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AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES R. COOPER

Chris Madigan

Charles Cooper is professor, Department of Literature, and director, Third College Composition Program, at the University of California at San Diego. In the Department of Literature he teaches in and coordinates the writing major and also teaches graduate level courses on composition theory, research, and pedagogy. In addition to directing one of the four college composition programs, he works closely with directors of the other three programs on cooperative evaluation and curriculum development projects. In this role he chairs the Council of Writing Program Directors.

Before coming to UCSD in 1979 Cooper taught for eight years on the Faculty of Educational Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo, and for two years in the School of Education, University of California at Riverside. He also taught high school English in California for nine years. From January to July 1978 he was a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Educational Research at Stanford University.

His Ph.D. degree is from the University of California at Berkeley.

He has been a consultant to schools and colleges in California, New York, Pennsylvania, Georgia, South Carolina, Ohio, Washington, Utah and to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service, the New York State Education Department, and National Writing Project centers at Berkeley, Santa Cruz, Albany, and Buffalo. Active on the National Council of Teachers of English, he is presently Chair of the Committee on Research.

He is the author of more than fifty articles, reports, and reviews, and of published instructional materials and tests. His books include *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1977) and *Research on Composing: Points of Departure* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), both edited with Lee Odell; *Measures for Research and Curriculum Evaluation* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1975, with William Fagan and Julie Jensen); and *Measuring Growth in Appreciation of Literature* (International Reading Association, 1972).

His current research and writing are in the areas of evaluation of writing and research on written language and on the composing process.

IN DISCUSSING his own writing process, Charles Cooper explains that he usually plans while writing—what James Britton calls "shaping at the point of utterance." The same applies to his tape-recorded responses. To watch him stop, run his left index finger across his forehead, eyes tightly closed, then produce the last parallel item in a series is to witness such shaping. To see him scan repeatedly left-to-right before answering, as if reading his text from the air above him, and to watch his lower lip curl under his upper, the tip of his tongue barely whetting both, is to see a craftsman ready himself and his tools before leaning into his work. In both what he says and how he says it, Mr. Cooper shows an intense awareness of what it means to compose.

MADIGAN: In *Research on Composing*, you and Odell claim your "audacious aim" is to redirect and revitalize research in written composition. What are you hoping for, and why is that audacious?

COOPER: I think the word "audacious" is more a reflection of our sense of the difficulty of what we recommended, not that the work itself is audacious. And it may have been somewhat presumptuous for us to issue the call since neither of us was an established senior professor, nor had either established a reputation as a researcher, though we'd trained students in research.

We used that term, too, because in the introduction we discussed Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's *Research in Written Composition* (NCTE, 1963), which seems to call for more comparison and intervention studies. And we felt research needs to refocus on more fundamental, more basic questions about written language as a process, how school-age and college writers develop control, before we do any more comparison group studies. So the redirection means for us a redirection away from conventional educational research where you simply evaluate programs toward more basic questions in what seems an emerging field of study in the composing process and its teaching.

MADIGAN: What basic research is being done now?

COOPER: Well, for me the most interesting is of two kinds. One is simply descriptive studies of written discourse by writers in the earliest through the college years. And the other is on the composing process. Discourse analysis is important because we need a clear description of the development of writing in different discourse types. At present we know very little about how the average student develops as a writer. We don't even know why a writer writes one sentence instead of another, similar one. And I think we need those descriptions not just in transactional writing but in expressive writing and other kinds as well.

Once we have the descriptions, then we'll have an empirical basis for much tougher evaluations of the school programs and public school materials. It's hard for an organization like NCTE to put direct pressure on publishers about the contents and sequence of school materials. The response is always, "Nobody knows the best way to teach writing yet. Nobody really knows what a fifth grader needs." Well I think we can find out, or at least get a much stronger sense than we have now, if we get these good descriptions of performance. So that's one large class of study.

The other kind of study, descriptions of the composing process, is much more difficult, but cognitive psychologists, psycholinguists, and educational researchers are beginning such studies with students of all ages, usually using the case study approach. I think from discourse studies and psychological studies of the composing process we'll learn a great deal.

MADIGAN: I want to talk specifically about research on composing processes. Some studies say composing processes may ultimately be as individual as the people who engage in them. Given that diversity and the complexity of the process, can we really make valid generalizations about "The Composing Process" or composing processes for discourse type X?

COOPER: I don't think we'll ever have a description of "The Composing Process." For one thing, we're sure the process changes over time, as a matter of growth and cognitive development, so a fifth grader's process is different from a ninth grader's, which is different still from a college student's.

But we may not need such an all-encompassing description. We may already know enough about the composing process to radically transform school and college programs, even though the general notion can't be applied directly and specifically to any single writer. Suppose we simply say that writing is a time-consuming, temporal, extended process with recursive stages and describe the stages simply as prewriting, drafting, and revising. If you look around secondary schools you'd see that almost nobody has recognized the composing process in even this simple way. School programs and materials and assignments don't reflect even that simple definition. So I think we already have a general understanding useful enough to reform the school programs.

But I think we will also learn that people's writing processes are very different, not just at different stages but between writers at the same stage. It's clear if you talk to other people about writing that your own procedures and rituals are very different from other writers. You may both be almost equally competent and equally readable and even equally efficient in terms of output and revised pages per week, but the process by which that's achieved is different.

My own process is one of very slow "shaping at the point of utterance," as James Britton says. I try not to move ahead to the next clause until I've worked out pretty carefully how it fits in the context of what I've said, how it's going to lead me to the next clause and to the next sentence. I do very little quick drafting, very little free writing or exploratory writing. I tend to want to sit around and think and plan carefully before I write anything. So as a result, I can sometimes write a long paper on a topic I'm very familiar with—let's say a long paper which doesn't need to be documented and which I'm going to read as a speech someplace—and write it straight off with almost no revisions, no tinkering, and very few changes. It's slow—it takes me days to write a short piece—but as I finish a page, it's finished. There's very little to go back to do to it usually. Other people I know well would produce five times the amount of language I would for the same task and throw away lots of stuff, cut and revise, and do major sorts of reworking. What they're doing that I'm not doing is using the

production of written language itself to find the implications and project the relationships of one idea to another.

Process studies will help characterize that full range of writing processes as well as refine the concept of the composing process—at least for a major discourse type, say nonfiction prose. And if school and teaching programs begin to reflect the range of alternatives as well as that general notion, maybe writers who would have ended up working as I do could learn to feel comfortable with a much more exploratory, indirect process, at least at the early stages of composing a piece. That might be the best way to go about it. It's already clear that there are a half dozen to a dozen different kinds of prewriting, of generating a lot of useful information before you draft. I'd see a student in a good writing program learning all these approaches, using them, and deciding which one feels best, which is for him the most productive. I'm not at all sure that my process is the most efficient. I might have been a better or a more productive writer if at some point I had learned a different process.

MADIGAN: You've mentioned case studies. Can case study do anything other than suggest hypotheses to confirm with larger samples and inferential techniques?

COOPER: That depends on whom you ask. An anthropologist would say sure it can. And a clinical psychologist would say sure it can. Case studies are a way of discovering knowledge, and they're legitimate research in themselves with direct implications for clinical and teaching practice. Philosophers who have studied the way knowledge is created in the social and psychological sciences—people like Paul Diesing at SUNY Buffalo—have argued that the case study is an appropriate way to get answers to some questions. Diesing's *Patterns of Discovery in the Social Sciences* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971) is mainly a reaction against the narrow, behaviorist, lab-centered notion of research and the still widely accepted notion that the only evidence we can trust comes from highly controlled studies using conventional psychometric statistics. But all we have to do is look around to recognize that much of what we know about how societies function comes from case studies, from a single anthropologist's observations of a tribe, from a single clinician's looking at his practice case by case—Freud, for example. So I see the case study as legitimate and important in research on composing and teaching writing.

I know it's common to say we do case studies to find out the questions to research. Case studies *can* lead to intervention studies, experimental studies, surveys, but they're real research in their own right, particularly in sets of four to eight where you ask the same questions and observe the same activities in several people. A set of case studies gives you confidence in what you're seeing. And if researchers in other places reach similar conclusions, that contributes to knowledge just like any other kind of research.

MADIGAN: Do you see composition research ever getting like that in some sciences where researchers communicate mainly to each other, practice lags years behind research, and research demands respect and even funding?

COOPER: I think it's inevitable that some of us are going to become rather narrow specialists, that we'll develop certain forms of jargon and specialized ways of proceeding. That's the case in most specialized fields of study. But I don't see any problems with that. We're researching a process that has incredibly high stakes for schools and students and we want to move as quickly as we can to those implications. I'm very comfortable seeing research centers develop and researchers talk to themselves and a few others as we move quickly into some fairly technical and esoteric matters. There'll always be enough of us around to interpret that research for teachers.

And teachers themselves are getting involved in research, not just in program evaluations but some basic research. Groups like the National Writing Project Center at Berkeley are helping teachers design studies, involving them in research in ways that integrate research with teaching practice. I'm happy to see work in both directions.

MADIGAN: Let's forget research itself for awhile. What's an education professor doing in a literature department?

COOPER: Well my colleagues at San Diego may be more surprised to find me there than I am to be there. I think that college and university English and literature departments are becoming serious about writing instruction and writing programs, and I think they're finally willing to admit that teaching can be informed by people with training outside traditional literary studies. Composition is a behavioral, psychological study, and people looking at composing and writing from that perspective have important and useful things to say. Cynics might argue that this change has occurred simply because enrollments have dropped and college English departments have had this change of heart not in any principled way but simply out of self-interest. But whatever the motive for the change, I'm delighted to see it. And I think writing instruction is likely to get better because people like me are now permitted to work inside college English programs.

Another way to account for my presence in a literature department is the growing interest in graduate-level training of composition theorists and researchers. There are several new programs around the country. We're developing one at San Diego. And that pleases me even more than the earlier change because it gives us a new place in the university, outside of education, to train composition specialists. We badly need them. And composition is where most of the jobs are presently.

MADIGAN: Sounds very political. What are the challenges composition

specialists face in their departments and universities and in society?

COOPER: The major problem remains that composition is not considered a scholarly field or an academic area of specialization. Another problem is that many universities with pretensions to being selective and being research centers think that writing instruction is a task for the secondary schools, and that the university shouldn't be involved in it and shouldn't admit students who can't write.

I think that last attitude is dying quickly. In fact, most selective campuses, like San Diego, now recognize that they need very strong, effective writing programs at the freshman level and perhaps even beyond. So the major issue is the general regard that composition is not an area of academic specialization.

I think resistance to that will fade as the quality of the work improves, and for me that means that a great deal of the composition specialist's work will be basic research that obviously breaks new ground and really contributes to the field.

MADIGAN: How about cultural problems? Richard Ohmann claims in *English in America* (New York: Oxford, 1976) that educational systems are responsive to the personnel needs of the economic system and will support the tacit ideas of the dominant groups in the society. Not all writing programs do or would want to fit that description. Where does the composition specialist fit into our society, especially in the literacy crisis the media trumpets?

COOPER: I think Ohmann's very astute in his observation that college writing programs are not currently training students to think or to learn. They exist to improve the efficiency of students' passage through the system and to teach them survival and practical writing skills so they can make reasonably good grades and go work on their M.B.A. at Stanford. But in my view, Ohmann is talking only about the traditional college writing program that sees itself as remedial and training students to survive in college and be careful clerks and reasonably good writers of memos and ad copy once they get into the world. But that whole view of writing, even freshman writing, is changing. More and more people are recognizing the value of writing to learning, and for me the way to justify a good freshman writing program is what it contributes to learning and thinking. Certainly that's what we try to do in the program I direct. I just don't believe it's true that writing is not valued highly in our culture. And by "writing" I mean people at all levels of all occupations who can write in an engaging, attractive way, even write persuasively enough about their organizations' policies to change the direction of government and corporations.

It seems to me that whatever one's ideology, there could be little argument about taking writing seriously in colleges and universities. By seriously I mean viewing it as a basic part of a student's general education, of

thinking and learning within written discourse.

MADIGAN: Let's talk about teacher preparation a little bit. How can a graduate student who wants to teach mainly college literature prepare herself to do a good job in composition?

COOPER: Well, only a tiny percentage of new, teaching Ph.D.'s are not teaching composition, and in nearly every case the composition assignment is one class or more. In some cases it's nothing but composition, whatever the training. So it would be easy for me to argue that doctoral programs in English and literature should require some advanced work in composition theory and teaching. A couple of courses, one surveying rhetorical theory, current discourse theory, and new research, and the other looking more directly at pedagogy, would be invaluable for any doctoral student, whatever that person's ambitions.

I think that as these courses move into English departments and are enriched by literary scholars in rhetoric and genre studies and close textual criticism, they will attract more doctoral students. Until very recently only education schools or speech departments offered such courses. But now that they're more available, people will take them, and we're likely to judge a doctoral student without such courses as not fully prepared.

MADIGAN: What about the veteran who teaches only literature and suddenly faces freshman composition because of enrollment drops?

COOPER: That's more and more common, and at some state colleges where enrollments have dropped so drastically, the only way to retain positions is to put faculty almost full time into composition teaching. We're seeing that everywhere. And those people need training and retraining to be brought up to date almost as much as new graduate students and teaching assistants.

It's very difficult because there's little one can do to coerce a full professor into spending a semester reading composition theory and research in a seminar. I think any college facing the problem I've described would be lucky to have a faculty member who could offer such a seminar even if attendance is voluntary.

People are now being required to teach composition who have never had to do it, but who are likely to continue doing it through the 80's because things are only going to get worse. And it would seem to me unpleasant to face the next ten years teaching a skill with little chance of any reward, with little likelihood of students appreciating you or the course, and with little chance of success. If I were in that position, I'd at least want to find out how the literature of composition theory and teaching might help.