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ABSTRACT

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Audience in Introductory Composition: Reducing the Pretending

Douglas Brent

In recent years the relationship between writer and audience has been moving more and more to the forefront of both rhetorical theory and pedagogy.¹ However, the latest perceptions on writer-audience relationships have not, in my view, been applied to what teachers actually do in the classroom as thoroughly and sensitively as might be wished. When the idea of audience is applied at all, it is often misapplied, resulting in classroom activities that fail to facilitate learning and may, in some cases, force students to perform tasks so unreal that credibility, one of the most important parts of any writing task, is destroyed.

The case approach is the most obvious example. Versions of this approach have been in composition teachers' tool kits for years, but now we are seeing entire textbooks devoted to this method of teaching.² Case exercises describe a rhetorical situation, sometimes very elaborately, and then ask the student to play a role, writing a letter or other communication directed at one or more carefully defined audiences. In a recent article, David Tedlock outlines this approach in detail, suggesting that its main advantage is that it "makes students much more aware of the needs and expectations of the reader."³

In a paper read at the 1981 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Stephanie Yearwood points out that such exercises require students to engage in elaborate fantasizing, when they know full well that the audience is not the one specified in the assignment, but rather the same old teacher.⁴ This element of artificiality can reduce the assignment to just one more meaningless exercise. Yearwood's observation corresponds to

my own classroom experience. I have never felt that my students are very happy trying to imagine, for instance, that they are doctors about to address the people of a small town on the touchy subject of closing the town's beaches. The problem is magnified if the assignment does not supply very much material, for then the students must not only make up a persona for themselves and another for their audience, but also make up the vast array of facts that real writers would either have available or be able to go out and find when necessary.

Moreover, not only do the students have to engage in guesswork, so do I. If the purpose of criticizing a paper is to provide feedback on how a reader responds, then I must respond by telling them where they have persuaded or lost this hypothetical audience. In short, I must pretend that I am a citizen of a small town and don't want the beaches closed--and if my students choose not to believe that my reactions are authentic, how can I blame them?

A different but closely related problem attends the opposite extreme, the expressive assignment. Such assignments typically call for students to explore their thoughts and feelings on a subject, often a very personal one. Sometimes a journal is recommended as a way of capturing the raw material of emotion on paper before transforming it into more public prose. However, I don't limit the term "expressive assignment" to writing based on personal experience. I mean it to include the common type of assignment in which students are asked to state their opinion on topics ranging from keeping pets to banning war--in short, the classic freshman theme.

Here at least one aspect of role-playing is removed, for the student does not have to adopt a persona; in fact, the more the student's actual personality comes through the prose, the better. Yet the problem of audience remains. If the student's thoughts and feelings are to become anything but

formless gush, they must be shaped for another human being. But who is that human being? The same old teacher. Certainly it is possible for a good, humane teacher to be genuinely interested in the inner lives of students, but no-one would want to learn a type of writing that only a teacher would read. What real rhetorical situation, outside the classroom, are these students practicing up for? Who is the teacher pretending to be?

An answer is suggested by the anthologies of prose models that publishers supply by the truckload for our students to read. These anthologies vary in their selecting principles: some lean toward longer essays, some towards shorter; some present chiefly expository essays, others include some narrative and descriptive writing; some have a literary focus, others include some writing on scientific subjects in a commendable attempt to broaden their appeal. But whatever the precise mix of prose types, the sources are always about the same. Articles from the more literate popular magazines like Harper's and Atlantic Monthly are mixed with selections lifted from the more literate popular books like The Descent of Woman and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Often a few classic essays by authors such as Bacon and Swift are added, but most of these, too, were written for the contemporary equivalents of the same sources. In short, whether or not the selections are journalistic in the narrowest sense, they are all forms of belle-lettres. Whether on the surface they seek to inform, persuade or amuse, the audience is always the same: the interested, intelligent reader who wants to be entertained by being informed, persuaded or amused. Even the most rarified and intellectual belletristic essay has as its audience the reader (perhaps a rare beast, but one in whom writers must believe or go mad) who finds it entertaining to be made to think deeply.

Writing aimed at this particular audience tends to have certain

rhetorical features. Some are obvious and rather superficial. The title may be more intriguing than informative. The opening is often an arresting description, amusing anecdote, or deliberately outrageous statement--and here, perhaps, is the origin of the unhelpful advice, "Catch your reader's attention in the first paragraph." The closing is often equally dramatic. What comes between may be enlivened by liberal use of narration and description, perhaps employing dialogue more often than exposition to make its points. The writing may be marked by either a relaxed and conversational or a colourful and highly-wrought prose style.

These features are, as I have said, rather superficial. More significant is the fact that most belletristic writing, aiming as it does at the interested general reader, tends to have the same basic subject. Whatever the particular subject under discussion, the argument sooner or later tends to drift in the direction of moral enlightenment. The reader isn't usually very interested in facts for their own sake; he is interested in what those facts can tell him about himself as a human being and about his relationship to the rest of the world. Thus the writers of belletristic essays tend to show how certain ideas, facts or personal experiences have illuminated for them a part of universal human truth, in the hope that their readers can share in that enlightenment. These essays are, after all, written as a form of literature, and universal human truth is a standard property of literature in whatever form.

Composition instructors have been complaining about the unsuitability of belletristic models for years.⁵ But my point is not simply the fact that the surface structure of these models is unsuited to our students' needs. Rather, I am interested in what these models tell us about the audience that we are implicitly asking our students to write for when we assign the



typical freshman theme. The authors represented in the anthologies are perhaps more successful at turning their thoughts into public prose than our students, still a little egocentric, are likely to be, but essentially they are writing the same sort of prose. Their audience--the readers of Atlantic Monthly or Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance--is the same one that students are supposedly addressing when they attempt expressive writing, for both groups of writers are attempting to transmute their own insights into prose that will be interesting--and entertaining--to another person. Most of the examples and precepts given in writing handbooks are designed to help students write to this audience. The Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers, for instance, says explicitly:

The general reader is the reader that most writing is addressed to. Such readers may have specialized interests, but when they turn to the Sunday Magazine, the Saturday Review, People, Ebony, or Psychology Today, they are general readers. . . . In writing for them, the psychologist, for example, will make an attempt to interest them.⁶

The book then goes on to explain how to do so, advising students, for instance, to "begin with a brief anecdote or incident that leads directly into your main topic."⁷

For many students, the audience that this type of writing is aimed at is as fake as the group of townspeople worried about their beaches. Consider in particular the students in the average introductory composition class-- not an advanced class, not a creative writing or journalism class, just a plain introduction to composition, remedial or otherwise, of the type that accounts for by far the largest amount of composition taught in colleges in

the 1980's. Some of these students will, one day be writing business letters, reports and memos. Others will enter academic disciplines (God help them) and write academic essays for publication. Some may never write anything at all after they have left our hands. But not one in a hundred will ever write an essay as a piece of literature after stepping out of the composition class. And even within the composition class, this kind of writing is just game-playing. The students know perfectly well that the audience is not the reader of Saturday Review; it is just the same old teacher who, despite all attempts to respond personally to the students' writing, is also playing a role.

The result is often the opposite of what one might expect: when students attempt to share their moral enlightenments with me, the typical result is not emotional-gush, but rather dead, abstract, unfelt prose. Part of the reason may be that they are too young to have any moral enlightenments, but I find this rather hard to believe. A more likely reason is that they simply don't believe in their audience. There is no real reason for them to share their opinions, along with those of thirty-odd others, with the same tired composition teacher.

It is possible to make the situation appear more realistic by having students read papers to peers or even engage in mock publication, courtesy of the department's ditto machine. Over the years, teachers have developed an impressive array of handsprings and juggling acts to coax belle-lettres out of their students. Such tricks often work, and the enthusiasm and camaraderie they can generate is not to be slighted. The writing, too, has its value even if students don't ever do it again. Basic techniques of selecting and ordering material can be learned from reading and writing in any mode. Learning self-expression is also part of acquiring maturity, and

if helping students mature is not our job I don't know whose it is. But despite all efforts to make such writing realistic, the basic problem is still the same: the students are practicing for a rhetorical situation that they find very hard to believe in because most know they will never encounter it once the composition teacher stops juggling.

The question is, why bother to go to all this work to make an unreal situation seem real rather than attempting to approximate the real writing situations that students face every day outside the composition class? Students are continually being asked to generate essays, reports, exam responses, and other pieces of writing, and their motivation to succeed in these tasks is high: they will get poor grades if they don't. Composition instructors are, I think, often embarrassed to be caught thinking of academic writing as "real." After all, the academy is a very artificial place, and grades certainly seem the most artificial indicators of success that could be imagined. However, this is only true if "real" is defined as "like the writing that occurs in the workplace." If we define "real" as "like the writing that one actually does," what could be more real than academic writing to a student who will be producing little else for anywhere from two to six years? And what are grades if not quantified indicators of the success or failure of a piece of writing? They are artificial only in the sense that they are consciously selected points on a scale, whereas the success of writing in the non-academic world is usually marked on a pass-fail system (Is the proposal accepted? Is the contract awarded? Is the paper published? Does the milkman leave the right amount of milk?). If it is true that the basics of generating and organizing material can be learned from any kind of writing as long as enough is performed and enough of the right kind of feedback is given--and surely this is the assumption that

justifies the use of belletristic models and expressive writing assignments in the first place--then it should not be a major wrench for students to shift to a new audience when they ultimately stop writing for our academic colleagues. Even if we were to teach them a more "functional" format; such as business writing, in an introductory course, they are not likely to retain the details that distinguish this type of writing from others if their skills are not reinforced until after graduation. If specific instruction in non-academic writing is required at all, its place is in more advanced courses taken closer to graduation when the audience for it is fewer years away. But I am not convinced that this specialized instruction is very badly needed at any point. The important thing is to provide students with as much feedback as possible on any kind of writing that they can believe in.

If we want to take advantage of the reinforcement provided by the academic world, how do we go about it? The ideal is a writing course paired closely with a content course and team-taught by a composition and a content-area instructor. However, this ideal is administratively unwieldy and therefore rare, except for the common literature/composition course, which cannot in conscience be forced upon students with no interest in literature. What can we do on our own, in the absence of ideal pairings?

Robert H. Weiss suggests that instructors interested in designing a cross-disciplinary writing course should survey other faculties to discover what types of writing they actually assign:

Writing assignments would be related to the types of writing the students will likely encounter in other disciplines, rather than being based on a theoretical classification of the kinds of writing. . . . Traditional theme-writing would be assigned only if the survey found it frequently in academic courses or anywhere else--in other words, not at all.⁸

I heartily second the motion. However, Weiss goes on to recommend the case method as a way of creating relevant writing assignments:

A case which calls for translating a medical article into plain English can yield valuable lessons on audience analysis, technical and plain language, and paraphrase; a case which considers the constitutionality of legislative initiative and referendum can help instruct students to analyse a process; a case which establishes perception and introspective analysis as prerequisites for a job candidacy can illustrate observation and the use of detail; and a case set in the business world can be a vehicle for teaching thesis-and-support structure.⁹

Aside from the obvious difficulty of applying such specialized cases in a heterogeneous class, believability is a serious problem. These cases are only marginally closer to the students' experiences than is the case of the doctor and the beaches, and require an equal amount of role-playing on the part of both the writer and the teacher who supplies feedback. Rather than try to create an artificial audience, why not (as Yearwood suggests in another context) use the audience that is actually present--us and our students?

In his article, "Intentionality in the Writing Process: A Case Study," C. H. Knoblauch distinguishes between "generic intentionality"--the writer's choosing among vague categories of purpose such as informing, persuading, and amusing--and "operational intentionality"--the writer's choosing exactly whom he wants to persuade of what, and why.¹⁰ Knoblauch contends that operational intentionality is the most important and, because writers

may be trying to influence different people in different ways at the same time, the most complex. What, then, is the operational intention of students performing academic writing? I see it as falling into three broad categories:

1. They want to discover new information and synthesize it for the direct purpose of learning about a subject.
2. They want to discover new information and synthesize it for the indirect purpose of learning how to do so.
3. They want to convince their instructors that they have successfully accomplished (1) and (2).

Simple research topics would supply students with the opportunity to fulfill the first two intentions. To ensure that the exercise is one of critical and evaluative thinking rather than simply of reporting (or plagiarizing) information, the topics can be phrased as specific, directive questions: not "Solar Energy" but "What specific type of energy source would be most appropriate in this area?" Such topics call for skill in reporting facts, reporting, analyzing and comparing others' opinions, and establishing and defending one's own point of view: in short, all the skills needed to survive both the academic and the workplace jungle. They even call for self-expression, but, as in real life, it is self-expression integrated into a larger context.

We can give students the opportunity to fulfill the third intention, not by role-playing, but simply by responding as ourselves. First-year students given basic historical, sociological or even scientific topics are not likely to produce essays so specialized that we cannot evaluate the completeness and logic of the prose. My students seldom do, at any rate. We can respond usefully to these essays by simply indicating where we

are confused by tangled syntax or insufficient information, bored by redundancy or offended by mechanical errors. If we react in this way, we will be paralleling, not just simulating, the reactions of instructors in content areas. The specific contribution that we can make as composition instructors is to use our training and experience to pinpoint, more exactly than our colleagues in content areas may be able to, exactly why we are confused, bored or offended, and more important, help students avoid such problems by helping them modify their writing processes. Techniques such as peer evaluation and conferencing will also be more effective if brought to bear on this realistic situation rather than used to enhance an otherwise unconvincing simulation.

What models should be used as part of this instructional procedure? Once can argue that models of any kind are unnecessary,¹¹ but writers such as Paul A. Eschholz make a good case for models as long as they are not used in the traditional read-analyze-imitate sequence, a sequence that has helped paralyze generations of beginning writers.¹² If, as I pointed out earlier, the standard anthologies do not reflect a believable rhetorical situation, where can instructors who want to use models at all find suitable ones?

At my own institution, the University of Calgary, we tried producing our own anthology of published academic essays. However, it met with a cool reaction from instructors and students alike. With the remarkably clear perception of hindsight, some of the problems seem obvious. The essays were too long, too complex and too specialized to be approached sympathetically by a class of first-year students from all disciplines. After all, one of the main justifications for using belletristic essays in composition classes is that they are designed for the non-specialized reader; if students of introductory composition find essays by Baldwin, Orwell and Swift remote from

their immediate needs, they are even less likely to be able to respond to "A Membrane Model of the Circadian Clock" or "The Effect of Brick Type on the Compressive Strength of Masonery." But there is another problem, one that would not be resolved by choosing simpler models and individualizing instruction so that students can read models suited to their own developing inclinations. When academics in specialized disciplines write for professional journals, they write for an audience of peers who want primarily information and enlightenment about their field, delivered with minimum fuss and maximum clarity. When the same academics read essays written by their students, they also want minimum fuss and maximum clarity, but they are not primarily looking for information and enlightenment about the field (although it is certainly a bonus if they find it). Rather, they are looking for information about their students' ability to handle the field--about their students' knowledge and their student's ability to form judgements based on what they have learned. The content area is only the incidental subject; the real subject is the student. This shift in the expectations of the audience produces a subtle but distinct difference in the writing. If their purpose is to demonstrate mastery, students may include details of which their reader is well aware, just so that they can prove that they understand them. Because of this difference in the intricate dance of writer and reader, even the most simplified and non-specialized models of professional academic writing simply don't look to students like something they need to pay attention to, because they aren't the sort of writing they do. The rhetorical situation is still all wrong.

A traditional standby of freshman composition is the study of essays by other freshman composition students. As part of a peer evaluation technique, this custom has its place. However, if the purpose of the models

is to show students real writing in action, exclusive use of other essays from within the composition class represents pernicious inbreeding. In his essay on cross-disciplinary writing, Weiss suggests an alternative, recommending that "course readings would include only samples of writing gathered in the survey [of the entire faculty] and would set the stage and establish models for assignments."¹³ However, he later suggests a case approach, and withdraws the earlier motion:

Under one cover, no text could adequately deal with laboratory notebooks and reports, literary analyses, surveys of secondary sources, book and article reviews, proposals, critiques, research reports, case histories, constitutions, feasibility studies, nursing "processes," logs, journals, field notes, lesson plans, policy statements, observation reports, summaries, abstracts, and memoranda (hardly an exhaustive list).¹⁴

But why should it have to? The specific differences between assignments in various disciplines are mostly a matter of external format, and should be learned in the relevant content courses, not in a general composition course. Our place is to teach general writing strategies, including a general sensitivity to audience. For this task, a basic collection of student writing samples from both humanistic and scientific disciplines, preferably with comments from the instructor who assigned them, should be sufficient to help our students understand the rhetorical situation that is important to them: acquiring and demonstrating mastery of a subject by writing about it. It does not matter greatly if some specific formats are omitted, as long as students perceive the intended audience of the samples to be their own intended audience.

In short, I am not simply proposing a more narrowly "functional" curriculum in place of the traditional emphasis on expressive writing and belletristic models. Rather, I am suggesting that we stop being apologetic about the "artificial" writing peculiar to the academic world. If we accept that that kind of writing is, for the time that our students spend in college, more real than any other, we can exploit its peculiarities rather than avoiding them. The gain is not just the short-term pragmatic one of "getting their attention." By taking advantage of the reinforcement offered by our colleagues, we allow our students to practice what we preach continually, not just three hours per week. By so doing, we can better help them learn the more general skill of understanding and responding to any type of rhetorical situation.

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Notes

1. Perhaps the most recent review of ideas concerning writer-audience relationships is Douglas B. Park's "The Meanings of 'Audience,'" College English, 44 (1982), 247-57.

2. See in particular John P. Field and Robert H. Weiss, Cases for Composition (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979). Robert Scholes and Nancy R. Comley's new text, The Practice of Writing (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) also makes extensive use of this technique.

3. "The Case Approach to Composition," College Composition and Communication, 32 (1981), 255.

4. "'Audience'--in Discourse Theory and Teaching Writing."

5. A particularly well-researched denunciation of this sort of model is Laurence Behrens' "Meditations, Reminiscences, Polemics: Composition Readers and the Service Course," College English, 41 (1980), 561-70.

6. Glenn Leggett, C. David Mead, William Charvat, Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers, 7th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 160.

7. Leggett, Mead and Charvat, p. 176.

8. "Writing in the Total Curriculum: A Program for Cross-Disciplinary Cooperation," in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980), p. 135.

9. Weiss, p. 137.

10. College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 153-59.
11. See, for instance, James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 208.
12. "The Prose Models Approach: Using Products in the Process," in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980), pp. 21-36.
13. Weiss, p. 135.
14. Weiss, p. 135.