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ABSTRACT

A writing course structured on the principle that personal experience essays should be written as arguments that draw out a conflict or opposing view can help student writers avoid producing prose that is either too abstract or too concrete. Students can be taught to approach the personal essay as a special type of argument on a particular controversy to a significant audience. First emphasizing the importance of audience, defined as the specific opinion, attitude, or ignorance that a piece of prose attempts to affect or change, and then leading students to see what they have learned or how their attitudes have changed about a subject, composition teachers can help students define their own previous attitudes as the audience for their arguments. A course designed around a sequence of assignments dealing with conflict progressively more external to the student might be managed in three phases: first, papers based on personal experience from which the student learned something significant; second, papers arguing with someone the student knows personally; and finally, papers based on readings in which the student argues with an unknown other, a professional writer or essayist. Such a course should enable students to make the connection between their own private experiences and issues significant to the society outside their private world. (AEA)

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Decentering and Identification:

Making Argument the Core of the Composition Course

"They can't handle abstractions . . .and therefore I always give them topics like 'describe your favorite room.'" In a recent College English article (41, p. 397) Richard Ohmann cited remarks such as this he had heard of colleagues making. He warns us that diverting students away from abstraction and into definite, specific, concrete language ultimately cripples our students. When we focus primarily on teaching students skills that make prose "readable" (in Hirsch's phrase) or "interesting," we may be urging students only toward detail--toward the surface, the immediate, the self-centered, and the acceptable--and away from critical analysis, away from confronting conflict, away from challenging the reader out of comfortable assumptions. For when the principles of readability and interest

are mechanically applied, to quote Ohmann, "The reader's most casual values, interests, and capacities become an inflexible measure of what to write and how to write it, a Nielsen rating for prose"(CE, 41, p. 397).

Ohmann somewhat distorts his image of the writing teacher staunchly turning students away from confronting significant issues, but he distorts to good purpose. For he fashions a useful gargoyle to warn us away from an extreme we may be sorely tempted to more toward. Having students write only about concrete experiences and readily identifiable subjects feels safer than inviting them to speculate on controversial issues.

The temptation to move toward the extreme of the concrete comes, of course, quickly on the heels of an attempt equally dangerous--that is, the attempt to push students, inexperienced and unprepared, into socially significant abstractions. Abstract papers on abortion, busing, gun control, or civil disobedience can easily lead to papers just as trivial and evasive as any description of a room. Such papers are only more scary and seem more irremediable because they say things that make ill-considered judgments about people's lives. That is why we want to retreat into the concrete and immediate details of personal experience.

But regardless of which extreme feels safer, both of these extremes--papers that are only concrete detail

and papers that are only unsupported generalities result from a similar difficulty which I would like to spend my time here briefly examining and suggesting a solution for. To anticipate a little, I want to suggest that both problems arise from a trivialized conception of audience; and I want to suggest that the solution lies in structuring the composition course around argument.

Before I launch into this question of audience and argument, I need to say what I mean by the term audience. The audience is, on one level, obviously, the reader. But I will be referring to a more specific notion of audience, the audience Walter Ong refers to when he says that "the writer's audience is always a fiction" (PMLA 90, 1975). I am going to assume with Ong that the most well-defined audience of any essay is the specific opinion or attitude or ignorance which the paper is attempting to affect or change.

Take, for example, a student's paper proving that baseball is really a more dramatic sport than football. The audience for such a paper is anyone who is able to entertain, at least while reading the paper, the opinion that football is the more dramatic sport. Or consider a student's classification paper arguing that a student leader should have at least three different approaches to working with students, depending on whether the students are mainly intellectually oriented, socially oriented, or

interested in action. The audience for such an essay is anyone who had not thought very explicitly about what sort of talent and art is involved in being a leader, in getting people to do something.

Of course, the reader who reads these student essays may or may not hold the opinion or attitude the writer is trying to inform or change. Chances are the reader hadn't much thought about it one way or the other. But for the sake of the essay, the reader takes on that opinion or attitude as the essay defines it, in order to participate in the world which the writer has created, and in order to test that world against what the reader knows.

With my assumption about the audience made explicit, I would like to return to my argument. I am arguing that both papers that are too abstract and papers that are too concrete suffer because of a trivialized conception of the audience.

Let me consider the problem with papers that are too abstract first, because I think we are most familiar with ways to solve this problem. We all know the usual problem with essays that make unsupported abstractions--frequently these are essays on significant social issues, essays on abortion, or busing, or civil disobedience. The usual problem is that the writer is not concerned with the two sides of the issue, or is perhaps not even aware that the issue has at least two sides. A one-sided approach

to a controversial issue naturally causes even the most moderately informed reader to dismiss whatever valid abstraction the writer might end up making. And we know that if the writer would only define clearly the point of controversy, and understand the reasons it exists, the paper would begin to sound more reasonable. Making students aware of the opposition, or in other words making them aware of the objections their audience is likely to raise, and then enabling them to deal with those objections, is what we spend most of our time doing when we teach argument and persuasion.

This process of trying to understand the other person's position has been called by psychologists <u>decentering</u> and by rhetoricians <u>identification</u>. In teaching argument and persuasion we try to bring students through the process of decentering, or going outside of one's own frame of reference, and of identifying with that of the other. In teaching persuasion, I think, we have always been clear on that. Decentering and identifitation help students to see the genuine significance of controversy and to take a position in relation to it. The only question for the teacher is that of the most effecient way to enable students to understand the opposition. I will have more to say on that later.

We know that bad papers on abstract or social issues trivialize the audience by assuming or pretending there is no significant opposition. But we may not realize that bad papers on more personal subjects, papers based on

personal experience and familiar detail, often suffer from the same malady. As Ohmann has suggested, essays that only inform us of the writer's own sensory perceptions, no matter how concrete, informative, and interesting those details may be, trivialize the audience by denying they might be challenged, and by giving them instead only what they expect. In such cases, Ohmann wonders, "What happens to the possibility of challenging or even changing the reader? If keeping the reader's attention (with concrete detail) is elevated to the prime goal of our teaching, the strategies we teach may well lead toward triviality and evasion" (p. 397).

This is serious criticism of our priorities, though I think noone would realy argue with his conclusions. But once we acknowledge that excessive concentration on detail, on the concrete, is dangerous, what do we do? For we are equally certain that concentrating solely on significant abstractions can also lead to meaningless essays. If we are not willing to abandon the personal experience essay in favor of philosophical or social arguments, the question becomes: How do we move students beyond simple accounts of personal experience to more significant issues? How do we draw out the abstractions--the conflict, the controversy, and the argument--from the personal experience, without abandoning that experience altogether?

I would suggest that we teach students to approach personal essays as a special type of argument, and I would

like to explain. Now, to make every essay an argument is the strategy suggested to students by a few of our more popular textbooks--I'm thinking particularly of Sheridan Baker's and David Skwire's. But as it is presented in those texts, the advice seems to raise more questions than it answers. First of all, argument considered as persuasion is traditionally assumed to be a mode of discourse separate from the other modes--from narration, definition, cause/effect, classification, etc. We are used to looking at the demands of argument papers as distinct from the demands of other modes (and in fact Skwire's textbook embraces this contradiction by claiming every essay is an an argument but then having a separate section on argument essays). We expect argument papers to arise from issues which are clearly at least two-sided. With personal experience papers, on the other hand, issues for controversy and debate do not readily present themselves from the material. We don't see any need to look for argument or ask for it. Where, after all, is the significant conclict in a description of a room? in a classification of diets? in a cause-and-effect on how sports builds leadership?

We have probably all come across Baker's or Skwire's advice to students to give essays that "argumentative edge," that "persuasive principle." But I think the advice they give for building argument out of personal experience

seems false. In their examples the argument seems forced onto the subject and removed from the writer's intentions. For example, in explaining how to put the argumentative edge on a subject, Baker says that the process goes like this: once you've got a subject, say "cats," you must get an idea about it--to quote Baker, "not just 'cats,' but 'The cat is really a person's best friend.' Now," Baker goes on to say, "the hackles on all dog people are rising, and you have an argument on your hands. You have something to prove. You have a thesis" (The Practical Stylist. pp. 2-3). At least such a paper does make a generalization. It is better than a paper lost in the detail of "what I like about cats." But how much does such a thesis have to do with why the writer chose to write about cats? And how did the writer choose, from the multitudes of possible controversy, to focus on a conflict with dog lovers. If the subject arises from personal experience, how does the writer make the leap from detail to a generalization that defines a significant controversy. Baker and Skwire tell students to make every essay an argument, but they don't say how.

I would like to suggest that for essays based on personal experience, the best way to help the writer discover controversy, and hence to define a significant audience, is to first ask the writer to think about why he or she chose the subject in the first place. (Note that I am assuming

the writer already has a subject. Composition teachers have a myriad of suitable ways for helping students with this first phase of finding a subject. And of course the subject becomes better defined as it is shaped into an argument.) Chances are the subject the writer has chosen is a subject he or she has learned something about, something he or she hadn't realized before, perhaps doesn't even fully realize yet, and perhaps believes a significant group of other people have not yet realized either. When the fact that the writer himself has learned something and changed in some way becomes clear, then the source of the debate, the source of the conflict, the source of the argument, also becomes clear. For the person the writer is arguing with is himself. The audience, or opposition, which the writer must define is the writer himself two hours ago, or two weeks ago, or two years ago--the writer before he or she learned what he knows now.

In Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, Young, Becker, and Pike argue that much good rhetoric begins with a problem, a difficulty. We experience something new that conflicts with our conception of the world, so we try to adjust our old conception of the world to accomodate the new. In the process, of course, we change, we learn something. Also speaking of the function of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke has said that rhetoric has as much to do with communication between parts of our inner self as it does with com-

munication among people. What I am suggesting here, then, is simply an application of their insight to teaching the personal experience essay. Students can be urged to choose to write about subjects they have learned something about. If we urge them to try to retrieve their image of the subject before they learned what they did, in other words, before they changed to accomodate that new insight, we help them define a significant audience. They direct their argument to themselves before they changed, and the reader vicariously participates in the role of the unenlightened self who gradually, in the course of the paper, gets enlightened too.

What I am saying, then, is that just as much as the writer who is writing on an abstract or social controversy must know the audience's position, so must the writer who is writing about personal experience.

If it is true, then, that the way to avoid students' producing papers that are too abstract or too concrete is to draw out the conflict, or the opposing view on the subject, if this is true, what conclusions might we draw about the way a writing course could be structured on that principle?

The first thing we notice is that argument is not a separate mode of discourse, but something that gets taken up from the beginning of the course. Assignments would not, then, necessarily progress from one mode to

another--from description to comparison/contrast to cause/effect, etc.--though it is certainly useful to introduce these modes. Instead, assignments would progress according to the degree of distance between the writer and the source of conflict, between the writer and the source of the idea he or she is arguing with. In other words they would progress according to how difficult it is for the writer to decenter and to identify with the audience. This suggestion is reminiscent of James Moffett's and James Britton's theories that writing develops through phases from the self-expressive to the transactional.

(This is not to suggest that writing well about conflict whose source is internal is any easier than writing well about an external controversy. It is only to say that when the conflict is more personal, the information about the conflict is usually richer and more intimately known. For some writers, no doubt, drawing out that information and composing it into a meaningful form can, in fact, be much more difficult than writing on subjects more removed from personal involvement.)

A course designed around a sequence of assignments dealing with conflict progressively more external to the student might work something like this. It might be managed in three phases: first papers based on personal experience, experience from which the students learned something significant to them. Second, papers arguing with someone they know personally. And finally, papers based on readings, papers arguing with an unknown other.

As for the first phase, assignments asking students to draw on personal experience would not be much different from any of the assignments based on personal experience we already ask student to write. But such assignments would, in some way or another, get students to emphasize something they've learned; it would ask them to try to explain in what way they have changed or grown, in what way they have become enlightened. They would have to describe what their opinion or attitude was before they changed and then describe how experience made them realize something new.

I have, for example, asked students to write on whether sports really builds character, given some of the characters we see in the media lately. I asked them to emphasize what they learned. Here is what an introductory paragraph sounded like. While the paragraph itself may seem rather mechanical, it does manage to control a difficult argument:

> Before swimming competitively, I used to feel that swimming was just something fun to do, something that would be good physical exercise, nothing else. I never realized how much more there was to being on a team. Swimming teaches good sportsmanship, responsibility, and self-confidence.

For each topic the writer went on to explain how swimming changed his mind, and in so doing, the writer created a very convincing argument for ways sports do indeed build character--an argument that used personal experience to develop a significant abstraction.

At another point, I asked students what they got out of their summer jobs other than dollars and cents. One student's opening paragraph read like this:

> I went to work the first day with the attitude that I would never end up in a full-time blue collar job because I was going to college. . . .My summer job rudely awakened me to the real world. I learned that if I don't challenge myself and set personal goals, I could easily become a blue collar worker. If I want to be successful, I can't expect anything to come easy; I've got to go out and make my own breaks.

In both of these cases of what turned out to be very successful and absorbing essays, what draws the reader into the essays is the students' ability to depict the internal conflict they experienced and eventually resolved. We participate in that experience with them.

So in the first phase of the course based on arguments, the students are arguing with a very familiar audience, i.e., themselves. In the second phase of such a course, students would argue with a known other. Young, Becker, and Pike's description of Rogerian argument in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change makes so clear what it means to argue with a known other, that I can do no better than to suggest that this phase of the course should be Rogerian argument and then refer you to their text (esp. chapter 12).

Finally, the third phase of such a course asks students to confront what professional essayists or other writers have said. For students to be able to argue with professionals, of course, requires that they have access

to information on the two sides of the controversy. If they are learning research techniques, this is a great opportunity to get students to practice those techniques by having them find out for themselves what the two sides of the issue are. Otherwise, essays might be presented in pairs, so that both sides of an issue are clear. Or, essays might be chosen because they deal with subjects students can evaluate authoritatively based on their own experience. They can decide, for example, whether a particular historical essay approaches its subject in a way appealing and suitable for college students. They can decide whether a particular analysis of college experience seems valid. Or they can decide whether a particular analysis of our culture seems valid, at least on the basis of their exposure to our culture.

I have just outlined a sequence of essay assignments which continually asks students to decenter, to focus on argument first within themselves, then with a known other, and finally with an unkown other. Such a course can help students realize two things. First, that within their own experience--the concrete, the immediate, the self-centered--they can find and shape useful generalizations about things they have struggled to learn, things others are interested in because of that very struggle. And, secondly, such a sequence helps students realize that when others write, they too create generalization based on their own

knowledge and experience, generalizations whose validity the readers must measure against their own. Such a sequence of assignments should enable students to avoid both the extremes of the too concrete and of the too abstract. Or, more precisely, it should enable them to make the connection between their own private experience and issues significant to the society outside their private world.

I would like to close by reading from one of my own student's papers because I think it illustrates very well the enabling powers such assignments develop--powers both in reading and writing. I asked my class to analyze an essay by Erich Fromm, "The Illusion of Individuality" (Contexts for Composition, 4th ed.). Fromm argues that our society fosters conformity. With wonderfully described examples, he shows that society suppresses spontaneous feelings and original thinking, and that the results are insidious. I asked students to decide, based on what they know about our culture, whether this is indeed so. Most students, when they first read the essay, were very much impressed by Fromm's commanding view of our culture. In their analysis they simply repeated what Fromm argued. But when I insisted they really look at their own experience and decide just how much of Fromm's conclusions they can accept, they began to see that even the well-supported opinions of the expert must be examined--even here there is room for controversy. Here is the way my student concluded his essay:

> When I first read the Fromm essay, I was in total agreement with everything he said. I found Fromm a very persuasive writer, a writer who could convince many people to change to his point of view. However, the more I read the essay, the more I am able to see where I differ with Fromm in some areas. I sum up Fromm's essay in a way which he might find very gratifying. Fromm is at first so convincing that after the first reading, I found my opinions suppressed by the powerful argument. However, the more I thought about it, the more my original thinking surfaced--my originality. I would guess that Mr. Fromm would like it that way.

I think any composition teacher would like it that way too.

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