One thread I noticed in the composition literature from the 60s and 70s was a question of conceiving of the writing process solely as an act of individual agency or as some socially or culturally mediated process. In reading beyond our assigned texts, I turned to Patricia Bizzell’s “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty.” from 1982. That essay begins by laying out some of the stakes of both positions as they were articulated in the 70s, and then claims that a composition theory adequate to the complete writing process would need to draw from both poles, the individualistic, which Bizzell associates with a cognitive “inner-directed” orientation, and the social, “outer-directed” orientation. That view Bizzell links to the, now familiar, notion of “discourse communities.”

Deploying Bizzell’s terms, “inner-directed” (i.e., individualist) and “outer-directed” (i.e. sociological) perspectives on the composition process, it seems that many of debates from the 60s and 70s implicitly engage this problem. So, while one’s basic assumptions on the status of individual agency in the writing process may always be an issue affecting what and how one teaches, it appears to be an important issue in these two decades, when the field is more urgently attempting to define itself.

It’s clear that Perelman’s sociological orientation maps well onto Bizzell’s “outer-directed” perspective. Bizzell describes that orientation, in sociolinguistics, as one which “seeks to analyze the ways thinking and language-using are conditioned by social context” (487). This sentiment is fairly consonant with Perelman’s. In contrast to the “cognitive” view, which sees thinking and writing as the application of universal, invariant structures to different situations, Bizzell argues that the “outer-directed” view understands the writing process as happening in a discourse community. The flaw she sees in the cognitive view is that it takes the conventions of a particular discourse community, and universalizes them as basic structures. Mina Shaughnessy, in her introduction to *Errors and Expectations*, though she does not use the phrase “discourse community” shares this assumption. The sources of errors in “basic writing” are not the student’s incapacity or slovenly thinking, but rather “the different pressures and codes and confusions that have gone to make up ‘English’ for the BW student. At times variant and standard forms mix…” (393). Thus, while focusing on the student’s own experience (anxiety) of the writing process, Shaughnesssy assumes that there are different discourse communities in which different “codes” are acceptable. She does critique a broadly relativist position that would deny the existence of error, which, arguing that the “rules” of convention are historically contingent, and thus (somehow) “finally arbitrary” (392). This position she dismisses because it ignores the difficulty students find in carefully navigating between the “codes” they are comfortable with and those expected of them in college.
Rohman and Wlecke, on the other hand, argue broadly from what Bizzell terms the “inner-directed” position, that is, from the cognitive position. The aim of teaching writing, they claim, is to “allow [students] greater self-actualization through better thinking” (219). The process of “pre-writing” was to help students “effectively” conceptualize. Writing, then, is a wholly internal process of the writer’s mind. The assumption here, Bizzell might claim, is that the “effective conceptualization” which is something the student self-generates, as opposed to “echo[ing] the culture” is still very much conditioned by the student’s discourse community.

Kinneavy’s existential/phenomenological view on “expression” may at first sound like it leans in the same direction, but in the end (judging from these few pages), I think, it fits closer to the middle than comfortably in the sociological space inhabited by Perelman. Kinneavy begins his review of phenomenology by arguing that it was a reassertion of the importance of the individual (375). What is important to this quick summary is that Kinneavy, in plainly emphasizing and insisting on the importance of the “self” expressing individual in discourse—in writing—his reading of phenomenology shows that that individual is constituted discursively and through culture. This means, briefly, that the event of writing is not a merely cognitive matter, but bound up, even as it is “individual expression” in a cultural world. Thus, Kinneavy is closer to the “outer-directed” understanding of the writing process than he might seem.

In the end, this particular aspect of some of the debates in composition studies in the 1960s and 1970s may or may not have been the central point to many of those in the debates, but I think attending to that aspect—the question of subjectivity—while it is perhaps a familiar debate, still has a certain amount of traction, as we have to conceptualize more the multimodal or virtual forms of writing that obtain now.