READER-AWARENESS FOR INEXPERIENCED WRITERS: TEXTBOOKS VS. TEACHERS

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Student writers are frequently urged to think of their readers and know exactly for whom they're writing. Most writing texts give at least perfunctory advice to that effect, and some go into detail about how readers ought to be accounted for during the composing process. Unfortunately, much of this advice is misleading for inexperienced writers, and is as likely to confuse as to help them. Audience-awareness is one of the most difficult aspects of composing to learn; it is my contention that inexperienced writers ought not to be asked to compose for specific audiences outside themselves until they have learned to write for the reader in themselves. Recently Donald Murray has proposed the terms "writing self" and "reading self" to describe the psychic components of composing.[1] His suggestion that the teacher's role is to "model the ideal other [reading] self" is fruitful. But in this essay I want to argue that teachers need not only to awaken inexperienced writers to an awareness of the writing self-reading self interaction, but also to help them develop the reading self into a genuinely objective point of view. I will argue that the writing teacher's job is to develop the reading self in the inexperienced writer until that self is secure enough to assimilate objective viewpoints within the composing consciousness. To see how this job can be done, let's look first at some bad advice in a place where we have some right to expect otherwise: current writing texts.

Such advice often comprises well-meant but confusing generalities. One text cautions freshman composition students that "writing addressed to no one in particular instead of to real people can't be fully satisfying."[2] But who are "real people" and how is the writer supposed to envision them as she composes? Such advice blinds inexperienced writers to the fact that no writer ever composes for a "real" reader but for the "fiction" that Walter Ong argues always represents readers in the writer's mind during composing.[3] To encourage inexperienced writers to believe that they can address actual readers is to misdirect their composing. For they must learn that the way a writer fictionalizes a "real" reader determines how that reader is made use of within the context of the writing. What the unskilled writer must learn is that she must reinvent her readers — their values and expectations — in her imagination if she is to have those readers psychologically present during composing. If she cannot form readers in her thoughts as she writes, then she cannot write for them. Another kind of misdirection in such advice arises from the latent egocentricity of many inexperienced writers, who cannot easily adopt a point of view distinct from their own. One writing text creates just such a misdirection in attempting to show students how to imagine their readers:

A Completed Stance

Nancy's stance now looked like this:

My role:	I am a young American who traveled through Europe this summer. I would like to show how other backpackers can do the same thing, but do it more easily than I did.
My reader:	Young Americans who might want to travel as I did. My essay will be slanted somewhat to women, but men should definitely be interested too.[4]

"Nancy" has not defined any reader different from herself; she has merely projected a class of readers with her own characteristics ("young American women" who "want to travel"). Such a formulation permits "Nancy" to assume an audience with her own knowledge and interests in general; she writes not for others but for herself. She would undoubtedly have trouble with this advice:

> You must keep in mind the concerns and values of the people you want to reach; you should have some knowledge of their educational and social backgrounds, how old they are, what kind of work they do, and whether they are . . . liberal or conservative about religion, sex, and politics.[5]

Useful advice, certainly, but how is it to be actualized? How does one "keep in mind" these items of information about readers? And how is the teacher to enable inexperienced student writers to learn to do this? For such writers normally lack the skill to shape their written style in such specifically reader-oriented ways. They are accustomed to adjusting speech, in an oral situation, to different speakers. But they are not experienced in the composing situation; they do not know how to translate knowledge about readers — when they do consider readers — into nuances of logic and style altered according to the audience's needs.

General expostulations to inexperienced writers about keeping the reader in mind can easily confuse or misdirect such writers. That is because they do not have control of the composing process, do not grasp the psychological dynamics of the interaction between writing self and reading self, and have a natural tendency to project themselves as their own audience. But the failures of textbook advice about reader-awareness are due not to the obtuseness of the authors so much as to the ill-understood complexity of the subject itself. Douglas Park stresses that even experienced writers are reader-aware only sometimes. Conventional attempts to talk about audience as a "single, locatable, something" are misdirected, he argues, because audience "involves many different contexts dispersed through a text."[6] For in fact "it is only in highly structured situations or at particular times that writers focus on audience as a discrete entity. Much more often writers, I suspect, think primarily in terms of shaping the material for appropriateness, clarity, accuracy" (254). Indeed, he points out, requiring inexperienced writers to try to envision particular readers different from themselves "can be inhibiting and complicates rather than simplifies the problem of dealing with audience" (255). Linda Flower also concedes that for inexperienced writers, "trying to put complex thought into written language may . . . be task enough" for them, because the labor of finding out what to say precludes the more difficult task

of representing the reader. Indeed, she adds, "the reader is an extra constraint that must wait its turn" in the composing of inexperienced writers.[7]

Because it is often platitudinous or confusing, textbook advice cannot be relied on to help inexperienced writers learn to write for others. Convincing models of composing for readers do exist, however, and they are premised on the idea that students learn to write for others by first learning to write for themselves. Composing-for-oneself requires a psychic pairing of a reading self with a writing self. Dorothy Augustine remarks that "the competent writer" develops "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.' "[8] That is, the good writer will carry on a dialog with a reading self as a way of exploring and developing the topic. Such a writer will, says Augustine, "engage in a variation of the intention-response exchange by 'standing in' for the addressee" (227). The writer projects an active other self which "listens" and "responds" to the writing self in a psychic dramatization of the rhetorical situation. This composing-for-oneself precedes and underlies the mature audience-awareness that experience brings to writers. In the process of writing for herself the novice writer learns — not how to imagine *a* reader, but how to project herself as *the* reader.

The pedagogical implications of the writing self-reading self interaction are extended by Donald Murray in his suggestion that it is the teacher's role "to bring the other self into existence" and "to recruit the other self to assist in the teaching of writing."[9] Certainly teachers can first coach the reading self into its role as responder to the writing self; writing texts generally fail to help students learn this. But the teacher needs to go a step further: the inexperienced writer must be taught not only to bring the reading self into play, but also to train that self to adopt other roles — those of the targeted readers. The reading self must work in partnership with the writing self by learning, chameleon-like, to take on the coloration of the audience, so that gradually the inexperienced writer, by learning to write for himself, becomes able to write for others. Responding to students' writing, the writing teacher must keep in mind two complementary purposes: to develop the capacity of the composing consciousness to split itself between the writing self and the reading self, and to train the reading self to assimilate reader expectations within the composing consciousness.

Texts cannot do this; only responsive readers can. Teachers have the best opportunity to be such readers and to direct their responses to the reading self. Some examples of writing by inexperienced writers, and some responsive questioning of it, may help illustrate this point. The following assignment was given to first-semester students at a public two-year college, after two months of the course had elapsed and after considerable small-group work had been done: "Write about an event in your life that changed you in some way. Tell about the event and analyze the nature of the change it brought about. Your readers will be the other students in your group, who are interested in the change you describe and want to understand it better." These students typically lacked either the financial resources to attend a four-year institution or the academic record to qualify them for such a place; sometimes they lacked both. The majority had not enjoyed a positive academic experience in high school. They were both inexperienced students and inexperienced writers. The goal of this writing task was to encourage them to articulate an experience unique to them and to try to communicate that experience to readers known to them, of similar socioeconomic circumstances, but from different communities and different family situations.

The first example is from a piece entitled "Finding Love," in which the writer is describing how she broke up with a boyfriend:

> At the end of our junior year, we decided to break up over summer vacation and go out with other people, before we decided to do anything with our future. As summer went by we grew further and further apart. It was like [John] would say that we would go out and then he would never show up to get me. He did that alot. Then he started dating other girls, I knew it was over then. I finally let go of him. It was like my whole life just died. Then in my senior year I met Derek, who had just broke it off with his first love. John moved to Florida and I haven't seen him since.

This is the final paragraph; it leaves the purpose incomplete. But it does not fail because the writer could not envision her readers — she had worked with them for two months in class. This paragraph fails to show clearly the change it deals with because the writer herself has not been able to bring to consciousness her own attitudes toward that change. Her

diction is teenage-romance cliche: "I knew it was over then"; "my whole life just died." This formulaic language appears to offer the clearest verbalization of her experience presently available to her. Since she appears not to have other words for her experience, it would be useless to tell her to "explain this more clearly to the reader." Until the reader in her can talk to the writer in her, no further self-questioning will occur and no new words will flow. The teacher can begin this process by impersonating the reading self, probing and querying the writer. In conference with this writer, or even in a series of marginal responses, the teacher may ask:

- Can you think of some words that describe how you felt about John before you broke up?
- Can you list some words that describe how you felt during one of those times when he didn't show up to get you?
- Can you make up a sentence or two that says just what you did when, as you say, you "let go of him?"
- What words tell best what you felt when you let go of him?
- I remember what it was like to be in love when I was in high school, but I wonder if you and John did the kinds of things we did in high school? Can you help me understand why you enjoyed being with John by telling me what you did together that you enjoyed?
- You haven't said much about Derek. Do you want me to know anything about him? Or do you have a reason for not telling me about him?

These questions are reflexive, turning the writer back upon the experience with some new ways of seeing it. Impersonating the reading self, the teacher stimulates the dialogue between writer and reader by helping the student "read" the experience she is trying to clarify. The teacher's questions stimulate revision first by helping the writer increase her lexical choices and recognize logical gaps, then by introducing an external, first-person viewpoint. Once the student begins to write for herself as reader, she will become capable of the global revision needed to produce a more fully contextualized analysis.

A different kind of disjunction between language and experience appears in the second example, the penultimate paragraph of a piece written in response to the same assignment, entitled "My New Life." An experience during a weekend retreat is the topic:

> Saturday night proved to be most interesting. We saw a very moving film and had a discussion time afterward, that eventually got very deep. As we were talking, one guy began to cry. He was someone we all looked up to because he was a jock, good looking, and liked to party. We were all shocked when he confessed he was tired of living the sinful life that he was. He made us look at ourselves and our own lives. I realized I had been exposed to only two elements of what I was looking for. Sunday School and church were there, but God was hiding in the shadows when he should have been in front. That Saturday night I and about ten others were saved. I accepted Christ and am now living my life for him.

As this writer narrates his experience he slips from teenage patois (the discussion that "got very deep," the "jock" who was "good looking" and "liked to party") into the rhetoric of born-again Christianity. He is "tired of living the sinful life," though the nature of the sin is not broached. Evidently the writer has no experiential basis for the phrase; it is part of the self-denunciatory language of conversion. Confessing sins prepares for the discovery of "God hiding in the shadows," a metaphor suggesting reorientation toward a previously hidden truth. The familiar phrases of commitment conclude the episode: "I accepted Christ." No doubt the writer has heard the language in sermons and knows it from his reading. The sudden shift from teenage idiom to the language of religious conversion suggests the writer struggling to verbalize a radical shift in self-perception. But he has not adequately read himself yet, and does not understand exactly why he feels changed, nor what led to his overwhelming sense of sin. Unable to express why he feels changed, he finds it expedient to resort to the linguistic formulas of conversion in the absence of the language of genuine self-knowledge.

The challenge for the teacher in this situation differs from that posed by the first writer, who could not articulate major segments of her experience. This writer has a sort of language for his experience. The teacher can help by asking questions pointing away from the cliches of conversion toward a verbalization of the disturbing self-awareness that led the writer toward conversion in the first place:

- What was the film you saw Saturday night?
- You said the film moved you. Can you find some words to describe how it made you feel?

- What part of the film do you remember best? Can you describe what feelings you had during this part?
- In the discussion after the film, was there any issue you felt personally involved in? How did this discussion touch you?
- When the fellow you respected said he had been living a sinful life, did he say what his sins were?
- A lot of people find the word "sin" hard to define; I know I do. I'm not sure what the words means for me. Can you tell me some words or descriptions that help define "sin" for you?
- I am also a little uncomfortable with sudden changes in people's attitudes, because I don't change very quickly myself. You've convinced me that you have changed in your feelings about yourself, however. Can you help me understand the connections between the discussion you had that night and the meaning of "sin" for you personally right now?

The first group of questions probe the reading self, making it conscious of gaps in the narrative. The last two questions introduce an "I" as a sympathetic outside reader. Of course the writer has been aware of the teacher and the writer's peers in the class as potential readers of his writing. But these questions force an outside viewpoint into articulateness *within* the composing consciousness; they force the writing self to take account of a reading audience outside the context of the experience. They provide a model for the reading self to continue probing that experience from the outside. From the dialogue between writing self and reading self the writer can discover that it is not enough just to tell the story fully; because the articulate voice represented by the teacher's probings demands its own understanding of the experience, the nature of sinfulness itself must be clarified. The writer will have forced upon him the awareness that not everyone is comfortable with a theological interpretation of guilt or error, and that sin is not a self-explanatory concept. In some part of himself — in the reading self — the writer will realize that he must adopt a separate identity, recreating the outside perspective as part of his own composing consciousness. Only when he can view his own experience from a perspective outside that experience will he be able, as the textbooks urge, to "write clearly for the reader."

A third instance of writing requiring responses targeted on the reading self may be found in this passage from the beginning of a piece entitled "Breaking Away," written in response to the same assignment as the earlier examples:

> I knew for sure that when I graduated I would have to move on to bigger and better things. You see, Woodville had a way of locking your life inside the community if you stayed around too long. In the beginning people would think that they were going to be content with their life style, but later realized that they missed the chance to get away.
>
> My older brother and I went into the service after high school. It was the first big step out of the nest for both of us. I don't know how Jeff felt about it, but I felt lonely, scared, and wanted to go back home. I had no choice but to fulfill my obligation and I adjusted very well.

The rest of this piece develops the attitudes of the writer's younger brothers, and the writer's own feelings about paths his brothers were following. The conventional diagnosis of this passage would be a lack of focus: what "bigger and better things" did the writer think about moving on to? How did he adjust so well in service? Unexamined composing lies behind the gaps in development; the writer has not asked himself how much of the growing-up-and-getting-away process he really wants to account for. And there is another, subtler problem. To describe his world the writer uses language which is thoroughly, unconsciously personal in context. "A way of locking your life inside the community" suggests a process that only small-town residents might grasp. And why did the writer have "no choice but to fulfill my obligation"? Why the redundancy between "no choice" and "obligation," or are they discrete in their meanings? What is the ethos of the term "obligation" in this context? The writing teacher must devise responses which express to the writer both the need to clarify his purpose in writing and to clarify the experience by perceiving it from a viewpoint outside the familiar personal context it presently has. The following questions will help make these needs clearer to the writer:

- When you began writing this, what did you want to tell about? Did you want to tell about life in Woodville, or about life after you left it?

- You mentioned people who thought they would be content in your town but realized later they wouldn't. Can you talk about someone like this?
- You say you felt lonely and scared; what did you miss about home? What do you remember being scared of?
- I don't come from a small town, and I have a hard time understanding how anyone could feel "locked inside" any town, as you nicely put it. I'd like to know how a town can make a prisoner out of someone.
- Also, I have not been in the service, so I don't see how anyone can feel an obligation to it. Can you help me understand what you mean by "obligation" here?

The first three questions show the teacher responding to the incompleteness of the writing, trying to help the writer gain control of his purpose. The last questions confront the writer with a viewpoint outside his experience, in the person of someone wanting to understand the small-town ethos, but needing clarification of the code phrases which render that experience.

These questions, of course, by no means exhaust what can be asked of these writers as they work. But such carefully-targeted responses, and responses like them, can awaken the writing-reading interaction in students' composing, if used in conjunction with drafts in progress. Students must understand revision as a reseeing and reworking process, in order to benefit from such questioning, and be given the opportunity to rework their writing as part of the strategy. If these conditions exist, the method of responsive questioning can be exercised by students among themselves, in pairs or in small groups, as well as by the teacher. What is required most of all is the instructor's willingness to make her inexperienced writers aware of the need to become readers of their own work and to help them understand how outside viewpoints can enter into the composing consciousness. The outcome can be writers who, by being taught to write for themselves, learn to write more successfully for others.

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NOTES

[1]Donald Murray, "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," *College Composition and Communication,* 33 (May, 1982), 140-56.

[2]David Skwire and Frances Chitwood, *Student's Book of College English,* Third Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1981), p. 6.

[3]Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," *PMLA,* 90 (January, 1975), 9-21.

[4]A. M. Tibbetts, *Strategies of Rhetoric with Handbook,* Fourth Edition (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman and Co., 1983), p. 19.

[5]Maxine Hairston, *A Contemporary Rhetoric* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 64.

[6]Douglas Park, "The Meanings of 'Audience,' " *College English,* 44 (March, 1982), 254.

[7]Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English* 41 (September, 1979), 34.

[8]Dorothy Augustine, "Geometries and Words: Linguistics and Philosophy: A Model of the Composing Process," *College English,* 43 (March, 1981), 228.

[9]Murray, p. 143