Reflections on Teaching Audience Analysis and Organization in Different Contexts

by

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In a recent issue of *College Composition and Communication* (Dec. 1990), two articles characterize the current trend in writing research and theory in much the same way. Russel K. Durst sees a movement over the last several years from product to process to context-oriented research (405). And Richard Fulkerson identifies an emerging consensus among researchers and teachers which he terms "rhetorical" (414-17). Despite their differences in terminology, both authors are pointing to an emphasis on writing as a social act, an emphasis which values audience awareness and "contextual flexibility" rather than correctness, honest self-expression, or authentic personal voice (Fulkerson 409-10). Fulkerson notes that the two best-selling college composition textbooks, Axelrod and Cooper's *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* and Trimmer's revision of McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose*, reflect and encourage this social emphasis by leading a writer to consider his or her purpose in a given writing situation, the audience, and the feedback of actual readers during peer review sessions (414-15).

Although research and textbooks do play a role in setting the agenda in our field, they are also a recognition of and a response to changes that are taking place in classrooms across the country; the trends noted above reflect the fact that teaching writing has become more complex in recent years. Upper-level writing courses now teach students how to identify, analyze, and write within the context of their discipline's discourse conventions. Business and technical writing courses prepare students to write on the job by modelling real-world writing situations. Even in freshman composition courses, "real-world" writing assignments are becoming as common as more traditional assignments like personal narratives and research papers. In my freshman composition courses, I am finding that these "real-world" assignments are welcomed by the increasing numbers of non-traditional students returning to school and even by traditional students who work or anticipate internships. Both of these groups view these assignments as practical and, in many cases, immediately applicable to their daily lives; they often transform a generic "real-world" writing assignment like "Define a problem that exists in an organization you belong to and propose a solution" into a business writing assignment, sometimes turning their final draft in to the reader they've addressed as well as to me.

ther words, in freshman composition courses, we are no longer
ply teaching students how to write so that they will survive in college,
igh that remains one fundamental aim. Whereas upper level courses
: a well-defined purpose - to teach the conventions of a specific
ourse community, whether that community is composed of the
ibers of academic discipline or a corporation - the goals of freshman
position instruction are becoming increasingly diverse. My recent
ibi call for personal, "real-world," and academic writing. I have no
is to change this approach with its smorgasbord of purposes and
iences, but the mix has sharpened my sense that teaching writing,
writing itself, is a context-driven activity.

.ough I have tried many approaches over the years, audience analysis
 organization have remained the writing skills that I find most
cult to teach well. Teaching these skills under the influence of
:rent theoretical emphases and to different kinds of students has
)ed me define the problems better, if not to find completely satisfying
itions. I got an especially useful opportunity to re-think these
)lems during the three years I taught technical writing to employees
large manufacturing firm. This teaching experience not only clarified
sense of the differences between writing in a business context and
ing in college, but also focused my attention on the problems my
lents and I face when we transfer our concern with audience and
inization from "real-world" writing assignments to academic ones in
hman writing courses. Audience analysis and organization vary
siderably from one type of writing to the other because of the context
/hich it is done. In the remainder of this article, I'd like to describe
l reflect on some of the differences I observed.

:KGROUND

 students enrolled in my beginning and advanced technical writing
rses held various positions in their company; there were line workers
) were seeking promotion and who would need to write in their new
itions, as well as engineers, scientists, and managers who wanted to
rove their writing. Depending on their jobs, they wrote a variety of
uments including brief informational memos and forms, entries in
:arch logs, quarterly progress reports of their own (or their division's)
vities, project progress reports, proposals, and final reports. In some
:s, the format was rigidly specified by their managers; but in others,
requirements were loosely defined and as long as they fulfilled the
pose for which they were writing, they were free to organize and
nat their memos and reports as they wished.

Most of the writers had not had process instruction in college nor any courses in technical or business writing. They had adapted the general writing behaviors they had learned in school to the workplace and they defined writing narrowly - that is, primarily in terms of their written product. At the beginning of the course, their most commonly expressed concerns were correctness, grammar, style, word choice, and organization. They knew good (and bad) writing when they read it, but how it became clear, concise, and persuasive remained something of a mystery. Perhaps because they were inclined to think in terms of processes and systems, they were receptive to the broader idea of writing as a process and even to some digressions on how language works as a system. They were highly motivated and fun to teach because they saw writing as very important to their success at work and used what they earned almost immediately, often reporting whether it worked or didn't; some even began dialogues with their managers about good writing.

Although these writers were receptive to the idea of writing as a process, they resisted strategies that made the process longer without, for their purposes, substantially improving the effectiveness of their texts. They simply did not have the time to write multiple drafts or to revise extensively; they preferred to focus their revising efforts on key parts of the document - on the opening summaries or abstracts and on the recommendations and conclusions particularly.

These writers were willing to spend more time planning before they began writing because they saw that this would save them time in the long run. But again, they showed definite preferences for certain planning strategies. These writers saw themselves as knowing what they had to say before they began writing; their ideas, conclusions, and facts were already before them, often already discussed with their peers and even perhaps with the readers who would receive their memos or reports. Since they engaged in this kind of social, collaborative invention, they were not especially interested in idea-generating techniques like freewriting, clustering, or various question-asking schemes, which try to call forth ideas from the individual writer's heads. In their minds, HOW they were going to say it - not WHAT they were going to say - was the main question.

AUDIENCE

In the end-of-the-course evaluation, these writers consistently ranked audience analysis as the most useful skill they learned in the course. Although these students could describe at length what their readers' reactions were likely to be, many had never used this knowledge consciously to help them plan how they were going to write their texts.

found audience analysis useful in a number of ways: it helped them
le how to organize their texts; what information was needed by all
eaders of a document and what information could be relegated to
ons that only some readers would read; what headings were needed
rect readers to the sections of interest to them; what tone to take;
what kind of elaboration would be most clarifying and persuasive.
nort, audience analysis became an efficient way to generate, orga-
format, and re-assess their texts.

r audiences were often multiple, with varying degrees of interest,
vledge, and familiarity with the information to be presented. These
rs were highly sensitive to the differences and to the potential
icts among these audiences; they were also aware that sometimes
own purposes differed from those of their audiences. There would
ud groans when someone talked about writing to marketing or to the
nt counsel because these audiences' interests (Will it sell? Is it
ciently "new" to justify a patent?) differed from their own (What is the
nical problem to be solved? How "elegant" - in terms of former
tions - is this? Will the solution pose a manufacturing problem?).
i when their audience was simply their manager, their purposes
sometimes mixed - how to explain a problem and the attempted
tions without appearing to have wasted too much time and money.
etimes, too, they wrote with potential future audiences in mind in
tion to the audience actually addressed; reports on testing, for
ance, might be composed with a sense of their potential use in
luct liability suits.

er these circumstances, audience analysis was challenging because
ptential conflicts among audiences, between the audiences and the
er, or among the writer's own purposes. But in another sense, it was
ll-defined problem. Readers' reactions, however conflicting, were
rmined to a large extent by their role in the organization and their
tion in its hierarchy. The criteria which served as the basis of these
tions - cost, time, resource limitations, government regulations,
ion politics and so on - were, to a large extent, shared knowledge.
audiences were real people whom the writer might know and might
with - even about the report s/he would be sending in a few days.
standard questions of audience analysis (How much does the reader
v? What are the reader's likely reservations and attitudes? What will
eader do with this information? What do I want the reader to do with
could often be easily answered even if writing on the basis of those
vers remained a complex problem.

situation with our college writers can be quite different. Some "real-
d" assignments - like the problem-solution assignment I mentioned

above - can present audience analysis problems like the ones of the
workplace writers. In writing to someone within an organization to
which they belong, college writers can address an actual person and
predict that reader's reaction on the basis of shared knowledge of the
organization's goals and ways of operating. Audience analysis of this
kind may be a new experience for them, particularly if they are writing
a proposal for the first time; but the specific writing problem and the
nature of the writing situation (with its real reader and clear purpose)
make the questions they need to ask relatively clear.

But audience analysis is quite different for academic writing assign-
ments. In place of writing to an actual reader clearly situated in an
organization and using their shared knowledge about the organization
and its criteria for evaluating information, students in freshman com-
position courses may be asked to write a research paper to an academic
audience (often a fictional professor rather than the writing teacher) in
the context of a course where no shared content knowledge (which might
provide students with some idea of the criteria by which the ideas would
be evaluated) has been established. In comparison to "real-world"
writing contexts, academic writing contexts are extremely nebulous and
especially so in freshman composition. The problems lessen a little when
students leave composition classrooms and write to actual professors in
the context of shared knowledge that has been created during the
course; and when students enter their major fields and perhaps take
discipline-specific writing courses, writing for academic audiences may
become even easier.

But the problems of academic writing in general and audience analysis
in particular will not disappear even then. Consider the nursing student
who, two years after her freshman composition course, may find herself
writing an essay exam in an Intro to Film course, notes in a chart as part
of her clinical in Obstetrics, and a research paper for a sociology course
in American Racial Minorities. Because of her nursing major and the
clear purpose and audiences for the chart notes, she will probably
eventually be able to do this writing with some confidence and success.
But her writing in the humanities and sociology courses may present her
with some of the same problems she encountered as a freshman. Even
if her professors have conscientiously spelled out "what they want," she
may have difficulty analyzing her audiences in a useful way both because
of her inexperience with the conventions, assumptions, and evaluative
criteria used by each of the discourse communities and because those
conventions, assumptions, and criteria are in themselves abstract and
hard to articulate, even for experienced teachers in the disciplines.

In some respects, life presents students with an interesting cart-before-

horse problem. From a pedagogical perspective, the most well-
ied, local, known audience should be the first audience, with
ents moving on to well-defined conflicting audiences, and then
aps to ill-defined and/or abstract audiences. Instead, in moving
general education courses to courses in their major, and finally to
or graduate school, our students write for their most ill-defined
ences first. I don't think this means that we should abandon
emic writing assignments, or even audience analysis during these
nments, in freshman composition courses. We can and should help
ents analyze academic audiences, pointing out general features of
emic prose, preferences for certain kinds of support, citation
entions, what is generally expected when one is asked to "compare
contrast," and so on. We should also remark that the standards by
h teachers in various disciplines evaluate writing may vary consid-
ly (as recent work in writing-across-the-curriculum has shown
ley and Hansen 1985]). Compared to its usefulness in "real-world"
ng contexts, then, audience analysis in academic writing contexts
iited in scope and in its ability to help students generate text; to put
irkly, realizing that academics appreciate a diversity of sources in a
arch paper is a good deal less helpful than realizing that a manager
cts a cost-benefit analysis.

ANIZATION

hing audience analysis in the workplace and in college had the effect
nphasizing the differences between the two writing contexts, clari-
s for me some of the problems college students have with academic
ing, and showing me the limitations of using audience analysis in
nman academic writing assignments; but teaching organization in
e two contexts yielded different results. Again, teaching the same
in different contexts sharpened my sense of the differences in the
writing situations and my sense of how closely organizational
mes are related to audience and purpose, but I was able to transfer
e of the concepts and teaching methods from one setting to another,
even from "real-world" assignments to academic ones.

workplace writers organized their reports and conceptualized the
ons for their organizational schemes not so much in terms of their
ect as in terms of their audience. At first, their preference for
nizational templates, such as the Abstract - Summary of the Project
rk Completed - Future Work structure for progress reports, seemed
ormalistic to me. But it became clear that their preferences were a
onse to the needs and reading habits of their audiences. These
ers knew that very few of their readers would read their entire
iment, particularly if it was long. (Studies have in fact shown that

while 100% of managers read the opening summary and 60% read the conclusions, only 15% read the body [Souther 6]).

The most useful organizing strategies were ones that helped them to arrange their information so each of their audiences got what they needed and what the writer wanted them to have. The general whole-text structure of abstract - conclusions - body placed the most important information up front, an arrangement that clearly acknowledges a manager's reading habits. Because nearly everyone read the opening abstract, summarizing was an especially important skill. Even in the body of the report, mini-summaries appeared at the beginnings of sections, followed by the specifics that would presumably be read by fewer people. Sometimes the opening summary or abstract would be a compilation of the mini-summaries at the beginnings of sections.

Another purpose of the summaries at the beginning of the report itself and at the beginning of various sections was to direct the reader to parts of the report that might be of further interest. In other words, it was not enough to use structures that readers could anticipate and to order information in accordance with their known reading habits, it was also necessary to call attention to that organization. In addition to summaries, these writers found it especially helpful to learn to write and use informative headings as well as other formatting techniques (like lists) and visuals to call the reader's attention to important information. Headings, because they signalled new topics, also made transitions between sections unnecessary.

The fact that certain audiences would read only parts of documents and the rather strict division of documents into parts leads to a certain amount of repetition. This repetition, the lack of transitions between major sections, the placement of the conclusions before the support, and the reliance on format and visuals all distinguish good technical writing from good academic writing, and it was helpful to discuss these differences with these writers in these terms.

If college students adopted the organizational framework mentioned above for academic writing assignments, it would seem odd because their audiences read in an entirely different manner - that is, from start to finish. (Reading technical reports as a writing teacher - that is, in a way in which they are not intended to be read - can be tedious because of the very features that make them effective for their intended readers.) Many of the features of academic prose acknowledge these reading habits - for example, placing the strongest point last, using transitions between major sections and even between paragraphs, avoiding repetition, and so on.

hing organization to workplace writers made me more conscious of
lifferences between the two kinds of writing and the reasons for those
rences, but it also pointed up some common features of technical
academic writing - like the similar use of opening summaries and
: sentences - that are rooted in the comprehension strategies of
ers in general. And some of the workplace strategies transferred
y into the classroom even for use in academic writing assignments.
of these was getting the students to think of their drafts in sections
at least at the rough draft stage, to label them with headings. This
urages concrete thinking about their organization; they can't write
lings without knowing how their essays are arranged. If the
lings are a combination of topic and function, they can also focus
ition on the work that parts of the essay are supposed to be doing.
ding whether to keep the headings is an opportunity to discuss
entions in academic writing and the necessity of analyzing their
ing situation. Replacing headings with transitions is another
tive translation of the conventions of the workplace into the class-
n.

lly, then, teaching audience analysis and organization to two groups
udents in different writing situations was helpful because it showed
context not only defines the audiences, purposes, and conventions
riting but also influences the processes of writing and teaching. It
a starker version of the contrasts I have experienced in freshman
position as I teach these skills in the context of the different
gnments with their variety of purposes, audiences, and topics.

ing the changes in composition theory to my definition of the context
hich I teach these skills adds yet another perspective on the
action. As the primary emphasis in writing research and pedagogy
moved from product to process to context, it seems to me no accident
the favored assignment has moved from the five paragraph theme
term paper to the personal narrative to "real-world" writing. These
gnments are particularly useful in exploiting what their correspond-
heoretical emphasis has foregrounded about writing; they are good
s to teach the skills and the views of writing that are being
hasized.

think it would be a mistake to abandon earlier favored assignments
vor of a wholesale conversion to the latest trend, which always
is, implicitly at least, to be progress. We can learn a lot from our
ents when we try out new trends in the context of assignments that
not tailor-made for it. For instance, my workplace writers rejected
e of my process notions (like the importance of elaborate invention

and multiple drafts) because these notions were incompatible with the
realities of their real-world writing situation; similarly, my college
students look puzzled, ask a lot of questions, and produce very vague
audience analyses when we are on academic writing assignments.
Trying out new theoretical and pedagogical emphases in a variety of
assignments and writing contexts is a good way to clarify what they are
really about.

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