent what we believe those experiences should be: the things that writers do naturally when they write.

**Process Descriptions as Historical Narratives**

I acknowledge, of course, that writers experience something when they write, and I’m even willing to believe that prediscursive experiences (such as knowing-in-action) do exist; however, my argument thus far has been about something else. Specifically, I have been arguing that “good” process descriptions problematically stabilize both the experience of writing and the writing subject by appearing to account for what naturally happens when writers write. I advocate that we find alternate methods of making sense and use of descriptions of process, methods that resist a too-easy conversion whereby only certain descriptions of writing emerge as valid explanations of its “real” nature.

To this end, I turn now to Hayden White’s theory of historical narrative, which is informed by Kenneth Burke’s tetradic tropology and its four master tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. According to White, Burke’s first three master tropes provide “the direction that thought itself might take” as we make meaning and try to understand our world (74), while the fourth, irony, motivates revision: by adopting a critical posture toward knowledge itself, irony challenges the stability of understanding produced through the interactions of the first three (73–74). In Tropics of Discourse, White employs Burke’s four master tropes to develop corresponding “modes” of narrative explanation, arguing that a given event’s discursive description persuades readers to arrange story elements and assign meaning to their synthesis according to the conventions of a particular tropological mode. White’s appropriation of Burkean tropology, which itself can be understood as “a system [...] by which the mind comes to grasp the world conceptually in language” (Kellner 17), can thus be applied to analyze how language persuades readers to make stories cohere in specific ways. Indeed, White’s own description of his narrative modes—as “strategies for constituting reality in different ways, each of which has its own ethical implications” (22)—induces me to understand his theory as necessarily rhetorical: as rhetors, we can use White’s theory to produce descriptions that induce audiences to both understand reality in a given way and to revise it; as rhetoricians, we can use his theory to analyze how and why historical narratives achieve the effects they do.

Given that reflective writing assignments attempt to record the work of writing so that student-writers might better grasp what writing is, how they do it, and
how they can learn from what they already know how to do so they might do it better—in other words, given that reflective writing discursively constructs writing realities that serve specific rhetorical purposes—and given the field’s commitment to theorizing, practicing, and teaching revision, White’s Burkean-inflected theory seems an apt methodology for exploring how students’ process descriptions can both make evident, and prompt a reconsideration of, disciplinary commonplaces regarding what writing is and how it should be taught. I advocate this methodology even as I recognize that critiques of White’s structuralist tropology—for example, its “failure to recognize the role of ideology” and its “cyclicity,” which “leaves no possible material grounding in history” (Mellard 31, 30)—are warranted. My goal here is not to suggest that White’s narrative modes equate to deep structures of consciousness or developmental universals; rather, I mean to show that they are rhetorically useful. Through White’s theory, we can intentionally engage Burke’s epistemology of “perspectival knowledge” (Tell 41), applying it to readings of process descriptions in order to generate alternate accounts of what happens during writing and why. Such readings, I argue, offer new ways of inquiring into how student-writers experience and understand the work of writing.

As White elucidates, the rhetorical force of a historical narrative—which both describes what happened and explains “why things happened or turned out as they did” (128)—resides in its ability to provide a reader with an explanation the reader accepts as satisfactory:

The reader, in the process of following the historian’s account of [. . .] events, gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another. [. . .] And when he has perceived the class or type to which the story he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him. (86)

Further, this explanation, according to White, is “prefigured by the original description (of the ‘facts’ to be explained) in a given dominant modality of language use,” with each dominant modality corresponding to one of four master tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (128). In other words, the language a rhetor uses to describe what happened directs the reader to organize and thereby make sense of events according to the conventions of a specific modality; once the reader recognizes this modality (and makes meaning accordingly), she is induced to accept the rhetor’s discursive representation of a past event as a valid account of what actually happened and why.

In a classroom that adopts a reflective writing pedagogy, the most important reader in need of explanation (from a student’s perspective) is the teacher, and it is her belief in the pedagogical value of learning-by-doing that determines what a satisfactory explanation can be. In such classrooms, texts are “processed” so they might develop and improve; in making this processing visible, students over time develop as writers: they learn how they write and, more generally, how to write by
reflecting on what they do as writers. Consequently, in such contexts persuasive process descriptions are those in which students narrate their actions as writers according to a developmental trajectory.

Maria’s process description manifests this developmental trajectory, and, not surprisingly, when understood as a historical narrative it is predictably exemplary, because in it Maria describes what happened during the production of a single text in such a way that her explanation of why it happened as it did aligns with what most writing teachers believe should have happened: she figured out in dialogue with others how and why she needs to revise. Applying White’s terminology, Maria’s process description provides a synecdochic explanation. In this modality, a description of an event constitutes one part of a development that leads to a whole, and the event’s explanation—why it happened as it did—is the whole itself. As White explains, the synecdochic mode directs a reader’s thought toward the “integration of all apparently particular phenomena into a whole, the quality of which [is] to justify belief in the possibility of understanding the particular as a microcosm of a macrocosmic totality” (73).

Returning to Maria’s description, we can say that it is exemplary because in it she links together elements of her writing experience so that they form a coherent—because-developmental whole: not only does she realize through peer review what she needs to do next (“sharpen the thesis”), but she also demonstrates that she now understands why this focusing needs to happen (she was “trying to do too much”; she was being “over-ambitious”). She makes clear that she is also learning how to listen to critical feedback even though doing so can be difficult (“Vicky hinted that my thesis was too broad, but I didn’t want to hear it because I was still very excited about the ideas”), which further evinces Maria’s writerly development. Consequently, Maria’s description reproduces assumptions informing the whole that is reflective writing pedagogy itself, namely, that by reflecting on their writing, students learn both how to write and how to be writers. Put differently: Maria’s process description is persuasive because her explanation legitimates the pedagogical assumptions of the reader who required her to write it.

It makes sense that writing teachers who are in the learning-to-write business would be most persuaded by process descriptions that prove students are developing as they should. Indeed, we might say that our teacherly investment in synecdochic explanations is inevitable. However, this investment, when coupled with the belief that “good” process descriptions tell the truth about writing, naturalizes the category of writer by delimiting what counts as “appropriate” writerly development. In her chapter on reflection and assessment, Yancey voices this linkage, explaining that what we seem to reward [in reflective writing] isn’t just a sense that the writer understands his or her writing strategies and processes, but also and as important that these are appropriate, given (our understanding of) the way writers behave. (147)
By including the parenthetical “our understanding of,” Yancey acknowledges that there are other ways of understanding how writers behave (and, by extension, how they develop). I argue, however, that in privileging the synecdochic mode of explanation in our reading of students’ process descriptions, we disregard how alternate modes can help us rethink what writing is and how it happens, and we disregard these modes because we misread a difference in description as a failure to learn. In short, we fail to see what some of those other ways of understanding the phenomenon of writing might be.

To demonstrate the insights afforded by reading for such differences, I turn now to an excerpted description written by “Steve,” a student who responds as follows to the question “How would [you] prepare the current draft for submission after meeting with [your] peer group?”:

My group did not find the things that I said would need to be changed but they did find some other things that would help out. First that I need to explain more on some of my details and second that I need to change one of my ideas and to use the world wide web instead of WWW. (Qtd. in Yancey 27)

In an effort to make sense of this student’s logic of movement between drafts, Yancey concludes that the “underdeveloped scaffolding we see [in Steve’s description]—the general claims, the dearth of detail”—most likely “indicates that Steve hopes he can move forward rather than knows how” (27). Yancey’s interpretation makes sense to me. But I wonder: what else might we discover if we regard Steve’s description as something other than his inability to explain synecdochically his writing experience; his inability, that is, to write something more like this:

My group did not find the things that I said would need to be changed, and the things they did point out were pretty vague. I think this is because I didn’t explain very well the parts of the draft I needed help with. I still don’t know how I’m going to work in my second paragraph, which is my favorite part of the whole thing, but right now it seems pretty random. To get better help from my group the next time I’m going to really need to point out where I need help and why, not just say, “Here’s my paper. What do you think?”

There is, of course, the possibility that Steve’s actual process description decently describes his sense of what actually happened during his group’s meeting. Perhaps his group members’ comments were minimal, vague, and unhelpful. In this sense, Steve’s description lends itself to White’s metaphoric mode, where a clear and precise description of events that is similar to what actually happened is the explanation (White 72, 88, 90–91, 128). When interpreted as a metaphoric explanation (rather than a failed synecdochic explanation), Steve’s description points to what some student-writers might understand to be their task as reflective writers: to describe what happened clearly so that their teachers understand that it in fact did. Such minimalist descriptions thus suggest how a student-writer’s need to account for
having completed a required assignment trumps any value he might find in writing a detailed account of his writing process. A more savvy student, of course, would understand the need to describe a peer review experience like Steve’s synecdochically, perhaps by remarking that he now understands “how important it is to be in a group with readers who really care about your work.” However, lacking such a moment of realization—or a clear reference to how he is developing appropriately as a writer—Steve’s process description can be envisioned by Yancey only in terms of Steve’s inability to explain what he needs to do next and why.

Now consider this excerpted process description written by “Sarah,” who was asked to describe her process of writing a case study of students she tutored:

The first thing I had to do was to decide on my student. After a question in class, I decided to do Carol and Alice. They work together in English 1101. The next thing I did was break up the categories into paragraphs. The categories were the student, issues, strategies, outcomes, and finally, what’s new. Under each of the categories I put the main things that I wanted to say about the two different students. (Qtd. in Yancey 28)

When Yancey contrasts this process description with a companion (or “secondary”) text that Sarah wrote, she realizes they both “told the same story”: each seemed “highly mechanized as well as overly general”; paragraphs “seemed like slots without integral or synthetic connections”; her papers “didn’t progress” (28). Yancey’s reading of Sarah’s description locates Sarah’s description in White’s mechanistic, or metonymic, mode, wherein a description of an event is taken to be one example, or a reduction, of the workings of a universal law of cause-and-effect (White 73). A description prefigured in this mode is recognized as a valid explanation when the reader accepts as true the universal law the description typifies. The metonymic mode thus differs from the synecdochic because the latter operates inductively, with parts building to create a coherent whole, whereas the former functions deductively, with a governing “law” preceding descriptions that verify its truth. In this case, it seems as if Sarah is working from the logic of the Law of the Outline, which declares the following: A clear plan for organization results in a good product. However, because many writing teachers want their students to write into their projects, to discover as they invent, not to predetermine before they even begin their paper’s order and content, Sarah’s seeming adherence to this law generates an explanation that many of us likely find unsatisfactory. By comparing the process description with the student’s other text and realizing they both “told the same story,” Yancey was able to locate “a starting place from which [she] could respond to the student” (28). My application of White’s theory, however, points to a different place from which to respond: instead of simply encouraging Sarah to develop and make connections among and across her ideas and paragraphs, we must first persuade her to believe that the epistemology of the outline is only one way to understand and approach the work of writing.
Taken together, Steve’s and Sarah’s “unsatisfactory” process descriptions provide alternate accounts of writing that challenge dominant commonplaces informing reflective writing pedagogy. In foregrounding his obligations as a student over his curiosity as a writer, my reading of Steve’s description suggests the ways in which students writing in a historic moment marked by, among other things, increased bureaucratic demands for accountability might “process” writing very differently from their empowered peers writing alongside decentralized teachers in communities across the land. My reading of Sarah’s description invites us to consider how writing according to the culturally revered logic of cause-and-effect might indeed feel to some students like a natural way to write. To discount both of these writing realities is to ignore how contemporary and culturally sanctioned ways of thinking (about writing, working, learning, teaching, and so on) influence both the student writer and her writing processes.

**Irony’s Absent Presence**

To describe, to be attentive to the concrete state of affairs, to find the uniquely adequate account of a given situation, I myself have always found this incredibly demanding.

—Bruno Latour (144)

In his discussion of irony, White distances himself from Burke’s humble consideration of alternative perspectives (see Burke, *Grammar* 514) and instead adopts a more traditionally literary definition: “[A]n ironic utterance,” he explains, “presupposes at least a tacit awareness of the disparity between a statement and the reality it is supposed to represent” (White 208); because it says one thing but means another, irony enables a writer “not only to say things about the world in a particular way but also to say things about it in alternative ways” (9). Further, by making readers aware that alternative representations of reality are possible, irony also foregrounds the epistemic limitations of language: it reminds readers that the nature of symbolic representation itself ensures an understanding of reality that is forever incomplete.

It should come as no surprise, then, that I’ve been unable to find a student-authored process description amenable to an ironic reading. After all, I’m never actually there, in the dorm room, when one of my students types, “I realize after writing this draft that I need better, more logical transitions,” only to turn to her roommate and announce, “I sooooo care about my transitions.” That irony functions rhetorically to include some and exclude others is a truism in tropological studies, and a hypothetical student’s desire to build community with her roommate (both of whom are on hypothetical academic probation) rather than with her teacher-reader (a supposedly fellow writer who, like her, struggles to say what she means) seems reasonable enough to me. Indeed, as a recovering honors student myself, I’m fairly
certain that an ironically written process description would sail right past me, because its recognition would require that I also acknowledge the existence of a student subject nervy enough to distance herself from me: her teacher. It would seem, then, that in contexts like college classrooms, irony’s capacity to question and revise knowledge that sustains the status quo is limited, if even possible.

This sustainability is, in fact, what some scholars argue is irony’s very aim—to reproduce and legitimate asymmetrical relations of power. Interestingly, however, in the case of my imaginary nervy student, it is irony’s absence that sustains both my writing pedagogy and its buttressing commonplace: that “the power dynamic in the teacher-student relationship can, under ideal conditions, be erased” (Miller 19). Indeed, it is irony’s absence that manifests the fiction of this ideal. Among other things, its absence highlights what Brian Huot describes as the “disjuncture between the [student-writer’s] competing roles of student and writer” (169)—and by extension, the teacher-writer’s competing roles as teacher and writer—a disjuncture I would argue the synecdochic imperative helps conceal. By re/producing the “right” kind of writing subject, the synecdochic imperative legitimates the very pedagogy that requires students to write process descriptions in the first place.

By reconceptualizing process descriptions as historical narratives, however, we and our students have the means to recognize, critique, and learn from the rhetorical work they do. Rather than serve as the origin of and foundation for student learning, process descriptions become instead different versions of the work of writing. In advocating this reenvisioning of process descriptions, I don’t mean to dismiss the usefulness of asking students to think critically about their writing and the processes they undertake to produce it. Rather, by critiquing commonplace assumptions about process descriptions, I mean to mystify the concept of reflective writing so that we might gain some critical distance from our current and very strong disciplinary beliefs about it. This process of mystification begins when we regard “good” descriptions not as support for our preconceived notions about how writing really happens, or as proof that a learning-by-doing pedagogy really works; instead, we acknowledge that they represent only one kind of writing experience, a representation that obligates us to ask: how else might a student’s story of writing get told, and why? What can alternate representations of how writing happens tell us about how writing is perceived and learned and how else it might be taught? And perhaps most important: how can students’ “inappropriate” representations of the work of writing—in reminding us that our story of how writing happens is as incomplete as their own—generate new avenues of inquiry, projects open to rethinking both writing pedagogy and all the discursive and embodied complexities the conjoined term student-writer implies?

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Although my hope is that readers persuaded by my argument will join me in pursuing such lines of inquiry, I will conclude by identifying the visionary ironies that can become visible when we read process descriptions differently. In doing so, I hope to motivate a reconsideration of what it might mean to learn from them.

I begin by returning to Steve and my reading of his description, which I argue makes apparent the ways in which students’ pressures to identify as students can override any value they might find in identifying as writers. For such students, the questions prompting inquiry are not, “How do I write?” or “How did this version happen?” but rather, “How can I describe what happened so that my teacher knows I did what she told me to do?” The irony here, of course, is that in such instances, reflective writing pedagogy, which aims to help student-writers assert authority as writers, ends up reinforcing some students’ sense of themselves as “only” students. Further, synecdochic process descriptions, which necessarily exclude ironic references to unshared aspects of students’ writing process, stifle students’ continued inquiry into the phenomenon of writing by finishing it in a way that renders further investigation unnecessary. By satisfying both teachers’ need to know that students are learning and students’ desires to satisfy that need, synecdochic explanations thus prevent us all from learning more about what happens when students write and why—which is one of reflective writing pedagogy’s primary aims. “Good” process descriptions, which illustrate students’ capacity and willingness to revise, also ironically deter teachers from feeling compelled to revise our own understanding of what writing is and how it might best be taught.

One final irony that emerges from my application of White’s theory underwrites the previous two: it is the ironic mode—the narratives students won’t write, or perhaps the ones teachers like me can’t read—that manifests the skepticism and meta-awareness constitutive of reflective thinking. It is through an ironic perspective, White explains, that rhetors become able to consider “the extent to which [the synecdochic mode] fails to take account of certain features of the elements thus classified”; by bringing back into the fold elements that disrupt the “ordered reality” posited through synecdochic explanation, irony makes possible revisions to the status quo (White 6). Applying these points in the context of my argument, we might say that in order to rethink and revise existing assumptions and practices pertaining to writing and its teaching and learning (which for my own professional health I must assume teachers of writing are committed to doing), we must take seriously accounts of writing processes that fail to explain.13

I argue that we can begin to do so by changing the purpose of process descriptions: instead of conceptualizing them as a method for helping students develop as writers (and thus begin a cycle that affirms existing pedagogical beliefs and practices), we should regard process descriptions as just that: descriptions of what happens when students write from their very real subject positions as students. Such descriptions
would not try to account for students’ “appropriate” writerly development, attitudinal or otherwise. Nor would their purpose be to represent accurately authentic writing experience. Rather, by intentionally disarticulating their descriptive function from their explicit explanatory purpose, descriptions would emerge as sources of data in an ongoing inquiry to probe the mysteries of the phenomenon we call writing (along with those phenomena we don’t yet call writing but perhaps should). Successful disarticulation in the writing classroom would thus first require a teacher’s investment in a pedagogy of studying writing for purposes of theorizing it. To thwart the compulsion to use process descriptions as proof of learning, this approach would also necessitate that students study descriptions they themselves have not produced. And finally, from a Schönean perspective, such study would demand the presence of descriptions of student writing as it is happening. I say this because although “good” process descriptions require students to conflate description with synecdochic explanation, in his lesser-known theory of a ladder of reflection, Schön himself draws a clear line between descriptions of real-time actions and explanations generated after the fact (Educating 115–17).

Process descriptions as we traditionally understand them occur at Schön’s Level 3 and constitute what he terms reflection on descriptions of reflection-in-action. This is the point at which a practitioner moves from describing what is happening to describing what happened—the point at which a history gets written. Looking back on what came before, the practitioner begins a “dialogue of thinking and doing [with himself or with others] through which [he] become[s] a more skilled” practitioner (Educating 31). He makes visible through his discursive articulation the questions, criticisms, and suggestions that influenced his previous actions, as well as his perception of the effects of those actions. Before this dialogue can begin, however, Level 2 reflections—descriptions of the real-time moments of reflection-in-action as it is happening—must exist. This means, then, that in fine tropological fashion we have come full circle, albeit starting from a different, more rhetorically informed spot: with a re-turn to empirical research in the form of culturally responsible ethnographic research for purposes of gathering new data that describe how students write.

From my perspective, engaging in dialogue for purposes of analyzing process descriptions redefined and the multiple explanations they generate would be the primary work of a course committed to taking reflection seriously. Doing this work in a rhetorically responsible way would require teachers to examine with their students the complex dynamics by which discursive representations of experience are tethered to relations of power circulating through discourse, and the ideological and material contexts within which representations get made. Such a pedagogy would thus steadfastly refuse to follow a path of inquiry my earlier critique of experience counsels against. Rather, it would seek to explain experience even as it attends to the ways in which explanations function as rhetorical inducements to understand
fully that which we are obligated to understand differently. This inquiry can begin, however—and this is key—only when writing teachers acknowledge that we still have much to learn about how real students write.

**Notes**

1. I am grateful to Kellie Sharp-Hoskins, who, in talking with me about tropological theory, used the phrase “metonymic imperative,” thereby inspiring the title of this article. I also thank John Schilb and anonymous *College English* reviewers for their helpful, productively critical responses to an earlier version of this piece.

2. As Robert Probst puts it, “The responsibility for making judgments about the quality of their work must become the students’. They are the ones who must feel the rightness or wrongness of their statements, because, ultimately, they are responsible for what they write” (76).

3. For more on the ways in which reflection can reinforce dominant ideology rather than spark revisions to it, see Clegg 177; Fendler 16, 17.

4. From a strict Schönian perspective, Yancey’s representation of process descriptions more closely resembles knowing-in-action, because discursive accounts of how student-writers produced texts begin to “mak[e] explicit what [students as writers] already know how to do” (Schön, *Educating* 87). Yet Yancey also references Jeff Sommers’ Writer’s Memo to exemplify the value of process descriptions, which he argues help students “[look] back into the process leading to a completed draft, and [reflect] on both it and the final product” (qtd. in Yancey 26). Thus, Yancey’s discussion of what process description are and what they can enable students to do implies that the genre is a way of looking back on prior actions such that tacit knowledge and its revisions in real-time practice become visible for reflection and learning.

5. More specifically, Yancey explains that

   through [. . .] constructive reflection we create the specific practice from which we may derive principles toward prototypical models. In composing a text, a writer invents practice that may have within it certain understandings and strategies that accommodate themselves to another rhetorical situation. Moreover, in inventing practice that spans rhetorical situations, a writer invents him or herself, re/creating the identity of a writer. (50)

In other words, constructive reflection is the process through which students come to understand what writing and being a writer mean. It is a model that represents learning as understanding, and understanding as the capacity to theorize—a capacity that enables writers to transfer their understanding to new rhetorical situations, applying and revising it as needed.

6. For a discussion of how this same dynamic functions in the field of English studies more broadly, see Yood.

7. Although Schön states clearly that descriptions of reflection-in-action are only conjectures (see *Educating* 25), teachers frequently regard them as accurately representing an inarticulable process, which indicates the rhetorical appeal of such descriptions to those of us striving to connect *doing* with *learning how-to-do*. In this regard, McGuire and coauthors’ wording—that Schön’s concept of reflection-in-action “has been integrated by social work educators as an accurate representation of how social work professionals operate in the real world” (3; emphasis added)—is especially interesting, because it suggests that this kind of integration (for example, integrating the practices of “real” writers into writing pedagogy) deserves a closer look.

8. For a critique of theories that conceptualize experience as always only discursive, and for a proposed method of theorizing experience both discursively and otherwise, see Breu.

9. A thorough introduction to tropes and Burkean tropological theory is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are figures of speech that offer us
“a variety of ways of saying ‘this is (or is like) that’” (Chandler 124). To say that understanding is itself tropological, then, is to argue that the process of making meaning—and of making sense of that meaning—requires seeing ‘this unknown in terms of that known. As White explains, understanding is “a process of rendering the unfamiliar [. . .] familiar; of removing it from the domain of things felt to be ‘exotic’ and unclassified into one or another domain of experience encoded adequately enough to be felt to be humanly useful, nonthreatening, or simply known by association. This process of understanding can only be tropological in nature, for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative” (3). The impossibility of complete understanding is a given in the tropological theory I discuss and apply in this article. Specifically, its aim is to motivate examinations of how and why language produces and authorizes certain kinds of understanding in specific contexts. In pursuing this aim, tropological theory conceptualizes rhetoric as simultaneously epistemic, persuasive, and revisionary, as an ongoing discursive process wherein language constructs knowledge, conceptualizes this knowledge as understanding, and undermines the validity of that very understanding. In representing the plurality of rhetoric—specifically, its interrelated domains of language, knowledge, persuasion, and revision—tropological theory reverses a historical trajectory whereby style remains disconnected from invention and tropes are reduced to mere ornamentation (see Butler; Kellner 15).

10. Although Yancey distinguishes reflection-in-action from reflection-in-presentation, characterizing only the latter as being targeted to an external audience, I argue that all mandated descriptions of reflection-in-action are always reflections-in-presentation, rhetorical arguments delivered to external higher-ups for purposes of persuasion. And I would argue that this is the case even in situations where students are not required to submit process descriptions for formal assessment, because in requiring that they be written in the first place, teachers indelibly mark them as course assignments and therefore themselves as the ideal external audience.

11. I did, however, find angry ones, which is the subject of another article.

12. For an excellent discussion of arguments regarding irony’s conservative force, see Welch.

13. Interestingly, attending to such discrepancies between what happened (Steve wrote X) and what one thinks should have happened (Steve should have written Y) is exactly where Schön locates reflection’s revisionary power: in Level 4 reflection, where critiques of dominant ideology can occur. According to Schön, a Level 4 reflection refers to the process through which apprentice and coach “reflect on the dialogue” the occurs in Level 3: “They might ask [. . .] whether they have come any closer to a shared understanding of the problem or tested their understandings of each other’s meanings” (Educating 116). Level 4 thus marks a revisionary moment, a space in which coaches work with their apprentices not to impose their ways of thinking and doing, but rather to try and reach a shared space of understanding. It is here, then, at Level 4, that coaches become open to learning from their students.

14. For a persuasive argument on the value of disarticulating description from explanation, as well as for a method of doing so, see Latour.

15. For a thorough discussion of the benefits of this approach, see Downs and Wardle.

16. For a theoretically nuanced argument that lends support to this requirement, see Jensen.

Works Cited


Weaver, Christopher C. “Grading in a Process-Based Writing Classroom.” Zak and Weaver 141–50.


