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ABSTRACT

In a Purdue University English 101 class, students were told to identify an audience outside the classroom for each paper they wrote. The central challenge to composition teachers is preserving elements valued in teaching academic writing in the context of ill-defined problems to be addressed outside the classroom. Most useful for instructors teaching "completely ordinary and yet utterly remarkable students" is the model of Linda Flower and her colleagues at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh who work with inner city teens. James Berlin offers an academic curriculum--as powerful as it might be in helping students understand the world, it does not bring student writing into the world. Lee Odell argues that typical academic writing assignments fail to challenge students to understand and address complex rhetorical situations. When students are asked to choose, investigate, and write about a local issue, they need to decide the most powerful place to make their case and to reach their audience. A two-paper assignment allows students to first prepare a research report outlining various points of view and political factors. The second paper is the student's contribution to public discourse on the issue. For example, a married student wrote to the mayor about the need for the city to take an active role in developing affordable housing and received a two-page personal response from the mayor. Students' rhetorical strategies were observed to shift after they learned to investigate their audience's roles and values. (Contains six references.) (CR)

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"Does This Paper Have to Have an Audience?": Freshman Writers and Public Discourse

I'd like to introduce you to the class I taught last spring at Purdue University. This was an English 101 class, very much the sort of uneven but interesting collection of students you get when you teach the first semester of the freshman sequence in the second semester. I had a few older students, a few who were starting school in the second semester, some savvy schedulers who had decided that fighting for a spot in 101 in the fall just wasn't worth it. I taught from a textbook called Four Worlds of Writing, which I knew well and felt free to criticize and adapt as I pleased.

In teaching this class, I constantly reminded the students that their writing could matter to someone other than me (for giving a grade) and them (for getting a grade). For every paper, they had to identify a real audience by name and address. For at least one assignment, they were required to mail or deliver the paper to that audience. And they got responses--real, personal responses that astounded them and me over and over.

Here are some voices from the class, excerpts from the memos they put in their final portfolios:[1]

1Students' names have been changed. Their written permission was obtained for this use of their work.

Derik: I consider my best paper to be the letter to my brother.... Once I got the paper started I wrote from the heart without a worry as to what kind of grade I would get.... The first time I saw him after he got the letter, he gave me a hug and said thanks. Up to this point in our relationship the closest we ever were to each other physically was when we would fight.

Kate: I feel that my writing gained much more significance when writing papers that would make a difference in society rather than simply meet the requirements of an English class. Writing letters and reports that would go beyond the classroom helped me learn the value of writing as a resource for change.

Manny: If I can learn as much in English 102 as . . . in English 101 than I might try to write a book about my fathers life. I truly believe that there are too many others out there that might end up as he did. [dying of exposure to Agent Orange]

Tim: I mentioned in the first paper [he's talking about his diagnostic essay] that I was embarrassed to share my work and didn't have any confidence in it at all. I also stated that my work was boring and dull. This has all changed this semester. Because I have learned to write a paper at a target audience and to address the concerns and interests of that audience I feel that my writings are no longer dull (at least to that audience). ... [H]aving a letter published in the Exponent and receiving several responses also increased my confidence and proved to me that people were interested in what I had to say.

This was a completely ordinary class, composed of completely ordinary and yet utterly remarkable students.

What I did in this class was to try to live up to what most composition teachers say they are doing: preparing students not only for academic life but for reaching their personal goals and participating as citizens.

I'd like to offer a very brief sketch of the problem I'm working on in developing freshman composition courses in which student writing is directed to audiences and forums outside the classroom.

James Berlin (to take an example) was well known for his argument that freshman English is the last hope for developing students into active, educated citizens. In one conference address, he said that "students deserve an education that prepares them to be critical citizens of the nation that now stands as one of the oldest democracies in history.... [T]hey must ... be prepared to become active and critical agents in shaping the ... conditions of their historical moment" (223).

However, Berlin's work, inspiring as it can be, comes up short in one crucial way (and this is also true of cultural studies more generally). It begs the question of how his students' cultural critiques become part of the discourses which shape history. His curriculum does not offer students ways to bring their voices into the world.

In contrast, a very different example. Linda Flower and her colleagues in the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh (Peck, Flower, and Higgins; Flower Construction; Flower "Literate") offer dramatic stories of their work with inner-city teens. These teens write and publish community newsletters in which they discuss and critique their experiences with school, family, friends, gangs, drugs. In ordinary circumstances--that is, in the limited world of

school literacy--these teens' voices would almost certainly go unheard outside the classroom (and very possibly inside the classroom as well). But the teens' work is widely read and discussed in the community, has gained attention from the mayor and school officials, and has led to new dialogue and problem-solving in the community.

I juxtapose Berlin and Flower to bring out what I see as a central challenge to composition teachers. Berlin's composition curriculum is an academic curriculum. As powerful as might be in helping students understand the world, it does not bring student writing into the world. On the other hand, the successes of the Community Literacy Center in bringing student writing into the world seem to be founded in the Center's position outside the academy.

What is a freshman composition teacher to do, then?

Lee Odell, in a recent issue of the Journal of Basic Writing, outlines the problem in terms that point toward resolving this dilemma. He describes a gulf between the kinds of "ill-defined" problems faced by adults writing in a variety of situations, and the well-defined assignments and teacher-audience of academic writing. Odell argues that typical academic writing assignments fail to challenge students to understand and address complex rhetorical situations.

Thus, in Odell's terms, when a freshman writes a cultural critique essay, her audience is the teacher, an expert in cultural criticism and its typical arguments and conclusions. The paths of her essay are already charted. She is engaged in a well-defined problem. On the other hand, teens in a literacy center, trying to figure out how to address the community about the unfairness of the high school suspension policy, have an ill-defined problem.

This gives us a place to begin. My question then becomes, how can we preserve elements we value in teaching academic writing (such as cultural criticism, or research skills), but teach them in the context of ill-defined problems? An example from my 101 class illustrates some answers to this question.

Greg, who runs his own lawn care business, is getting ready for the spring season. His mowing equipment is difficult to adjust, and he wants to simplify his operation by standardizing the height at which he cuts all of his customers' lawns. Various customers, however, want their lawns cut at different heights. He decides to write a letter to his customers explaining that a standard 4-inch cutting height will be best for everyone. He needs scientific information about why grass is best cut at four inches, but he will have to address other concerns as well, particularly the appearance of lawns that are cut high.

Greg's project is a good example of an ill-defined problem. As his teacher, I do not have any right answers for him, nor can I guarantee that his letter will have the impact he wants. He can test out his letter on me and on members of his workshop group, but the response that counts is the one from his customers. And even they are likely to vary in how they react to his new policy. Greg knows that he may lose some customers, while others may be pleased that they seem to have hired such a smart guy to take care of their lawns.

As a teacher of rhetoric, I see a number of very interesting dimensions to Greg's project. It involves audience awareness, reasoned argument, and the accurate use of appropriate, authoritative source material. It involves a sophisticated ethical appeal in which he positions himself

as a responsible businessperson, doing what's right for the environment. It even involves cultural critique--he has to identify and address cultural expectations for the appearance of suburban lawns. And his argument, if it is successful, will persuade his customers to break with a cultural code.

Does Greg's letter look like academic writing? No. But I might argue that his project is better preparation for the kind of purposeful, situated writing that academics and advanced students do actually engage in than is a typical freshman research paper. Academic writing, as you and I practice it as academics, shares many of the demands of Greg's letter to his customers. It is bound to a community, and its success or failure is founded in rhetorical analysis and strategic use of language in the face of an uncertain response.

Let me turn now to some practical concerns. How can we design courses and assignments that call for the rhetorical complexity of Greg's letter? How do ill-defined problems make their way into the well-defined world of an English class? To address these questions, I'll describe a few features of my assignments in investigating and writing public discourse.

I ask my students to choose a local issue to investigate and write about, one which they are personally concerned with. The criterion that the issue be local is paramount. If the issue is local, there will be close, relevant research sources, and there will be outlets for the students to express themsevles, such as campus and city newspapers, letters to city council members or residence hall directors, and so on.

Another paramount feature is a careful analysis of possible audiences or forums for the students' writing. I ask students to figure out the most powerful place to make their case, the best place to reach their audience. They collect information about how long submissions to different newspapers can be; they call campus offices to find out who they should write to.

In addition, they consider the roles and interests of their audience. What are the concerns of the campus housing director, faced with student demands for unlimited guest hours for members of the opposite sex? What is that housing director responsible for, and who does he have to answer to? What kinds of arguments and appeals will sway him?

In the end, I believe that the most important feature of these assignments is the stamped envelopes that students bring with them on the day their final papers are due. Their writing is going somewhere. Someone--and in many cases a lot of people--are going to read what they wrote, and maybe even respond.

My 101 students do a reasonable job dealing with these rhetorical challenges in the course of writing one paper, but I actually prefer the luxury of the two-paper assignment I designed for Purdue's developmental writing program. The first paper is a research report outlining various points of view on the issue and specifying the political factors that bear on the outcome. The second paper is the student's contribution to public discourse on the issue. By the time students write the second paper, they are so well informed that hard stuff like concessions and refutations and ethical and emotional appeals come much more easily. They can see how these strategies apply to their issues, and they use the strategies in their own writing.

By the end of a semester my students are pretty used to this weird teacher who makes them mail out their papers. They're used to the idea of portfolio grading, and they are thrilled that I don't give an in-class final exam. But what really makes the difference, for them and for me, is that their writing happens. Their letters and guest columns get published in the papers. They get correspondence from campus and city officials, written in personal and direct reponse to their concerns. They find out that someone (someone besides me, and after all I get paid for it) is listening.

Spivey, a married student struggling to pay high rent in a dilapidated apartment in a student area, writes to the mayor about the need for the city to take an active role in developing affordable housing for students. He gets a two-page personal response from the mayor herself.

Three women in my section of developmental writing are disturbed by the abuse of alcohol they found when they arrived on campus. They write a guest column to alert the community to the problem. It's published in the city newspaper--on my birthday. Their column is focused and cogent; it incorporates a variety of appropriate arguments and appeals. I could not have asked for any better public representation of the writing abilities of our lowest-level students.

Anna, a single independent student in her mid-twenties, writes to the financial aid office to express her dismay at the limited funding available for students like her, especially compared to those who have children. She gets a letter which not only explains how and why the university treats students with and without children differently, but also suggests alternate sources of financial aid.

During a semester of rampant campus debate over guest hours in the dorms, many of our developmental writing students are busy writing to deans, student organizations, hall directors, and newspapers. Most of them identify the pulse point that finally pushes the university to relax guest rules--the loss of income when students move out of the dorms into rule-free apartments. (It was fascinating to watch the students' rhetorical strategies shift after they were asked to investigate their audience's roles and values. They initially wanted to argue for the freedom and privacy of adults, assuming they could simply take a moral high ground and win the point. However, their investigation of the points of view of the university officials who held the power in this situation led them to take an entirely different tack.)

These are nifty success stories. So I'll also tell you about Carl. He was the quietest student in the class. He managed to do the work, but he expended huge amounts of effort to produce small amounts of prose. If he had started in the fall semester, he would almost certainly have been moved into Developmental Writing (it's not offered in the spring). His public discourse project protested the use of security cameras at his former high school, as an invasion of privacy. His letter fell a bit flat because he didn't understand the reasons why the school had installed the cameras, and he was misinformed about exactly how they worked. He also directed his letter to a former teacher, who had little say over the cameras. To his great credit, he went to talk to this teacher to find out why no one had responded to his letter. Reflecting later on this experience, Carl wrote, "At this point in the class, I was beginning to get the idea of public discourse and realized the importance of getting involved."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

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