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ABSTRACT

Although the complexities of the concept of audience in nonacademic settings are gradually being recognized, audience analysis continues to be viewed primarily as a cognitive, problem-solving activity. Grounded in decontextualizing research--such as protocol analysis--this approach to audience assumes that, to inform appropriate writing choices, the writer can and should determine values, needs, goals, and attitudes of a primary audience. However, recent ethnographic research suggests that, although the writer does make substantive analyses, the writer's main concept of audience is predetermined by contextual constraints. The writer makes choices primarily based on an organization's collective view of the writer-reader relationship, which the writer understands at a tacit level through everyday experience. Audience analysis is thus a social process shaped by both situational and organizational constraints. Students should be equipped with ethnographers' strategies in order to understand their audiences by understanding those around them, thereby viewing their writing in a social context. (Eighteen references are appended.) (MM)

The Collective Concept of Audience in Nonacademic Settings

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Abstract

Although we have begun to recognize the complexities of the concept of audience in nonacademic settings, audience analysis continues to be viewed primarily as a cognitive, problem-solving activity. Grounded in decontextualizing research, such as protocol analysis, this approach to audience assumes that, to inform appropriate writing choices, the writer can and should determine the values, needs, goals, and attitudes of a primary audience.

However, recent ethnographic research suggests that, although the writer does make substantive and stylistic choices based on demographic and purpose-oriented audience analyses, the writer's main concept of audience is predetermined by contextual constraints. The writer makes choices primarily on the organization's collective view of the writer-reader relationship, which the writer understands at a tacit level through everyday experience. Audience analysis is thus a social process shaped by both situational and organizational constraints.

As a teacher of professional writing and as a writing consultant, I am constantly frustrated at how little I know about audience analysis. Our textbooks and journal articles offer some help, but generally not much, at least not enough to prepare my future professionals for what they will face on the job; and certainly not enough to be useful to the working, on-the-job professional. It seems our textbook instruction and our theory has generally lagged behind the contextualized studies conducted over more than the past decade. These many ethnographies, along with my own research with on-the-job writers, suggest to me that audience analysis is a very complex activity which often forces the writer to consider many conflicting purposes. It is an activity which is influenced by both situational and organizational constraints.

The most common textbook view today of what a writer in a nonacademic setting does is grounded primarily in the cognitive model. This model assumes that writing is a process, <u>the</u> problem-solving process of the individual mind as it encodes information. According to this model, the writer can and should determine before writing the readers' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes.

During the writing process, the writer can and should accommodate readers' needs. The main purpose of the writing process, says this model, is to find the best ways "to do to or for one's reader" (Flower and Hayes 1980, 27); that is, to persuade or inform.

Our current concepts of audience as invoked or addressed seem to conform comfortably to the cognitive model of writing. The traditional approach to audience analysis encourages the writer to address readers; those who share this approach assume, as Ede and Lundsford (1984) point out, "that knowledge of [the] audience's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations is not only possible (via observation and analysis) but essential" (156).

A purpose-oriented analysis (Clevinger 1966), though narrowing this search to the situational, assumes much the same. With both approaches the writer, knowledgeable of the determinant reader, problem solves during the writing "process," fitting writer's purposes to readers' purposes.

Of course, the cognitive model also allows for the "inventive power" (Flower and Hayes 1981, 386) of the writer. While relying on the "task environment" (the rhetorical problem and the "growing text itself" (369)) and "long-term memory" (with its stored problem representations), the writer during the recursive process of writing "progressively fill[s] in [the] image of the audience" (27).

But the writer does more than merely flesh out this image. The writer creates a role for the reader that is appropriate for the immediate rhetorical situation and consistent with the writer's stored problem representations. The problem-solving process here, to apply Ede and Lundsford's account of invoking an audience, involves using "the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader--cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (160).

Cognitive-developmental psychology has added to our understanding of how writers learn to develop the perspective of readers and to invoke an appropriate audience role from among many available roles. Children acquire the ability to decenter and to imagine the views of others by engaging in role-taking, a process by which an "ind vidual somehow cognizes, apprehends, grasps...certain attributes of another individual" (Kroll 1978, 5).

This approach to understanding audience analysis is advanced by Rubin's important work on social cognition and written communication (1984). Referring to the personal construct theory of George Kelly (1955) and to the organismic developmental psychology of Hans Werner (1957), Rubin states: "The theory holds that we come to know others by viewing those others through a set of perceptual templates, a system of role and personality categories into which individuals actively assimilate information about their social worlds" (222). He claims further that "cognitive perspective taking includes knowledge about readers' prior knowledge about the subject at hand, <u>experientially</u> based associations, beliefs, values, opinions, interests, motives, intentions, and predispositions to respond in particular ways" [my emphasis] (232).

While this view of audience analysis shares assumptions of the cognitive model, it does not emphasize the individual mind at work during the writing process determining who the reader is and then accommodating that reader through appropriate substantive and stylistic choices; nor is the writer's construing of audience "just a matter of imposing a definition of audience" (232). Analyzing audience becomes an act of understanding both <u>what</u> the reader is and <u>how</u> the reader got that way--"a fundamentally social activity, entailing processes of inferring the thoughts and feelings of the other persons involved in an act of communication" (Kroll, 179). Writer and reader have entered a context that is no longer solely situational but is largely social, a system of role categories that allows writers to infer their readers' experience of their collective culture. Any knowledge that writers possess about readers is shaped by that context which writers and readers share.

If writing is indeed a social act, then perhaps what is called for when we attempt to understand audience analysis is to approach the process of writing as a process of reading. This process begins long before writers place pencil to paper. Each time writers make inferences about the conventions of their community, each time writers interact with other members of their community, they are reading and defining role boundaries as well as gaining information about how individuals act individually within these boundaries and about how these individuals perceive their own roles. Each time writers communicate to others, they are composing and testing and redefining their knowledge by applying it to a specific rhetorical situation.

I wish to suggest further that, to understand how writers know readers in nonacademic settings, we need to see the expression of knowledge--knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of rhetorical roles and operational purposes--as "community-generated, community-maintaining symbolic artifact" (Bruffee, 777). We need to examine "how the individual is a constituent of a culture" (Faigley, 535) and to define that culture and its complexities in order to understand the place of writing--both the product and the process--in maintaining cultural values, attitudes, knowledge, and ways of acting.

This of course will require, as Faigley notes of the social view of writing, "a great deal more than simply paying more attention to the context surrounding a discourse" (535). If we see writing as a process, we must recognize that it is a process embedded within many processes that constitute the workplace culture. We must acknowledge that the problem-solving of the individual writer is the problem-solving--"puzzle-solving," to use Kuhn's phrase (1970)--of the writer's community.

Much recent research in nonacademic settings that has taken a predominantly social view of writing seems to indicate that we need to revise our models of how writers analyze audience. The concept of audience is far too complex to be understood with our current audience addressed, audience invoked models. Findings also tend generally to counter the claims made in some of our journal articles that the purposes for nonacademic writing are more or less generic--that is, referential or persuasive--making "it is possible and useful to envision the particular reader or readers" (Walzer 1985, 154).

Writing, however, is "always already writing for some purpose that can be understood in [the] community context" (Bizzell, 227). We need only look to studies such as Knoblauch's (1980) to realize that making claims for audience analysis based on the generic purposes typically assigned to real-world writing ignores the multi-layered purposes that actually guide writers. Knoblauch found that writing on the job "typically entail[ed] responding to multiple purposes, the interaction of which motivate[d] and shape[d] performance" (154-44). Writers "set out to achieve several conflicting purposes simultaneously while responding to the needs of several, quite different, intended readers, each with different expectations of the writing" (155).

Given such complexity, we should ask how writers come to understand these purposes, how they understand the needs of internal and external readers, how they assign value to oftentimes conflicting purposes, and ultimately how this understanding finds form through their substantive and stylistic choices. Because "writers...may have internalized values, attitudes, knowledge, and ways of acting that are shared by other members of the organization" (Odell, 250), we should, as Odell suggests, examine the culture of the organization for answers to such questions. This examination will entail seeking to define how "groups of society members can become accustomed to modifying each other's reasoning and language use in certain ways" and how "these familiar ways achieve the status of conventions that bind the group in a discourse community..." (Bizzell 1982, 214).

The many job descriptions, policy and mission statements, and other documents that provide employees with organizational scripts for acceptable action certainly reflect the community's conventions. These "sacred texts," as Freed and Broadhead (1987) refer to such core documents, codify "the organization's institutional norms, its rules and regulations" (158).

Sacred texts, like all other documents composed on the job, may reveal what roles writers assume and what roles they wish their readers to slip on for specific occasions. But the community and its members are continuously in the process of understanding and revising the range of roles within which writers and readers must operate. In sharp contrast to the claim that an audience exists as a collective entity "only in terms of [its] relationship to the text and the relationship of the text to [it]" (Park 1982, 250), the concept of audience--the concept of the "other"--is always present in the form of Co-worker, Supervisor, Manager, Client. The distinction between this collective, conceptual audience--audience as community and subcommunities--and the situational audience--audience as defined by a specific rhetorical context--may be an important one to make if we are to understand writing on the job.

For writers and readers not only negotiate subject matter. They also negotiate the boundaries of their roles within the culture and within their respective communities. They maintain or redefine those roles by establishing relationships between writers and readers that are appropriate for specific contexts and consistent with cultural conventions.

Who actually inhabits these boundaries? All the colleagues, supervisors, managers, clients, customers, present and future, who will have occasion to provide some press in the shaping of a discourse. The members of these conceptual and situational audiences are, to adapt Ede and Lundsford's definition of audience, "<u>all</u> those whose image, ideas, or actions influence a writer during the process of composition" (168) and, I believe, <u>before</u> the process of composition.

This influence may be direct, though it is far from simple. Consider that as the writer articulates those writer and reader roles that she perceives are acceptable by convention and are suitable to the immediate context, the internal and external readers who will judge the appropriateness of her perceptions are also in the process of testing their understanding of role boundaries. For example, a supervisor may respond to a document during the cycling process in the roles of surrogate "primary audience," advocate of the writer, keeper of organizational norms, and prospective manager or surrogate manager, among others. The supervisor must determine if his responses to the document within these roles are appropriate for the immediate writing situation, are consistent and compatible, and are matched to those responses that might be given by the actual "primary audience," the writer, the "organization," and the manager. In order to fully analyze her audience, then, the writer must make a reasonable guess at what the supervisor's determination will be at all levels. And the supervisor is only one of many audiences the writer must consider.

Writers in nonacademic settings seem to be aware of such multiple perspective taking on the part of their readers, and they look to supervisors and others in their community to help them understand and judge the appropriateness of perceived boundaries for writer and reader roles. Odell's ethnography of workers in a state bureaucracy (1985) found that writers, in judging the appropriateness of their writing choices, relied on "their awareness of attitudes and prior experiences that are shaped by others in their organization" (251). Their "perceptions of audience [were] often based not so much on their experience with the intended reader but rather on [their] experiences in the office where they themselves work and on the nature of the work [they] do" (255-56). Writers in this study sometimes created their reader in their own or their supervisor's image; "writers' perceptions of their audience reflected not only their knowledge of the intended reader but also, in some cases, their understanding of their own job and their familiarity with procedures characteristic of the office in which the writers themselves worked" (251).

To understand how writers negotiate within the conventions of the collective audience, to discover how writers like those in Odell's study come to form perceptions of audience based on the culture of the workplace, we should, as my Rachel Spilka (1987) has advocated, center "our research more directly on the writer as he interacts with his various readers" (35). We should examine how writers interact with all others on the job, because it is this contact that allows writers to form their concepts of audience.

In addition, because the act of writing appears to be the method by which nonacademic writers and readers test social inferences, we should try to understand how nonacademic <u>readers</u> test such inferences. How do readers on the job read? How do they judge the appropriateness of roles assigned by writers?

Rubin (1984) claims that "writers are able to regard themselves as particular objects of their readers' social inferences. Writers come to see readers as making inferences about the writers' own intentions" (230). How do readers make these inferences and judge them accurate? How have readers been influenced by community conventions to accept or reject assigned roles? How does the reader's awareness of the writer's awareness of their mutual knowledge, "...the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that a speaker or writer and the audience <u>knowingly</u> have in common" (Thomas 1986, 582), influence acceptance or rejection of implied roles?

Some research has been conducted along these lines. Studies have focused primarily on readability and cue recognition, examining reading apprehension (e.g., Brown, Roe, and Ingham, 1986) and types of inferences generated during reading (e.g., Seifert, Robertson and Black, 1985). Reading aloud protocols have also been used to test the readability of documents.

But these studies tell us little of how readers come to understand their potential and actual role boundaries. They do not show us how readers test the appropriateness of roles inferred from texts against their tacit understanding of role boundaries.

What I am generally advocating today is that, if we are to understand how writers analyze audience, we must step back from the writing act and must seek to describe how writers read their work culture. From my experience with writers on the job, I can say that audience analysis does not take place primarily when the writer sits down to write, although this is the juncture at which the writer's knowledge of audience takes form. Audience analysis occurs every time the writer hears her supervisory talk about their clients; it takes place when the writer sees her manager interacting with her supervisor; it takes place in elevators and in cafeterias and in board meetings and in local pubs and on company picnics.

If we are to prepare our students to write on the job, then we must equip them with the strategies of the ethnographer so that they may read their culture and understand their audiences by understanding those around them. We must teach them to read sacred texts for social inferences, we must teach them to ask questions and to observe and to actively determine the conventions of the workplace. We must, in short, teach them research skills that will help them understand not writing, alone, but writing in context. If we send them into their professions with the notion that audience analysis takes place only when they begin to write, or shortly before, then all the heuristics in the world will do little to help them.

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