

THE AUDIENCE OF THE COMPOSITION TEXT: TEACHER OR STUDENT?

A Review Essay

JAMES E. PORTER AND RODNEY FARNSWORTH

John J. Ruszkiewicz, *Well-Bound Words* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1981), 359 pages.

We raise here a simple but nonetheless important question about composition texts: Whom are they for? And we caution those who would answer "For students, of course," and leave it at that. Our experience with textbook selection committees — both as choosers and as those chosen for — tells us that the first criterion members of such a committee apply is the book's appropriateness for students, and the second is the text's suitability to the writing program or the curriculum, should one in fact exist. We wonder if the text's appropriateness for instructors is seriously considered in the selection process. If not, we think it should be, because the suitability of the text to the instructor bears directly on the students and the program.

By ruminating on the ways texts are written, selected by committees, and reviewed in composition journals, we have isolated two prevalent assumptions about the relationship of the composition text to its intended audiences: the students and the teacher. With the assumption about the text's relationship to student we find no fault: The text should meet both the psychological and compositional needs of the students; it should direct itself at the students' level of writing development (as well as at their interests and experience) and,

by providing examples and strategies, help students write better. However, we challenge what we see as a common assumption about the text's relationship to the teacher. Too often the text seems to be viewed only or primarily as a supplement, as an additional means of imparting knowledge to students — knowledge that the teacher is assumed to have already. Behind this view, we detect the assumption that the teacher is a fully developed entity. While this is certainly true in one sense (the teacher *is* the undeniable expert in the writing class), it is faulty to assume that, simply because the teacher is the expert, that the teacher's intellectual development has ceased and that the teacher has the natural ability to use texts to pass writing skills on to students.

Recent composition research challenges these two assumptions held by purveyors (and surveyors) of textbooks. George Hillocks, for instance, has raised serious questions about the linear, mechanistic model for composition instruction. Do the teacher and the text already have "the truth" about writing? Is the student a *tabula rasa* upon which this truth is sketched? Is the pedagogical problem simply a matter of finding the most efficient means of passing on this truth, i.e., better texts, more dynamic teachers, etc.? Hillocks argues that, regardless of where expertise lies, writing skills cannot be imparted to students like so many ornaments to be hung on a Christmas tree. Hillocks' research demonstrates that the presentational mode — in which the teacher primarily lectures about writing to students (with the assistance of the text, as a surrogate teacher) — is not an effective means of composition instruction (659-673). According to Hillocks, the most measurably effective approach for teaching writing is what he calls the environmental approach. In this mode, the students teach themselves how to write through group involvement in actual writing situations; the teacher creates the rhetorical context and intervenes as a consultant, with a minimum of lecturing.

Furthermore, research in developmental psychology emphasizes — and common sense should dictate — that individual development does not cease when a person reaches twenty-one or when a teacher receives the Ph.D. Erik Erikson identifies eight different stages of development (he calls them "ages") that adults encounter. His insights have important implications for faculty development, as Joanne Kurfiss has pointed out. For example, they suggest that older teachers are likely to be at a different stage of personal development

than young teachers; they may need the opportunity to break out of old habits and roles in order to experience a higher degree of what Erikson calls "generativity"; failure to alter habits and roles may cause what we know as teacher burn-out. Younger faculty are likely to be in a stage where establishing professional identity is important; they need professional guidance, but limiting their opportunity to develop areas of expertise may frustrate them, also producing a kind of burn-out (31).

In short, we have cause to question common assumptions underlying textbooks and their selection. The idea that writing skills can be given to students via the presentational approach we have inherited (what William Perry calls "the dregs of the Lockean position") (108) and that the instructor has completed his or her development are both suspect. But we do not need research to tell us that faculty development should be an important consideration in textbook selection. A text should assist the instructor in at least two ways — by supplementing and reinforcing what the teacher has to say, but also (and this is the point that is often overlooked) by assisting the instructor in his or her own development. The composition text can be a means of inspiring teachers, of motivating them, even of offering them new strategies for teaching composition, no matter how experienced they may be. The teacher who is developing and questioning along with the students is likely to achieve better results in the composition classroom: the teacher's interests and level of development have a decided bearing on the students' interests and development. We should perhaps then select our composition texts with the teacher's development in mind.

We find a number of composition texts on the market today which do attempt to enlighten teachers. Marilyn Sternglass' *Reading, Writing, and Reasoning* aims to educate the composition teacher about basic reading theory and encourages the teacher to work more energetically to integrate reading, writing, and reasoning skills in the composition classroom. *Four Worlds of Writing*, by Janice Lauer *et al.*, acts in effect as a guide for the teacher ready and willing to convert to a process-oriented instructional approach; the text emphasizes the importance of invention in the writing process and shows how the tagmemic heuristic can be useful to students. Leslie Olsen and Thomas Huckin's *Principles of Communication for Science and Technology* may enlighten even the most experienced of technical-writing teachers; the authors sug-

gest insightful new strategies, such as a form for orienting readers and a heuristic for developing arguments.

John J. Ruskiewicz' *Well-Bound Words* is another such text, aiming at a certain kind of instructor. With its numerous literary examples and its strong formalistic emphasis, it seems appropriate for someone who has been used to teaching under the rubric of the current-traditional paradigm (Berlin and Inkster) but who wishes to shift (or is coerced into shifting) to what we may refer to as the new rhetorical paradigm. *Well-Bound Words* is a transitional text, aiming to move the traditional teacher into a new developmental phase.

Who is this current-traditional teacher? Although everyone has no doubt encountered the type, a sketch is still in order. The traditional teacher organizes the writing course around works of literature, which have the often secondary purpose of being the subjects for the students' writing. Class time is spent discussing "great ideas" or explicating literary works. Insofar as writing *per se* is taught, this teacher uses a style handbook as the text, which the students, for their part, may refer to in writing their critical expository papers about literary works. These papers are treated, by both the students and the teacher, as products. Such a teacher may resist adopting the new paradigm but, increasingly, will be forced to shift as more writing programs insist on process-oriented forms of instruction, forms which make the students' own writing, not Homer's and T. S. Eliot's, the focus for the course. Such a teacher probably needs a development period, an opportunity to test new waters by degrees. Baptism by immersion might leave the catachumen sputtering and indignant, not saved; that is, a composition text like *Four Worlds of Writing* might send such a teacher into shock, thereby stiffening resistance to change.

Well-Bound Words is a useful transitional text precisely because it aims at just such teachers. They can take great pleasure in finding a text rife with literary quotations; in fact, Ruskiewicz very effectively demonstrates the connections among classical rhetoric, English and American literature, and contemporary rhetoric. He maintains a contemporary rhetorical perspective while at the same time preserving and honoring a sense of the literary tradition which the current-traditional teachers value so highly. The instructor is introduced gently to the process approach, to Kinneavy's discourse theory, to sentence combining, to the use of modes as a heuristic. The current-traditional teacher, then, can be

come gradually acclimated to the new approach to composition. Unlike some texts which require total and immediate surrender of self, *Well-Bound Words* introduces new concepts at a pace that allows the current-traditional teacher to reconcile his or her past teaching approach with a different one. Ruskiewicz' text never insists that the teacher denounce the past.

Well-Bound Words is thus a perfectly designed rhetoric for those instructors who do not yet want what are regarded as the new, groundbreaking texts. In this rhetoric, Ruskiewicz avoids setting up a rigid or mechanical system. While he uses a layered three-part structure for the text, the format allows for flexibility rather than imposing rigidity. The first part treats the four modes, both as a heuristic for invention and as organizing principles, and then treats three of the four aims of writing codified by Kinneavy in *A Theory of Discourse*. The second section treats the sentence, the paragraph, and transitional devices; except for the chapter on revision, this section adheres to the formalistic approach. Nevertheless, Ruskiewicz does introduce what would be new concepts for the current-traditional teacher (sentence combining, for instance). Ruskiewicz then relegates the finer points of style to a third section, which is modeled on the format of many handbooks that owe their organization to Strunk and White. This layered structure allows instructors to include formalistic and stylistic components at their own discretion and in accordance with their own timing. The text places on the teacher responsibility for tying style to the writing process and the writer's aims. Ruskiewicz' text, then, offers an alternative to more tightly structured contemporary composition texts.

Ruskiewicz' text has its faults; however, a transitional instructor could turn many of them into advantages. *Well-Bound Words* possesses few finished student models, though in strict accordance with the new paradigm it should have offered more of them and included at least a few models showing students' work at different stages of the process. Only the chapter on informative writing has a full student model — and this one an infelicitous choice, a research paper explaining why Xerxes lost the Persian War. The self-expressive and the persuasive sections lack any models that might even remotely lie within the imitative reach of the average freshman-composition student, and this works to no one's advantage. The persuasive chapter lacks even a structured presentation of elements, so much so that it reads like a grab bag of tech-

niques culled from Aristotle's *Rhetorika*. Here, in trying to enlighten the teacher, Ruskiewicz has neglected the student entirely. Although this section provides fertile ground for a classroom discussion concerning the ethics of rhetorical devices, the student is not going to derive a clear idea of a persuasive paper from the chapter. For example, the particular strategies which a persuasive paper's concluding paragraph might employ would remain a mystery to the average student, unless the instructor supplements the text. This one instance points up the weakness of placing the formal material in a separate section. Nevertheless, it must be reiterated at this point that the chapter on the informative aim does not suffer either in examples or in narrative placement. That the persuasive and the self-expressive papers (where, for example, the methodological signposts for the reader are so vital) should suffer in Ruskiewicz' format seems odd. Again, the problem may be due to the two audiences of the text: in trying to enlighten the teacher, the text perhaps loses something for the student.

Is that trade-off worth it? We think so. We buy it first because the instructor — once enlightened — can supplement what the text lacks. Second, we have — much to the detriment to our most sanguine hopes — asked ourselves who reads composition texts, and we have concluded (alas) that the one person we can count on is the teacher. If the students are indeed uncertain readers, then perhaps their interests should be secondary. One hope remains: It will be the teacher — effectively developing through the text — who will help students realize their full writing potential.

While his scanty selection of student models remains a weakness, Ruskiewicz is excellent at choosing professional models. Both the weakness and strength of *Well-Bound Words* make it a perfect rhetoric for those instructors in transition between the literature-based approach and process-oriented approaches. Ruskiewicz has made a careful selection of prose passages from the seventeenth century to the present. For the current-traditional teacher who might tend to sneer at or question the legitimacy of Kinneavy's self-expressive aim, there are, for example, several self-expressive passages taken from Pepys' diary and from Dryden's *Postscript to the Reader* on his translation of the *Aeneid*. The breadth and appropriateness of his selections are particularly effective in the chapter on the modes of writing. Selections from advertising and popular publications aim at the undergraduates' experience, and

passages from traditional English prose sustain the interest of the instructor who, beneath all serious efforts to adapt to recent developments in the teaching of composition, still contains lurking aspects of the *literate*. The point to be made for all is that there is a connection between popular literature and Great Literature. In fact, *Well-Bound Words* subtly makes the connection between Aristotle and the students' own persuasive efforts, between Dryden and their expressive efforts. In short, the text emphasizes to student and teacher that all writing partakes of this worthy tradition.

Ruskiewicz is often able to effectively combine the traditional with the new approach. His sections on writing a thesis statement and his sections treating invention are exemplary. He takes the thesis statement, the crux of the formalistic approach, and presents its formulation as an organically developing process. We see models of a thesis statement refined by qualifications and limitations down to a scope manageable in a standard composition assignment. In each of the sections on the types of discourse — persuasive, self-expressive, and expository — Ruskiewicz offers inventive strategies. Of greatest value perhaps to the traditional instructor is Ruskiewicz' demonstration of how the modes can be useful as a heuristic for invention: His discussion helps instructors reassimilate the modes into a new framework of thinking. The modes are redefined, not rejected.

Well-Bound Words is also the kind of text that teachers may outgrow quickly. Our experience at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne suggests that, having used Ruskiewicz' text for a semester or two, instructors seem to want to move on to another. Many of our teachers who used *Well-Bound Words* during the 1983-1984 academic year turned to Lauer's *Four Worlds of Writing* for the next — an adoption few would have been able (or willing) to make a year previously. Our experience, then, with texts in general is that teachers are willing to change — and to learn from new texts — as long as those texts are not totally alien, and as long as those texts allow them to reaccommodate their past approaches. For a program just beginning to change from current-traditional approaches — or for individual teachers still mired in those approaches — we recommend *Well-Bound Words*.

Members of a composition committee, rather than viewing the texts solely as a two-part relationship between students and the text, should see the relationship as a textbook

quadrangle, with themselves as the collective third corner and, most important, with the teacher as the fourth. In light of this approach, *Well-Bound Words* can be favorably viewed as a text that will help the traditional teacher make the inevitable transition to the new approach smoother and less painful — therefore, more effective, in both the short and the long run.

The text is a learning tool, not just for the student, but for the instructor as well. And it might at least be suggested here that the text is the best control that a composition director or committee has over the various and sundry horde that flock around the flag of teaching better writing.

James E. Porter is an Assistant Professor and teaches composition, technical writing, and composition theory courses. Rodney Farnsworth teaches varied composition and literature courses. Both teach at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne.

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