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ABSTRACT

Teachers' role as primary audience has important implications for writing instruction. Teachers represent a combination of two audiences: a literal audience--a specific person or group of people implied in a writing assignment--and an ideal audience shaped by the writers themselves. As these two general types of audiences imply, writers both create and are created by their audience. Their choice of genre also reflects the internal and external pressures at work during the writing process. By providing direction in writing assignments and offering help in invention and revision, teachers can aid students in establishing a hypothetical dialogue with the audience. When teachers ask questions that help students to define their audience, for example, they ensure more successful revisions of papers. In helping to define what are acceptable and significant audiences, teachers determine how engaging students' writing will be. (MM)

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WE HAVE MET THE AUDIENCE AND IT IS US:

Teachers as Audience in the Composition Class

In the May, 1980, issue of CCC, the editor juxtaposed two articles which took opposite approaches to the role the audienoe plays in writing.[1] One argued that it is most helpful for writers to imagine the aotual, intended readers as they plan the substanoe of their essays. The other argued that help comes only when the writer invents an ideal reader, that the writer's audience is always a fiction. In a more recent issue, Walter Minot argues that in a sense, both are right: a writer's analysis of a real audience is a form of invention. Writers invent their audience by seleoting characteristics of the audience to appeal to, but the invention is only effective if it matches the reality.[2] Now since in the composition classroom there is rarely anyone other than ourselves to serve as audience, to be that reality, it behooves us to examine in more detail what our role is. Here I would like to consider what it means to talk atout actual or literal audiences and ideal or fictional audiences, and I want to consider its implications for our dealings with student writing.

In the writing classroom, the teacher's role as audience has always been, at least on the face of it, quite transparent. All classrooms

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are to a great extent "play" frames, a training ground where we imitate what goes on in the real world to prepare students for it. When we make assignments, read them, and grade them, we would like to think we can represent that "universal audience" which expects well-structured, grammatically correct, stylistically graceful, and cogently argued writing. In some ways it would be a great comfort if we could stop at that, standing for a "universal audience" whose standards of quality everyone agrees upon.

But we know such a universal audience is a myth,[3] Recall Deiderich's experiment which had 53 different readers ranking 300 essays on a scale of one to ten. Over 100 of these essays received every rank from one to nine.[4] It's no coincidence that before readers can do holistic scoring of test essays, scorers must be extensively trained, or "socialized," as readers, before test results may be considered reliable. If you have ever shared the same writing assignment with another teacher you know that the results from the two classes can differ significantly, depending on how, within the framework of the assignment, each conceived of precisely what was called for. Our student's thirst to know "what we want" is a very real need. Obviously, as readers we have significant room for choice as to what sort of readers or what sort of audience we can be.

What sort of readers should we try to be? We may consider ourselves as primarily surrogates for real world audiences. We are stand-ins in order to help students become familiar with the audience out there they will be writing for. Well, who is <u>that</u> audience? Is

it best described literally, as a peer group or as a specific person or group of people we say we are writing to, e.g., my friend, my supervisor, high school seniors? Or is it the reader literary critics speak of--the mock reader, a fiction, a reader implied in the text, a reader who dwells in the writer?

Literal Audience

I have seen an emphasis on the literal audience lead to some useful classroom practices, for example: Writing assignments which use cases--fictional situations that prescribe the person students must write to ("the dean of students is considering the policy on campus alcohol"). Or assignments which ask students themselves to specify whom they are writing to (your brother, the college president, your Representative). Or heuristics for helping students think about their literal audience's attitude toward their subject, their persona, and their structure. More generally, attention to literal audiences has led to a classroom emphasis on peer review and collaborative learning.

But I doubt that standing a literal audience up in front of a class will solve student's problems of determining what is appropriate to an audience. Tristram Shandy, in describing a fight between his father and mother, illustrates that the problem is there no matter how present and familiar the audience is:

> He [Shandy's father] placed his arguments in all lights; argued the matter with her like a Christian, like a heathen, like a husband, like a father, like a patriot, like a man. My mother answered everything only like a woman, which was a little hard upon her, for, as she could not assume and fight

> it out behind such a variety of characters, 'twas no fair match' 'twas seven to one.'[5]

If I ask students to write a job letter for a corporate position, no matter how much detail I put into describing the position, students still must create a persona they think will be persuasive with the corporate audience. They can sound like a money-maker, like a company-type, like a technician, like a team player. Standing the literal audience up in front of the class does not make clear what exactly will be appropriate, though it does have the great advantage of providing the opportunity for response after something is written.

But there is also the concomitant disadvantage. The literal audience denies the writer one of the great advantages of writing--that you are not confronted immediately with the reaction of a listener. Jerome Bruner, in introducing his series of essays On Knowing, explains that all of his essays started in conversation, and he proposed that "interior intellectual work is almost always a continuation of dialogue." Yet, paradoxically, to succeed in the work he turns to the essay to escape that very dialogue:

> In each conversation, the inevitable happened. By the very dynamics of dialogue you are constrained in two ways: first, you come to take the positions of the other rather for granted, and [second], after a while it becomes an unfriendly act to challenge the other's presuppositions. It is like the life-term prisoners in the sick story who are so familiar with each other's jokes that is suffices to recount them by announcing their number. . . .
>
> But just here the essay as a form comes into its own. It is an invitation to ignore the constraints of the other that you encounter in dialogue, to consider and to unpack any presupposition without giving umbrage. . . . It is characteristic of the

> essay form . . . to try to transcend the constraints of dialogue and its context-bound definitions of truth.[6]

Audience as Fiction

Bruner turns to the essay "to ignore the constraints of the other that you encounter in dialogue." Then is it true that the writer's audience has little to do with the speaker's audience, that the writer's audience is a fiction? Drawing on Ong's and Iser's work, Russel Long, in that same CCC issue, argues that it is. Far from having the audience constrain what is appropriate, he tells us, it is the writer who determines what is appropriate for the audience.

The audience is a creation, and as such:

> an analysis of its traits becomes possible only as the writer defines his purpose and decides on desirable reader characteristics. The widespread assumption that audience analysis leads to tactical decisions is reversed: a writer's choice of alternatives determines his audience; that is, his decisions create a very specific reader who exists only for the duration of the reading experience.

Long concludes that we should help our students by teaching them to ask not "who *is* my audience?" but "who do I *want* my audience to be?"[7] Long helps explain Bruner's experience, and yet his position needs qualification. For, as Minot has argued, if the real reader is created by the text, so is the text constrained by that same reader. Bruner's ideas began in dialogue, and his essays will be read by, among others, his interlocutors. When Ong argues that the writer's audience is a fiction, he makes clear that a writer does not invent just any sort of fictional audience. Instead, he chooses, from among

a relatively fixed number of conventional roles, one particular role to impose upon his reader. That readers are able to assume only a limited number of roles and that they only gradually acquire new ones is testified to by the initial reception of many an innovative writer's works. Ong recalls, for example, Faulkner's early obscurity.[8] The past experience, knowledge, and expectations the reader brings to the text limit how the message will be understood. To suggest to the student, then, that she can create her audience is only part of the story.

In a speaking situation that the listener constrains meaning is obvious. And perhaps this is why we sometimes feel more comfortable with the term "audience" than with the term "reader." I, for example, may impose upon a colleague the role of confidant for my complaints about the dean. If this is the first time I have approached her with such a role, she may be unwilling to cooperate--she may side with the dean, or she may not trust me enough to respond with her own feelings on the subject. And even if she is otherwise willing to play confidant, but we are at lunch where she knows the dean will overhear our remarks, though she is familiar with the role she is to play, she will not assume the role I create for her. Obviously, in speaking we cannot begin only with the intentions of the speaker as inventing the rhetorical situation. We also rely on a listener who brings her own expectations and constraints; and, as this example shows, we rely on occasions or situations which constrain what can be said and done.

The rhetorician Robert Scott describes the speaking situation this way:

> The event in which we are participating is <u>in part</u> pre-established by similar past events and <u>in part</u> created by the interactions of our intentionalities in the moment. . . .
>
> . . . It is as legitimate to take the listener as the maker of a message as the speaker.[9]

That speaker and listener interact to create meaning is most palpably demonstrated by studies in kinesics. Films of people talking show that people in conversation move in synchrony,

> sometimes . . . in barely perceptible ways, when finger, eyelid (blinking), and head movements occur simultaneously and in sync with specific parts of the verbal code (the words, with pitches and stresses) as it unwinds. In other cases, the whole body moves as though the two were under the control of a master choreographer.[10]

<u>Writer, Reader, Genre</u>

Just as the listener helps the speaker create meaning--through the expectations he brings from past listening occasions and through interacting with the speaker in the moment--so does the reader, though removed in time and space, help the writer. For the reader, too, brings expectations based on past reading occasions. We call these generic expectations. Genre establishes conventions which both the writer and reader must assume each other knows. One way, then, that writers create and are created by their audience is in choosing a particular genre to write in. What those various non-fiction genres are has not been explained much at length. Britton, Moffett, and Kinneavy suggest the broadest taxonomies, and we can get advice on how to write

in a very specific genre, such as the newspaper article, the technical document, or the recommendation memo. But what genres we want or ask our students to write in are, I think, less well-defined, both for them and for ourselves. And I think defining and in some cases creating those genres is one of our most important and difficult jobs.

The genre, then, establishes the reading occasion to which writer and reader bring certain expectations. And what about what Scott has called the speaker's and listener's "interactions of intentionalities in the moment?" How does that occur in writing? What interaction goes on such that a writer creates and is created by his reader?

One fruitful way to consider this interaction derives from applying speech-act theory to writing. In a paper presented at the 1981 CCCC, Marilyn Cooper demonstrated that the structure of every essay can be considered not just a hierarchical ordering of what we want to say about a subject, but also an ordering of things we want to do (in speech-act terms) to a reader. Her paper, for example, wanted first to assert, then describe, then dispute, then confirm, then recommend. In each step of her organization, she had to consider what her reader's reaction would be to what had been said and done, and she had to consider how best to move the reader to consider what she ultimately had in mind. In the actual paper, the reader's responses or questions after each section are always implied by the way in which the writer has "answered" the responses in the following section.[11]

In a recent College English article Dorothy Augustine, also relying on speech act theory, describes the interaction of intentionalities this way:

> The competent writer invents the reader. Or to put it another way, she invents her subject matter . . . on the basis of what she is able to project about a probable, existential exchange of intention(s) and response(s) between herself and some other "self."
>
> . . . In short, the writer's job is to compose the tacit presuppositions which he and the reader bring to their present and future understanding of each other and the subject matter which is being communicated.[12]

The writer, then, imagines what the audience's responses to successive assertions are likely to be. Here is where the inventing occurs. For the writer has not actually heard those responses, and, in a leisurely conversation with his readers, he may very well get a variety of responses: "What's the history of this problem?" "I'd like to hear more evidence." "Is that a typical example?" How effective his writing is will depend on how well he has anticipated and composed our responses. And of course we want the writer to compose much better responses--more knowing, more imaginative, wittier--than we might actually come up with on our own. No small pleasure we take from reading derives from our mind's playing host so skillfully to the writer who dwells within us during reading.

Thus while readers are capable of a certain range of responses, the writer composes and actualizes those responses, and does so by means of what rhetoric terms the factor of presence. The writer has control and, according to Chaim Perelman,

> by the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied. Indeed, such a choice endows these elements with a presence. . . .
>
> What we have in mind is illustrated by this lovely Chinese story:
>
> > A king sees an ox on its way to sacrifice. He is moved to pity for it and orders that a sheep be used in its place. He confesses he did so because he could see the ox, but not the sheep.[13]

Writing, then, arises out of a hypothetical dialogue between writer and audience. If this is so, our task in giving meaningful writing assignments and aiding students in invention and revision is to help that dialogue get initiated by helping students "evoke" audiences. This may mean mentioning specific people or groups we expect our students to address themselves to, but not necessarily. Real audiences are useful only insofar as they help students intuit a disposition towards a subject and an occasion in which it is appropriate to discuss it. No one may yet have that exact disposition. In other words, students need help giving shape and coherence to intuitions they have about attitudes toward the world that are inconsistent, or fragmented, or narrow. And they need help to know what possible generic shape a dialogue about such attitudes can take. They can write to help articulate those attitudes and come to terms with them.

Can I be any more specific about defining our role as audience in the composition class? Since in a sense everything we do in the class helps create the context for writing, I might best suggest how teachers can help evoke audiences by referring to a transcript of a

particular teacher/student discussion, found in Thomas Carnicelli's chapter on the conference method of teaching writing in Right Approaches to Teaching Composition.[14] In transcripts of two writing conferences, one that led to a student's successfully revising his paper and the other that led to failure, Carnicelli shows that one teacher was able to ask the "right" questions--those questions "that lead to the student becoming actively involved in the criticism of the paper"--and that the other teacher was not. Carnicelli's definition of the right questions are those that get the right results. But analyzing the transcripts in terms of audience suggests more specifically (though, alas, no less tautologically) that the right questions may be those which lead the student to be able to define an audience. (I'll just discuss the conference that led to a successful student paper, though the unsuccessful conference could be just as instructive for the way it ignores audience.)

Before the conference a student had written a rough draft of a paper entitled "A Life of Music?" The paper simply narrated several of the students' experiences with music. It needed focus and purpose. In the initial exchanges during the conference, teacher and student explored the question which the title seemed to suggest, the question of whether the student really wanted to make a life or a career out of music. They learned from the exchange that the student didn't feel ready to address that question. So they went back to the rough draft:

T[eacher]: Find some of the most important things, and then really tell us a lot about those--maybe some of the

experiences that changed you, that set you in your commitment to music. Don't give us the strict chronology.

S[tudents]: You can tell us what it is to be involved in music?--why everyone should be involved in music? Do you want to persuade people?

S[tudent]: No, maybe just show them. . . Because they don't know what they're missing. Like you're in the football locker room and a guy's singing--a guy who's supposed to be a "cool guy--and he's not going to join the chorus; but he has a fantastic natural voice he've never done anything with. Like myself, I'd been singing in choirs since fifth grade, but I couldn't sing at all when I started. I had to develop my own voice.[15]

Further into the conference, the student is warming up to the possibilities in this issue:

S[tudent]: . . . I could leave out the band completely, and go right into the singing, and about how people thought about my singing. . . . Like, one day I was walking out on the baseball field--I was starting catcher--and the pitcher came up to me and says, "Hey, I hear you made All-Eastern--that's really great." And just the week before, they'd been having this conversation in the corner about how "I don't believe this kid sings."[16]

Notice that as soon as the teacher saw some sort of audience adumbrated in the discussion (". . . why everyone should be involved in music?") and a sense of occasion or genre ("Do you want to persuade people?"), she moved the student to settle on a workable issue. At the point in the conference when the audience is defined--those "cool guys" who should learn what they're missing--teacher and student know the paper is going somewhere and the conference ends. The student returned the following week with a much better paper. Of course, Carnicelli's chapter demonstrated just one approach to teaching composition. But any successful approach will have to illustrate a

teacher creating a context in which students can intuit a reader who has recognizable attitudes, predispositions, and knowledge about a subject, and a willingness to engage in a dialogue that follows certain (generic) rules.

Two things emerge from this look at teaching in action. First, that audience, genre, and subject are inextricably related. And second, that both teacher and student participate in "inventing" the audience. The student provides a rough draft of experience full of nascent issues. And the teacher tries to draw out those potential issues and reflect them back to the student. Not every teacher will see the same issues. Student and teacher create in the process of review a common world of issues against which the student can compose and against which the teacher can judge the final draft. The final draft will be more or less different depending on which teacher the student talked to; and it will be judged differently by different teachers. This is not to say that teachers are arbitrary, but that the particular writing situation teacher and student create together is unique. Louise Phelps, in Freshman English News, has described the teacher's role during the "creative, constructive reading and criticism of a text" this way:

> Intervention involves providing information, advice, or direction which will change the student's composing behavior. At this point we confront a moral problem, because there is no question but that we are meddling in the student's thinking processes. (English teachers feel uniquely guilty about this, as if they were the only teachers that try to change the way students think.) We can intervene ethically by basing our advice on considerable data, justified inference from the data, and respect for the implied intentions and directions of the student's cognitive processes.[17]

For a teacher to find that line between the student's as yet unclear intentions and her own sense of the possibilities in a text requires effort and care, but drawing out students' attitudes and commitments is crucial. Even more crucial is finding out how they fit into the existent universe of discourse, for only so engaged is the student liberated through writing.

* * *

T: Do you have any idea where you're going to go from here?

S: It seems like . . . I'm not sure . . . It seems like some of this stuff could be expanded, and I'm not sure exactly what is kind of boring and what I should leave out, because it just involves so much that I . . . [18]

We have all been this student, wondering if we really have anything to say, doubting whether anyone really wants to hear it, figuring someone might be interested if only we knew how to locate what would be revealing in our experience--what to expand, what to leave out--it just involves so much. . . .

As teachers we stand in between two audiences--the "real" audience with occasions and expectations for reading and a certain common knowledge of the world, and the "ideal" audience that doesn't yet exist, the formless, inchoate, paradoxical, or conflicting voices that the student struggles to shape into a whole. In creating and responding to writing assignments, we aim to elicit challenging and provocative audiences with which a student can engage in a dialogue; we help bring into being a reader who will force students to grow intellectually. For ultimately it is we who help students determine

what is worth writing about, which world views are worth adding to or changing, who is worth talking to. It is what we help define as acceptable and significant audiences that determines how challenging our class is and how engaging our students' writing will be.

NOTES

[1]On the literal reader, Fred R. Pfister and Joanne F. Petrick, "A Heuristic Model for Creating a Writer's Audience," 213-220; on the reader as fiction, Russell C. Long, "Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention?" 221-226. But the Pfister/Petrick heuristic can lead to students creating their own audience less literally. A more thorough-going opposition to the fictional audience is the position Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor take in "The Integrating Perspective: An Audience-Response Model for Writing," CE 3 (Nov. 1979), 271-274.

[2]Walter Minot, "Response to Russell C. Long, 'Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention?'," CCC 32 (Oct. 1981), 335-337. For an even more sensitive and clear exploration of the relation between fictional and literal audiences see Douglas B. Park, "The Meanings of 'Audience'," CE 44 (March 1982). Park's essay ranges over much of the same territory as my own, though without direct concern for the teacher as audience.

[3]Chaim Perelman (The New Rhetoric) tries to make a case for a universal audience, but for a discussion of the central inconsistencies in his argument, see Lisa S. Ede, "Rhetoric versus Philosophy: The Role of the Universal Audience in Chaim Perelman's The New Rhetoric," Central States Speech Journal 32 (Su 81), 118-25. My thanks to Lisa for helping to instigate my study of audience and for her clear thinking and helpful comments.

[4]Diederich, Paul B., Measuring Growth in English (NCTE, 1974), p. 6.

[5]Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, bk. I, chap. 18, p. 42, as quoted in C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 22.

[6]On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand, expanded ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1979), pp. vii-xii.

[7]Long, 225.

[8]"The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," PMLA 90 (1975), 9-21.

[9]Robert L. Scott, "Intentionality in the Rhetorical Process," in Rhetoric in Transition, ed. Eugene E. White (U. Park: Penn State University Press, 1980), p. 54.

[10]Edward T. Hall, Beyond Culture (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), p. 72.

[11]Marilyn M. Cooper, "Pragmatics of Form: In This Paper I will Assert, Dispute, Confirm, Recount and Recommend," delivered at CCCC, March 1981. Without the speech-act terminology, Richard Larson comes to much the same conclusions in "Toward A Linear Rhetoric of the Essay," CCC 22 (1971), 140-146.

[12]"Geometries and Words: Linguistics and Philosophy: A Model of the Composing Process," CE 43 (March 81).

[13]Perelman, p. 116.

[14]"The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation" in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana: NCTE, 1980), pp. 101-131.

[15]Carnicelli, pp. 121-22.

[16]Carnicelli, p. 122.

[17]"What Literature Teachers Know About Teaching Composition That They Don't Know They Know," FEN, 7, No. 3 (W; 79), 15-18.

[18]Carnicelli, p. 125.