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Changing Models for Writing Instruction: Helping ESL Writers Develop a Sense of Audience

This article reviews the history of the popularity of the modes of discourse (narration, description, and so on) and shows the change in focus in composition from the modes to the rhetorical situation, with an emphasis on audience. Letter writing is a pedagogical strategy that draws students' attention to the need for consideration of audience. Letter writing activities in writing classes at California State University, Los Angeles; University of California, Los Angeles; and the University of Southern California informally illustrate the benefits of this rich communicative activity for both native and nonnative students of writing. This approach is suggested, not as an alternative to academic writing, but as an entrance into the rhetorical situation of academic discourse.

Most teachers of writing are familiar with classifications of discourse such as narration, description, exposition, and argument. Rhetoricians and compositionists call these well-known types of writing *the modes of discourse*. They were commonly discussed in the early 19th century in Great Britain, became popular in American rhetoric textbooks in the late 19th century, and completely dominated writing instruction well into the 1950s. In contrast, in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers in rhetoric and composition, along with many teachers, changed their focus from the forms of writing to the communicative goals of writing. This change parallels the shift in oral language instruction from an audiolingual to a communicative model.

We wish to ask two questions about practices in writing instruction: How did these traditional classifications of written discourse become so powerful? What goals and strategies of writing instruction have taken their place? To answer these questions, we review the history of the popularity of the modes of discourse and show the change in focus in the profession from the modes to the rhetorical situation, with an emphasis on audience. Finally, we suggest a pedagogical strategy that draws students' attention to the need for consideration of audience.

The Modes

The modes became popular with the publication of the American edition of *English Composition and Rhetoric* by the Scottish rhetorician Alexander Bain (1866). They provided not only a classificatory principle but an instructional guide as well. Higher education in the United States was changing in the second half of the 19th century. Before that time, colleges were small and usually religion centered institutions. The content of study was classical; in rhetoric this meant a focus on genres of writing such as letters, treatises, essays, biographies, fiction, parables, and so on (Connors, 1981, p. 446). After 1860, many large colleges and universities were established. They were less classically oriented and more interested in varied studies, especially science. The focus in rhetoric shifted from the classical attention to eloquence and style to an emphasis on forms. With more students and larger classes, forms were easier to teach. Furthermore, the new educated man was expected to write error-free prose and follow directions. As M. J. Maynes (1985) points out in *Schooling in Western Europe*, the industrial revolution called for workers who could follow directions and for a middle-management population that felt comfortable with the expectations of the owner class. Emphasizing forms and grammar above interaction with real audiences helped to satisfy these goals.

In the late 19th century, no textbook that did not assert the four modes sold well. During this time as well a book called *Paragraph-Writing* (Scott & Denney, 1891) appeared. The typology of paragraphs was drawn from the classical Aristotelian topics of invention—contrast, explanation, definition, illustration, details, and proofs (Connors, 1981, p. 448). Such paragraphs were assumed to be part of the "big four" types of essays: narration, description, exposition, and argument. Sometimes persuasion was treated as another mode, but generally it was considered as part of argument. At the turn of the century, books began to appear on one or the other of the modes singly, for example, *Expository Writing* or *The Principles of Argumentation* (Connors, 1981).

The modes completely controlled the scene of instruction in writing in the U.S. until the 1930s. The fact that the teaching of writing had not always been focused on these forms was lost to memory—the modes seemed to have been graven in stone. Of the single-mode texts, those on expository writing took over the market. The methods of developmment such as definition, classification and division, contrast, exemplification, and so on were raised from their status of paragraph development to the essay level. So what were at one point submodal methods of organization came to take on modal status. Many teachers will have "gone to school" to these modes and methods. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, they held absolute sway: That was what instructors taught because that was what there was to teach.

Change in Focus

The modes are not so much the primary organizing principle of college writing texts today, though they still, along with the submodes of organization such as classification, comparison, and so on, determine the table of contents of many essay readers and many ESL/EFL writing textbooks. Current composition theorists and researchers hold that the modes of discourse, though still popular, are less useful as instructional plans than writing assignments that grow out of a consideration of audience and intention. The modes have come to seem static, functionless, removed from social context. As Crowley (1984) points out, the modes are "persistently a-rhetorical" because they rest on only two thirds of the classical communication triangle—writer and text—excluding audience from the scene.

Much research has been done in the past two decades to help us understand the writing process, or processes, of both experienced and developing writers, in both first and second language. Knowledge of writing process has helped us make room in writing classes and revising as integral parts of writing. Subsequent process research has shown that planning and revising entail crucial attention to a writer's purpose in regard to a certain audience (Berlin, 1987).

As early as 1963, Wayne Booth wrote of the interactive effect of authorial intention and a known responding audience upon student writing (Booth, 1963). Berkenkotter (1981) examined audience awareness more empirically, showing some effects of such awareness on revision. Ede (1984) reviews research on audience, focusing on rhetorical, linguistic, and cognitive approaches, and Ede and Lunsford (1984) discuss pedagogical implications of the differences between writing for a known audience and writing for an audience that the writer must imagine and invoke. Current articles and textbooks embody the renewal of interest in audience that has characterized the past decade, a renewal that Kroll (1984) claims is as definitive for the 1980s as the renewal of interest in invention was for the discipline of composition in the 1970s.

A Model Strategy

One of the genres that characterized instruction in writing before the modes became popular was letter writing. We present this strategy here as one example of a writing activity that raises students' awareness of the need to consider audience. This is a particularly appropriate strategy for teaching the concept of audience because the act of writing a letter assumes the presence of a recipient. We suggest this pedagogical approach, not as an alternative to academic writing but as an entrance into the rhetorical situation of academic discourse.

The results of letter writing activities in writing classes at California State University, Los Angeles; University of California, Los Angeles; and the University of Southern California illustrate the benefits of

this rich communicative activity for both native and nonnative students of writing. Writing a letter allows students to participate in a genuine communicative context. Further, being committed to a real writing task helps them forget their anxieties about composing, thereby enabling them to enjoy the writing experience.

In teaching basic writing to a class of primarily nonnative speakers, we were concerned with several problems. First, how could we help students attend to a specific audience? Second, how could we support them in overcoming their writing anxiety, which often manifested itself in their inability to begin writing, or to write much, and help them to stop worrying inappropriately about errors? We observed that even when students were able to write, the essays were often written with a bottle of correction fluid in hand. This overconcern with error and neatness appeared to inhibit the writing process. Third, and not incidentally, how could we get our students to arrive on time for an 8 a.m. class? Letter writing was a possible solution. If we wrote at the beginning of class and students were interested in receiving and answering their letters, they would show up on time. We predicted that if they got caught up in communicating, their anxiety would lessen.

In order to accomplish these goals, we arranged for students to spend the first 15 minutes of the class writing to a member of another class. Their first letter was to an unknown reader, and they had to think of ways to introduce themselves to a stranger. Some students were shy and chose pen names, but everyone participated. At the same time that students wrote, we wrote to the other teacher. We wanted to show students that we considered letter writing a real and important activity, different from a classroom exercise. Letters provided a means of meeting new people, communicating ideas, sharing useful information (many students began asking students at the next level of writing about their experiences in that class), and at the same time practicing writing in a less threatening context, for this writing wouldn't be read or corrected by the teacher. The standard would be the reader's acceptance of the information that the writer wanted to convey.

Results

Results were immediately apparent. Students arrived on time for class eager to see what their pen pal had to say. They happily did this warm-up writing which, like free writing, served the function of loosening them up for the day's in-class essay. At the end of the quarter the two classes had a joint party so that students could meet their correspondents. After 10 weeks of writing and receiving letters, they had often formed new friendships. Class evaluations were extremely high, and many students expressed their pleasure with the letter writing assignments.

The students obtained both tacit and overt information about audience through letter writing. They had to decide how to present themselves to an unknown audience. How formal or informal should their writing be? In addition, they needed to understand something about

the conventions of letter writing. What format is appropriate for an informal letter? How does it differ from a formal letter? How should the writer address the other person? What about word choice—is slang appropriate? In such exchanges, the audience does not remain static. As the writer grows to know the audience better, how do letters change? What use does a writer make of the information and tone of the other writer's letter? We never corrected the letters or censored or restricted the topics students could write about, though we would give assistance if asked.

Letter writing can also be focused on specific topics. In more advanced classes, students can write about their writing history, current writing problems, and discoveries they make about composing. They, too, have to consider audience. How much do they have to tell their readers for them to understand a problem or solution? If they have given too little information, this real audience will ask for clarification.

Another model uses letter writing between classes of native and nonnative speakers. The topics of the letters can be information about projects each class is carrying out. For example, one possible project is for each student, or students in pairs, to observe a group in the community in order to report on uses of oral and written language. The letters communicate what each person has discovered, making audience a prime consideration. The writer needs to make sure the reader has enough background knowledge about the particular project. She must also decide what information to repeat, depending on how much time has passed between letters.

Letter writing doesn't have to be long-term to be effective. A letter makes an excellent diagnostic since students can perform in a real writing situation and thus lose some of the inhibitions they develop when they have to write for a new teacher. Topics can include a letter to a friend on a variety of subjects such as first impressions of a new school, a problem encountered, experiences in a new country, difficulties learning English, and discussions of favorite films, TV programs, or books.

Theoretical Implications

James Britton (1975), in the massive study *The Development of Writing Abilities*, shows (and deplores the fact) that in the schools, once past the very earliest elementary grades, students write only for teachers and their message is only the message the teachers want. Janet Emig's (1971) study, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders,* provides further evidence of this situation. Similarly, in much of composition teaching, for both native and nonnative speakers of English, we see that frequently the form is taught and specified for students' writing.

Certainly, organizational plans are important in academic writing, and in teaching writing we need to teach the importance of planning. It is a way of attending to audience. Organizational strategies such as classification or comparison are cognitive strategies, operations which

we all use every day just to cross a street or make out a shopping list, but which developing writers may not have conscious control of for writing tasks. Nonnative speakers of English will need help to identify and become comfortable with rhetorical approaches that are characteristic of writing in English. But strategies for dealing with the speaker-hearer-subject relationship need to be organically related to a writer's purpose and sense of audience; they should not be taught only through big fill-in-the-blank exercises, using paragraphs instead of words. Letter writing is only one of many activities that relate purpose to audience; for example, "I-search" papers (Macrorie, 1986), interviews, and reports on school and community issues provide other opportunities to make intention and audience real considerations in the writing process.

As writing becomes more and more important for the acquisition of a second or other language, teachers need to consider what underlying assumptions they bring to this area of teaching language. Most teachers at all levels—from elementary teachers through university professors—learned writing in a system of writing instruction that has a very long history. Textbook writers and publishers share this education. This history, as recent historians of composition and rhetoric have shown, is context bound. The modes as we know them at one point did not exist. At another point the concept of modes exerted a powerful influence, having developed in response to socioeconomic pressures as well as changes in the intellectual climate. Now that influence is waning, as we come to see that considerations of purpose and audience are what produce writing that communicates meaningful content in an interactive transaction between a real speaker-writer and a listening, responding reader. ■

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