DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 671   CS 213 463

AUTHOR   Barnett, Claudia
TITLE   Collaborative Ghost Writing.
PUB DATE   1 May 92
NOTE   9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
                Conference on Computers and Writing (8th,
                Indianapolis, IN, May 1-3, 1992).
PUB TYPE   Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Higher Education; *Reader Response; *Reader Text
                Relationship; *Reading Processes; Undergraduate
                Students; *Writing Assignments; *Writing
                Instruction
IDENTIFIERS   *Collaborative Writing; *Ghostwriting; Narrative
                Text

ABSTRACT
                An exercise in ghostwriting--a process where the
reader completes a section of the text in the reader's head based on
clues in the text--was used in freshman composition and upper-level
composition classes to get students to concentrate on their reading
processes. In this assignment, a short story was chosen from which
different portions of the text were deleted. Each group received a
copy of Raymond Carver's "The Bath" minus one full section, and were
instructed to write a ghost chapter that would restore the short
story to a coherent whole. Later, the new sections were pasted
together. The task of physically writing the ghost chapter forced the
students to read slowly and carefully, to notice which techniques
were being used, and to wonder why. When the students met to write
their ghost chapters, their discussions were heated and intense.
Often they had trouble relating to Carver's characters, his tone, and
the plot. In addition, students had a hard time with the ambiguous
ending, and often tried to resolve it in their discussions and
writing. The ghost chapter assignment provided an exaggeration of an
everyday scenario, and taught the students that the role of the
reader is actually that of a second writer; the first writer gives
the artifacts that constitute the text, the second interprets those
artifacts, filling in the missing pieces. They learned that if they
read thoughtlessly, they failed to engage with or complete the text,
therefore that text remained unfinished. (PRA)

Claudia Barnett
The Ohio State University
May 1, 1992

Collaborative Ghost Writing

"Texts are lazy machineries that ask someone to do part of their job," writes Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader.* Eco focuses on reading as an interactive skill—a skill which requires not only recognizing words, but the ability to form conclusions about those words. His reader is not merely a passive subject but a participant in the text—and the one who ultimately determines its meaning. "Writing" is actually part of the reading process, although this sort of writing normally takes place in one's head. Eco explains:

> Frequently, given a series of causally and linearly connected events a . . . e, a text tells the reader about the event *a* and, after a while, about the event *e*, taking for granted that the reader has already anticipated the dependent events *b*, *c*, *d* (of which *e* is the consequence, according to many intertextual frames). Thus the text implicitly validates a 'ghost chapter,' tentatively written by the reader.

A "ghost chapter," then, is a section of the text that the active reader completes in her head, based on clues in the text. For instance, if a character in a novel is introduced as a child, but suddenly appears as an adult, the reader must mentally write a ghost chapter about the character's growth. If, as a child, she had wanted to be a lawyer, but is now an underpaid bus driver working nights, the reader may conclude that her life has not been easy, that she has run into a number of obstacles, and that she is not happy now. The reader may visualize the character as a child, complete with smiles and braids, and then the adult, hefty and uniformed. All these assumptions are part of the ghost chapter.

Ghost chapters are not entirely conscious, and they are not actually "written." They are composed of strings of mental connections that we formulate as we read. The better readers we are, the more ghost chapters we write. If we skim, we usually don't write any ghost chapters at all. Sometimes, ghost chapters are optional methods of enhancing a text; many texts are graphic and complete, while other, like Henry James' later novels, for instance, require the constant writing and revision of the ghost chapter.

2

During the Autumn and Winter quarters, I taught a freshman composition and literature class, and I devised an exercise to help students slow down and concentrate on their reading processes. I attempted to move the "ghost writing" out of the subconscious realm of the mind and onto the computer screen, where collaborative groups of students could focus on and analyze the choices they made—and where they could recognize the possibilities of alternate choices. I selected a short story and divided it into five sections and my class of twenty students into five groups. I scanned the text and created a word-processing document from it; then I created the different versions of the text by deleting approximately one-fifth of each version. Each group received a copy of the story minus one full section (between two-thirds of a page and one whole page in length). Each group received a disk with the text on MacWrite II, and each member of the group received a hard copy of the MacWrite II version to read individually and take notes on. The missing sections were indicated by a string of asterisks (* * * * *). The students read their hard copies before meeting in their groups to decide what to write. They were instructed to write a ghost chapter that would restore the short story—not to its original form, necessarily, but to a coherent whole. This exercise takes approximately two hours to complete. At the end of class, we paste the five new sections together to create an entirely new short story.

The story was Raymond Carver's, "The Bath" (from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*), which I chose because it is terse and tightly written, and also because it's linear; it doesn't have any flashbacks to confuse the reader who's forced to jump in midway. The characters also remain relatively constant. A reader missing one section of the story will not be shocked to find out what he has missed; on the other hand, it's not very predictable, and the ending is ambiguous enough to interpret in a variety of ways.

This assignment is not about finding the "right answer" or figuring out what Carver would have written, and students are told this from the start. They know they should be as creative as possible, within the established guidelines of the tone, style, and content of the short story itself. They learn to look at recurring motifs, to recognize the precision of word choices, and to become hyper-conscious readers and self-conscious writers. Because the students work in groups, they are forced to discuss and justify their choices, and also to examine other possibilities.

Carver's story is about a young boy who is hit by a car on his way to school the morning of his birthday. His mother is actually the main character, and the story focuses on her dull reaction to the accident. "The Bath" is written in an eerie, almost humorous, monotone:

At an intersection, without looking, the birthday boy stepped off the curb, and was
promptly knocked down by a car. He fell on his side, his head on the gutter, and his legs
in the road moving as if her were climbing a wall.

The other boy stood holding the potato chips. He was wondering if he should finish
the rest or continue on to school.

Characters are usually not referred to by name: we know the boy's name is Scotty only because
that is what is supposed to be printed on his birthday cake; similarly, the doctor calls the mother
"Ann." The narrator, however, refers to the characters as "the birthday boy," "the father," "the
doctor," "the baker," "the woman," and "the man." The sentences are short and rhythmically
repetitive. What little dialogue that does exist is terse and vague:

"There's a cake that wasn't picked up."

This is what the voice on the other end [of the line] was saying.

"What are you saying?" the father said.

"The cake," the voice said. "Sixteen dollars."

Here, the baker is angry that he has not been paid for the birthday boy's cake, but the father has no
idea what he's talking about. Not only has he forgotten, by this point, about his son's birthday
party, but he was never involved in its planning in the first place; it's the mother who, in the first
scene, orders the cake "decorated with a spaceship and a launching pad under a sprinkling of white
stars" with the name Scotty "iced on in green as if it were the name of the spaceship." The reader
knows about the cake and realizes the baker is on the phone, but the father remains confused and
finally hangs up the phone and pours himself a whiskey. The reader, understanding the father's
ignorance and his impatience, sympathizes with him; but at the same time, understands the baker's
concern. After all, the baker does not know the child is lying in a coma in the hospital; he's just a
businessman.

One interesting thing about this story is that no character arouses the reader's empathy. It's
possible to feel bad for the mother, but not really to see through her eyes, or her thoughts. We see
her more from the outside; we see when she moves and we hear what she says, but we rarely think
her thoughts. Instead, the narrator dully portrays the events, the dialogue, and some of the
thought. When I asked my students which characters they could identify with, I was met mostly
with indifference. Some said the mother, if anyone, but that they could not really understand her
motivations. One or two said the boy or the father, but they did not seem very enthusiastic.

However, some remarked that after finishing the story, they felt like they'd been through a war, that they had been numbed by the rhythm and repetition of the language.

"The Bath" is a story that my students would normally read quickly and dismiss even more quickly. They aren't used to the tone; they aren't engaged with the characters. They relate better to characters their own age, with similar lifestyles to their own. They enjoy stories about growing up, stories of romance, stories of adventure—but normally not stories of small children in comas. And while I usually attempt to cater to their preferences, I also think it's important for them to be able to write critically about works they don't like. And there's always the chance they might like something new. The task of physically writing the ghost chapter forces the students to read slowly and carefully, to notice which techniques are being used, and to wonder why. Rather than simply being able to say, "I didn't like it," they are forced to think about their reasons for not liking it. And they are forced to consider that the monotone is deliberate, that the author intentionally created a story they wouldn't like.

Interestingly, a number of students admitted they had trouble with their first readings of the story and that they never would have read the story again if they hadn't had to complete the assignment, but that they had come to appreciate it. Those who appreciated it most realized that they could relate to it after all, just not in the same way they normally relate to stories. With "The Bath," they don't identify with the characters as much as with the situation. Anyone who had experienced a family trauma agreed that reading this story is much like living through a trauma: it's slow and bleak and seems almost surreal. There are almost no details, but some do stand out, such as the doctor's clothes. The students who'd undergone traumas said they were only able to focus on insignificant details like that at the time, and that their own conversation had seemed monotonous and repetitive.

At one point toward the end of the story, the mother decides to go home for a bath, but she can't find the elevator. She meets a family in the waiting room– "all sitting in a wicker chair, a man in a khaki shirt, a baseball cap pushed ba' .c on his head, a large woman wearing a housedress, slippers, a girl in jeans, hair in dozens of kinky braids, the table littered with flimsy wrappers and styrofoam and coffee sticks and packets of salt and pepper." They ask her if she's there to tell them about Nelson, presumably their son; she, in turn, tells them about Scotty. Then they point her toward the elevator. One of my winter quarter students said that when her son was in the hospital, she was so incoherent that she couldn't find the elevator, either. She said she bumped into a

woman in the hallway and that they both started talking about their children, but that she can't remember a thing of what was said. Instead, all she remembers is that the other woman was wearing blue polyester pants. Like the mother in the story, my student could only remember the most minute, seemingly insignificant details. She was too afraid to think about her son, so she focused on the superficialities of the external world. The other students in the class were very interested in her response because some of them had said Carver's story was unrealistic; here was proof of the opposite. This is one way in which group discussion can alter students' perspectives on readings.

When the groups met to write their ghost chapters, I noticed their discussions were heated and intense. Although I remained uninvolved in group discussions, I overheard several ardent conflicts about particular words or plot complications. The groups remained focused on the assignment for the entire two-hour class session. They were extremely attentive to details. For homework, I had them meet and write a short analysis of their choices. One group wrote: "The author always mentioned moisture (wet lips on the mother, wet eyes on the baker, moist skin of the doctor). We had the boy have dry hands symbolizing unhealthiness." Another group explained: "The mother had to be wearing white by the end of the fourth section because in the fifth she was mistaken for a nurse by the family waiting for news about Nelson." They were meticulous with their reasoning—both in terms of subject matter and language. Some groups managed to capture Carver's tone exactly, repeating phrases that he used or the types of sentences he wrote. The autumn quarter class ended their story like this—strangely similar to Carver's original:

> As the water ran into the tub the lady thought to herself like this. The boy should be awake soon. When he gets home we can have the birthday party.
>
> The phone rang. The mother hurried to answer it. That could be the hospital.
>
> She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"
>
> The voice said, "It's ready."

The ghost chapters exercise can be used in a variety of ways, to serve a number of purposes. I had those same two Composition and Literature classes work on variations of the assignment with some of their regular readings for class. For instance, both classes read Joan Didion's, *Play It As It Lays*—a short novel composed of many short chapters (each about a page or two in length). I asked each group to create a new chapter in order to explain something that was

troubling them. Some felt they didn't learn enough about some of the minor characters, so they wrote from their points of view. Others wrote chapters about the main character's childhood, or chapters about her future. They also had to give their chapters numbers to explain exactly where, in the novel, the chapters belonged.

The winter class read Sam Shepard's play, *Buried Child*, and then wrote a variation of a ghost chapter. Since plays are essentially all dialogue, the need for ghost chapters (or a director) is great. For instance, someone who reads a play in bed, without thinking about the staging or the costumes, is only reading half a play; the stage must be visualized, the voices heard. As with "The Bath," the students had some trouble relating to the characters in *Buried Child*. They didn't feel they were told enough about the characters, that their dialogue didn't make sense, didn't sound "real." The characters were people they didn't know, didn't feel comfortable with. The groups' assignment, then, was to create a character they could relate to (from an existing less developed character) and to write a chapter from his or her point of view. Thus, the ghost chapters were first-person narrations told from the points of view of minor characters. One group wrote from the perspective of Shelly, a visitor and a stranger to the family, and others wrote from the points of view of different family members, like Tilden or Hallie, to express their surprise or discontent with their lives. The students weren't allowed to add anything that would contradict the "original," but they could add any details that would fit its frame. They seemed to enjoy this exercise because it made it easier for them to visualize the scenes. This assignment, like the other two, was done in collaborative groups that required students to discuss and justify all their choices.

This quarter, I'm teaching an upper-level composition course, but I again used "The Bath" assignment, though with a slightly different focus. This course requires collaborative paper writing—something not all students are immediately comfortable with. So, before having students meet with their groups and actually try to write something on their own, I had them meet in groups and try to write the missing portions of Carver's story. It was easier for them to write someone else's story before working on their own papers; they were more at ease with less at stake. No one felt as if his own ideas or style were being criticized. Also, the types of choices they had to make were the same types they would have to make later in their groups, only now they would have an idea of what to expect.

What do my students think of this assignment? They think it's difficult, but they also think it's fun. They say it's one of the only times they can be creative, and some of them enjoy adding

new twists to the old story. At least one group per quarter, in fact, intentionally adds a humorous or absurd turn of events, such as the mother or the baker being the one who hits him, or the family dog having the same name as the other boy whose parents are at the hospital, Nelson. My students are always anxious to see the original story, so much so that I've taken to reading it to them at the end of class the day of the assignment. They are even more anxious, however, to hear their own, new stories. So I read that to them, too. Then we can discuss the choices they've made. They always seem to like their new stories better than Carver's original, which is somewhat problematic, but at least they take pride in their work.

Carver's story was a fairly random choice for me, but I think it works well and I will continue to use it. Students really have a hard time with the ending, which is ambiguous; there's a phone call to the mother and a voice says, "Scotty . . . It is about Scotty . . . It has to do with Scotty, yes." And that's the end. It may be the hospital, but then it may be the baker. Either way, we never find out what becomes of Scotty. My students seem to need to know what happens to him; in class discussion, they seem angry that Carver keeps Scotty's fate a secret. The winter quarter class actually ended the story with the newly recovered Scotty taking a bath; the spring class had him awaken and go home. This need to know, or to have the story resolved, makes an interesting discussion topic; it forces students to examine the criteria they use to judge what to read.

I think my students learn a lot from the ghost chapter assignments. I know there's no exact way to measure how much they've learned, but when I listen to their discussions, I can see that they are addressing important issues and that they are noticing details they might otherwise let slide by. And this way, everyone can be involved in the discussion—not just the few students who feel like talking in class that day. Not only does everyone have a chance to speak, but everyone seems to want to speak; they all become involved in the story and eager to contribute. The computer really helps students learn to collaborate; they can all see their ideas on the screen and edit them together. The computer also helps students see their work as a continuation of Carver's, rather than as something distinct.

The ghost chapter assignment provides an exaggeration of an everyday scenario; no matter what we read, we must carefully complete the pictures that most texts roughly sketch. The more carefully we complete these pictures—either of missing or less-developed details—the stronger our interaction with the texts, and the more we derive from our readings. The role of the reader is actually that of a second writer; the first writer gives us the artifacts that constitute the text, the

second interprets those artifacts, filling in missing pieces—the missing shards, the missing bones, the reason and rationale supporting the find. The reader is the one who completes the text—the one who ultimately determines how it ends and what it means. The person who reads every word thoughtlessly does not engage with or complete the text, and that text remains unfinished. This is what I am attempting to teach my students: not only to read carefully, but to interact—to infer connections, to draw conclusions, to visualize every detail, even those missing ones. The meaning of the text does not rest within the text, but rather within the reading of the text. When they realize, from working with their groups, how much it's possible to glean from only four-fifths of a text, they begin to understand how much they're normally ignoring when they skim five-fifths.