Question 3A (English 6319: Composition Studies): Citing composition studies since the sixties, a) indicate what major understandings have been advanced about WRITING within the field of rhetoric and composition, and b) take a critical position on this body of work, evaluating it in the light of criteria that you make explicit.

The field of Rhetoric and Composition has advanced through a number of changes since the 1960s. Theoretical and pedagogical shifts have occurred which not only influence the rhetoric and writing classroom but society at large. Among these shifts are theories about the act of writing. This essay will discuss major shifts that occurred in the field with an emphasis on writing, focusing on the periods known as Expressivist/Expressionist, Cognitivist, Social Construction, Social Epistemic, and Post-Process. Though not exhaustive, each section will highlight some major theoretical changes that occurred in each period. It would be naïve to view writing as a separate entity which has no deep connections with other aspects of composition studies (writer, rhetoric, pedagogy, disciplinarity, etc.), but discussion will always begin with, and focus on, the act of writing. A brief discussion of Current-Traditionalism, which was the dominant mode prior to the 1960s, will precede the analysis.

In order to evaluate the differing characteristics of each period I begin with a categorizing framework put forth by James Berlin and Robert Inkster in “Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice.” The two scholars propose that

the processes one may follow in working through any kind of cognitive or creative act are of three kinds: algorithmic, heuristic, and aleatory. The three categories represent areas along a continuum of procedures from strictly rule-governed with absolutely predictable outcomes (algorithmic) on the one hand, to strictly random with totally unpredictable outcomes (aleatory) on the other. Heuristic procedures comprise a wide middle ground of activities that are neither wholly rule-governed nor wholly random [and which are] a systematic way of moving toward satisfactory control of an ambiguous or problematic situation (3).

An important term in the definition of this three-pronged paradigm is “continuum.” While each period discussed in the forth-coming analysis will be presented as having its own set of beliefs about writing, none is wholly separate from the others. In some ways, each later period builds from preceding periods and in many ways is created in response to the theorizing of past periods. This creates the continuum of which Berlin and Inkster stress and should be kept in mind as one addresses the theoretical characteristics of each period. With that said, I argue that each strand of composition theory can be placed in one of the framing categories: Algorithmic, Heuristic, or Aleatory [see Figure 1].

**Current-Traditional**

The Current-Traditional paradigm of composition studies dominated the American university system from the late 1800s until the mid-1900s. It represents a positivistic world view in which truth and reality are uncomplicated and where writing is simply viewed as the dress of thought and thus non-epistemic. Some telling adjectives used by Berlin and Inkster in describing Current-Traditionalism include “mechanical,” “manageable,” “patterned,” and “controlled” (3). These point to the Current-Traditional view that reality existed outside the observer/writer and that the job of the writer was to communicate, as best he/she could, that reality to the reader. Thus, within this paradigm, writing “tends to be seen as an artifact rather than as a response to or an expression of a personal and social need, problem, or goal” (13). The teaching of writing was reduced to “an array of mechanical procedures, which in fact are techniques for editing” (3) and so the job of written discourse was to replicate objective reality. This made writing mechanical, utilitarian, and, very importantly, non-epistemic. As Robert Conner’s reiterates in “Composition-Rhetoric, Grammar, and Mechanical Correctness,” in the Current-Traditional paradigm, grammar and form dictate writing. Because of this, Current-Traditionalism is strongly in the Algorithmic camp.

**Expressivist**

The Expressivist period of Composition studies was in many ways a backlash against the rule-governed writing of Current-Traditionalism and was popularized in the 1960s. The Expressivist paradigm focused on the individual—the writer’s expression of personal thoughts and feelings. As Berlin defines it in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” “for this rhetoric, the existent is located within the individual subject [and] the underlying conviction of expressionists is that when individuals are spared the distorting effects of a repressive social order, their privately determined truths will correspond to the privately determined truths of all others” (484, 486). In regards to writing, invention was central as students were pushed to write about things that they felt related to their own lives. Writing was seen as self-fulfillment and the teaching of writing as an “evocative act” (Berlin and Inkster). Two leading expressivists were Peter Elbow and Donald Murray who, in influential essays written in the late 1960s, “A Method for Teaching Writing” and “Finding Your Own Voice” respectively, stressed the importance of developing and emulating a strong voice through one’s writing (Elbow 120) and stressed that “content comes before form” and that writing comes from the incisive and creative bite of the student’s intellect (Murray 119-20). Expressivism also stressed that students do “real-world” writing while always writing within themselves. While this view of writing does not problematize the nature of writing, meaning, and knowledge, and doesn’t take into consideration the social nature of knowledge-creation, it certainly did emphasize the individual voice in writing and moved away from the rule-governed paradigm of Current-Traditionalism and began to focus on writing as a process. Thus, Expressivism is firmly planted in the Aleatory camp.

**Cognitivist**

The Cognitivist period of Composition studies brings us back into the realm of Algorithmic. While this rhetoric did stress writing as a process, and not just a product as with Current-Traditionalism, it did continue the Current-Traditional emphasis on rules and on approaching writing and reality from a mechanical and scientific angle. The main influence on this paradigm was cognitive psychology and it stressed that “the structures of the mind correspond in perfect harmony with the structures of the material world, the minds of the audience, and the units of language” (Berlin 480). In this paradigm, the processes of writing were hierarchically organized and writing was seen as more of a recursive act than a linear one (stage process). The work of Linda Flower, John Hayes, and Janet Emig was highly influential in the development of this period. Flower and Hayes, in “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” stressed the circular and recursive nature of writing while putting forth the theory that the act of writing involves three major elements: planning, translating, and reviewing (369). Their hierarchical and rigid approach to the writing process is echoed in Janet Emig’s “Writing as a Mode of Learning.” In it, Emig states that writings is a “deliberate structuring of the web of meaning” and directly discusses the links between the left and right hemispheres of the brain and writing (125). Like the Expressivists, Cognitivists believed that writing and learning should be “engaged, committed, [and] personal” (126) but approached the writing process in a much more strict and hierarchical manner while emphasizing scientific approaches to theorizing about discourse. The Cognitivists believed that scientific-based research into writing could produce specific regulations, and a rather clear process, from which developing writers could learn. Because of this rather mechanical approach to writing the Cognitivists swing the composition theory pendulum back to the Algorithmic side.

**Social Construction and Social Epistemic**

While the Expressivists and Cognitivists made important advancements in composition studies they “ignore the problematical character of knowledge and meaning, and hence, of discourse” (Berlin and Inkster 13). One major aspect of this is that they focus on the individual production of knowledge and discourse while ignoring the social aspects of both. Among others, an important lineage of writers who helped bring about theorizing on the social nature of knowledge and discourse are Kuhn (who stressed the social construction of scientific knowledge), Rorty (who helped generalize Kuhn’s theories), and Geertz (who applied Kuhn’s theories to other fields of study). In composition studies, a major figure of social construction is Kenneth Bruffee. In a 1986 essay he writes that “a social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that entities [such as] reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves…are constructs generated by communities…they are community-maintained linguistic entities” (774). In the Social Construction paradigm, writing was no longer seen merely as a function of the inner-eye or as an individual’s rule-governed replication of an outer reality, but the individual, and his/her writing, was bound up with his/her social context. Knowledge was now socially complicated and written discourse was now viewed as socially-maintained and, importantly, writing was seen as epistemic—directly involved in creating knowledge and reality.

While this paradigm was clearly in the Heuristic realm, theorists of the Social Epistemic paradigm complicated knowledge, reality, and discourse even further. For them, writing is not only social, but caught up in issues of power and politics. In “Social Epistemic Rhetoric, Ideology, and English Studies” James Berlin writes that writing is *always* a social and political act; that no single person is in control of language; that writing is discovery and invention and not mere reproduction and transmission; and that writing should be aware of its own limits, biases, and ideology (81). In the Berlin and Inkster Algorithmic-Heuristic-Aleatory continuum both Social Construction, and its politicized brother, Social Epistemic, are in the Heuristic realm because they constitute a problematized approach to knowledge, reality, and discourse while not believing in a single correct solution to each (see definition of Heuristic in Berlin and Inkster 3). Writing then is not only socially constructed and epistemic, it is “persuasion in the play for power” (Berlin 83) and always caught up in the web of politics and ideology.

**Post Process**

While Social Epistemic seems to fit neatly into the Heuristic camp of the Berlin and Inkster composition continuum, the rhetoric of Post Process suggests that all “process” approaches to writing, from Expressivist to Social Epistemic, are too focused on systemic processes. Scholars such as Thomas Kent in “Paralogic Hermeneutics and the Possibilities of Rhetoric” and *Paralogic Rhetoric: A Theory of Communicative Interaction*, and Sidney Dobrin in “Paralogic Hermeneutic Theories, Power, and the Possibility of for Liberating Pedagogies,” writing in the last years of the 20th century, stress that writing, and the act of writing, are much more complicated and mysterious than previous paradigms suggest. Language and writing “cannot be converted into a logical framework or system of social conventions that determines the meaning of our utterance” (*Paralogic* x). Other post-process theorists focus on the instability of writing and the writing classroom (Goggin) while some call for the further complication of writing, writing research, and the teaching of writing (Trimbur). For all these theorists, each instance of writing is a unique act that cannot be predicted or systematized. These approaches to writing, focused on the complex and mysterious natures of it and the hermeneutical guessing game it involves, put much of Post Process in the Aleatory camp, leaning towards the Heuristic.

**Conclusion**

While some in the early 21st century would argue that composition studies is still firmly working under Process (Bloom), there is no doubt that composition studies theory and pedagogy is always developing and advancing. The field’s thinking about writing has experienced significant shifts, from the mechanistic and positivistic views of Current-Traditionalism to the politicized views of Social Epistemic. Since the 1960s (simplified dating), composition studies has taken writing from simply serving as “dress of thought” to a being a self-expressive act, to being hierarchically connected to cognitive processes, to being social and epistemic in nature, to being involved in the construction of politicized and “interested” realities. The function and qualities of writing have shifted and advanced in many ways and competing composition theories and world-views will continue to overlap, mesh, compete, and build on one another as the field, and writing itself, continues to advance into the 21st century.

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[Figure 1]

Composition Continuum

(based on Berlin and Inkster)

Writing as: rule-governed problematized and questioning mysterious and individual

Current-Traditional Social Construction Expressivist

Cognitivist Social Epistemic Post-Process