Sensing an Audience: Beyond Persuasion or a letter to Aunt Matilda

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Sensing an Audience as a Major Element of Writing Process

In Ede's 1984 survey of the research on the role of audience in discourse explores "the best methods the writer can use to achieve cooperation/persuasion/identification with the audience" (143) Ede cites numerous articles that explore sensing an audience in terms of Aristotle's notion of persuasion by analyzing the audience demographic. This idea has not lost favor. Today, psychological systems, such as psychological type theory, offer writers specific tools to understand their audiences. Educational courses on persuasion and consulting in the business world offer such devices to "speak the language of the other" (Tiberio & Jensen 1995; Tiger & Barron-Tieger 1998; Allen & Gray, 2002).

Clevinger and Flower moved the "persuasion" orientation forward to a more purpose-oriented analysis. But both stay with the analysis model. Flower moves the "analysis" of audience from writer-based to reader-based "by encouraging them to develop strategies which emphasize readers' needs and interests." (Ede, 1984, p.146) She suggests that students write for a real audience and a real purpose. More important for the purpose of this paper, and to push beyond the "real" audience, is Long's (1980) recommendation that teachers analyze texts "with a very detailed examination given to the signals provided by the writer for his audience" (Ede 225 & 148, 1984).

This idea of "signals given to the reader" has been explored by many researchers in various ways. Berkenkotter (1981) in her "thinking – aloud" study of the attention to audience by expert writers cites the research of Flower and Hayes who drew attention to "audience awareness" as opposed to "topic bound" and notes Kroll's distinction between investigation of audience awareness and investigation of the constructive processes operative in the mind of the writer. Berkenkotter claims that "the internal representation or mental sketch a writer makes of the audience is an essential part of the writing process" (396). She observes that Linda, her subject, "has learned how to make appropriate adjustments in her discourse, to evaluate, to revise, as the features of her subjects become more distinct"(396).

While this notion is valid, it can be differently interpreted for the purposes of this paper. More than "adjusting" according to the "features" of her audience, it is advisable to think of the process as more writer-oriented focus, asking the simple question: how would your writing change in a second draft when you pay close attention to the notion of how this would affect your audience? It is more about the writing, the various writers' tools "with audience in mind" that students should be invited to consider. The focus is the writing, and only slightly on the features of the audience. Obviously there will be distinctions between young and old audiences, different professional audiences, etc. However, in terms of teaching audience as an element of the writing process, students should be encouraged to think of a more universal audience, and focus on the responsibility and joy of writing in a way that both affects and informs the reader. There is an important difference.

It is more about the writer and the writing. What do you, the writer, want to say? How do you want your audience to feel? It forces the writer to become aware of the power and the responsibility of writing. It is understandable that most people, teachers of writing included, think of audience in terms of writing for a specific audience. Many influential books those deserving repeated publications, for example Beckett's excellent book on Transcending Boundaries writing for different audiences, in this case, fiction for children and for adults, the focus is on who you are writing for, and how this will affect critic's valuing of a genre. (Beckett, 2012) My focus is fueled by my own writing of screenplays and children's books, and its focus on fiction. "Really good fiction has a staying power that comes from its ability to jar, turn on, move the whole intellectual and emotional history of the reader" (Gardner 19 & 45).

Ideally, this would be true of all writing. Of course, sensing an audience is not the only thing a writer must keep in mind. "There is no point gathering an audience and demanding its attention unless you have something to say that is important and constructive" (Lamott 9 & 108). The writer, first and foremost, needs to discover a subject that is worthy of himself and worthy of the reader. There is a vapor of consequence around writing that mandates a significant subject and a communication between writer and reader. The audience, more often than not, is able to sense the artist's commitment to sense what the artist is willing to lay out on the table. Whether the artist can trust the audience is not a determinant of whether she should risk. "Such writing is of course risky, but all true art takes risks, and all true fiction assumes a reader of intelligence and goodwill" (Gardner 125 in Apps, 2007).

Students should be encouraged to know what you want to say, and say it. Searching for specifics demands that they gather the information, search their souls for what is emotionally true for them and say it, intrepidly, without reservation. At the very least the writer will create a work instilled with integrity. Dillard argues that: Often we examine a work's integrity (or at least I do) by asking what it makes for itself and what it attempts to borrow from the world….an honest work generates its own power; a dishonest work tries to rob power from the cataracts of the given. This is why scenes of high drama – suicide, rape, murder, well in genuine literature. We already have strong feelings about these things, and literature does not operate on borrowed feelings. (26)

Murray (1967) wrote a book on the teaching of writing that changed my thinking about writing process forever. The title itself was so informative. "A writer teaches writing." There have been a number of books and articles written by educators, theorists, philosophers; however, none had proved as informative, as elucidating as a book on writing by a writer. Focusing on the actual words of the authors proved to be a rich source of wisdom about the writing process were the introductions to play, poems and novels. Many authors from poets to writers of horror fiction—Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Henry James, Jon Franklin, Eudora Welty, Stephen Spender, Stephen King—have written "writer-help" books on writing. Market place books contained excellent essays on writing to help writers get their work up to a professional standard.

What a flood of ideas so much more significant than the usual books on "pre-write, write, edit"; on common grammatical errors on writing complex sentences. What a flood of ideas so much more helpful for the teacher of writing than the philosophical debates around meaning making. The framework for my thinking came out of Murray's 1968 look at seven skills of writing process: discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design, writing, developing a critical eye and rewriting. Over the years of teaching writing, I have found it is more useful and teachable to incorporate these last three — writing, developing a critical eye and rewrites — into the four major skills that can be been defined as:

Discovering a subject

Finding the topic that you want to explore, the story you need to tell, the truth you want to discover and reveal.

Sensing an audience

Taking responsibility for making your subject clear and delivering what it promises with impact and integrity and voice as you create a relationship with your reader through your words.

Searching for specifics

Finding those necessary and concrete details that permit the writer to tell her unique story or argument by providing meaningful symbols and metaphors and preventing the work from being vague, abstract, and convoluted and without individuality.

Creating a design

Putting the various pieces together in such a way that eliminates anything unnecessary, makes clear what is at stake, enhances meaning and leaves the audience satisfied. Mamchur, C. & Apps, L. (2009). It could be argued that all of the seven skills could become one: sensing an audience. However, I argue that although all affect the audience, the primary focus of the writer's mind is different in the four elements of "discovering a subject," "sensing an audience," "searching for specifics" and "creating a design." All demand writing, a critical eye and rewriting. The notion of primary focus, I am sure, depends upon your philosophical framework. What belief system gives preference to one way of operating as a writer and as a teacher over another? Essentially, I adhere to what is often billed as the social construct of understanding audience. I believe, as a teacher, as a writer and as a reader, that the words on paper form a relationship between writer and reader.

It is from that vantage point, I do my teaching, my writing, my research, and from that vantage point, I situate this paper. Before reflecting on the various disciplines, a word of caution is necessary. Though it is essential for academics to know where one situates one's ideas; it is not that important for teachers. I know I speak heretic. Ede counsels that the teacher of writing "who would have a sophisticated productive understanding of audience faces a large task, for he or she must have at least an awareness of, if not involvement with, both empirical and theoretical research in a range of disciplines" (153).

But given the choice between creating an education course on writing dedicated to understanding the "disciplines" that have emerged around writing and a course dedicated to teaching teachers to write and become effective editors, based on recommendations written by writers, the latter wins, hands down. "A writer teaches writing." Based on the work of the Bay Area Project, I changed focus from theory about writing to actual writing, using the four stage writing process as defined above. A two year study "follow up" inquiring about the teacher practice of 40 teachers who took a writing-based eight credit course in teaching writing showed that the 34 of the teachers changed their teaching habits, moving to workshop method which focused on teaching specific writing skills, with particular attention to revision. The six who did not were new teachers, working in a school that had a more traditional approach to teaching writing and these teachers did not feel supported in moving to a process oriented approach (Mamchur, 2000).

This research has fed my belief that it is not that teachers could not enjoy the voyage into the world of the complexity of the various disciplines around audience. It is that if time allowed for only one, the practical wins out because in the end. Teachers are very busy and want more than anything to find a way to teach writing that works. It is a luxury to be able to delve into theory and sadly; few teachers have that much time. This choice is a very practical consideration based on what teachers have expressed to be their deepest need.

Various Disciplines around Audience

Since the time of Plato, writers have discussed the importance of audience. The oldest perspective, the rhetorical one, is insinuated in my discussion of audience, but does not adhere to it directly. The limitations of the rhetorically-oriented perspective as so well defined by Kroll is that it sets up an adversarial position with the reader and because of its oral roots, is fundamentally persuasive in purpose (175). This paper's approach borrows from this model in that it does invite the writer to consider the reader and such things as the nature of the reader's beliefs and education in what Plato in *Phaedrus* suggests about the responsibility of the good rhetorician to "'classify the types of discourse and the types of souls, and the various ways in which souls are affected… suggesting the type of speech appropriate to each type of soul'" (2 in Kroll 173).

One limitation of rhetoric, also popular among English educators, is the tendency for rhetorically oriented perspectives to see nearly all communication as persuasive in intent, with the concomitant conception of the audience as an adversary, much like the opponent in a debate. Even writing that has an apparently informative or instructional aim is often construed as having a fundamentally persuasive purpose. Kroll argues that "a second limitation is the assumption-implicit in the rhetorical perspective-that in fact the writer either knows, or can find out, a good deal about the audience" (174). This assumption stems, of course, from rhetoric's origins in persuasive oratory and is fundamentally different in focus from a social orientation. It is not about knowing more than the audience, or knowing about the audience. It is about bringing an idea, a feeling, a belief, a truth of life — is it scientific, humanistic, and artistic, to the reader for the reader to take it into her life and integrate it with previous beliefs, ideas, and emotions.

The social approach can also be seen as a spiritual one as represented in the I-Thou relationship defined by Buber. In his essay on dialogue in *Between Man and Man*, he defines dialogue as follows: "There is genuine dialogue — no matter whether spoken or silent — where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (Buber, 1947/2002, 22). To me, good writing is an artistic form of dialogue. Kroll explores an informational — oriented perspective, one in which the writer is taught to be aware of the reader's process of reading and is based on Hirsh's theory of short and long term memory which suggests the writer needs to help the reader by introducing "new" information at the back of the sentence, which then becomes "old" information at the beginning of the next sentence. This has also led to the popular notion of "topic sentences." Dillon suggests such a response is too limiting, not taking into account the complex nature of reader response (in Kroll 178).

Dillon's criticism is valid; however, this model does alert the writer to the responsibility of being clear and helping the reader to understand (Murray's sixth step). It draws attention to the importance of structure. Sentence structure, paragraph structure, and whole composition structure. This paper's closer alignment with what is known as the 'Social Perspective' of writing is in part influenced by its inferring a relationship between reader and writer which moves away from what Piaget calls 'centeredness,' or egocentricity in their writing and which Mina Shaughnessy warns us from her research finding that there is evidence "of the egocentricity of the apprentice writer, an orientation that is reflected in the assumption that the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind" (1977, 240 in Kroll & 1984, 179).

Carl Bereiter's influential research suggests "that egocentric writing in middle childhood and beyond does not result from an absolute inability to take another person's point of view. Rather, it would seem that egocentric writing arises from incapacity to take account of the reader and cope with all the other demands of writing at the same time" (in Kroll 86). It is for this reason that Murray's notion of breaking the writing process into distinctive elements and have students focus on one element at a time is so attractive.

Research: Teacher Practice

Britton et al (1975) in their ground breaking study of the teaching of writing in London schools found that most writing done in English class transactions were directed to the teacher as audience. After collecting nearly 2000 writing samples from intermediate and high school students Britton sorted the samples according to ones that addressed the self, the teacher, a wider audience and an unknown audience. He found that 85% were written for the teacher or the teacher as examiner. This mode of writing he called 'pseudo-transactional,' because even though it gave students an opportunity to write, the lack of an authentic audience meant that the writing tended to be lacking the features of audience targeted writing.

As a means of inquiry around three issues: teacher awareness of audience, pseudo-transactional audiences and teacher teaching practice around audience, a research project was conducted in high schools in Lower Mainland of Vancouver, British Columbia (Mamchur & Daniels, 2001). Teachers were recruited by calling all secondary schools in the lower mainland, requesting the name of the head of the English department. Names of teachers were also accessed through the BC English Teachers' Federation. From the teachers contacted out of those who agreed to do the study, 40 names were randomly selected. Face to face and telephone interviews were conducted and responses were analyzed by two English professors at SFU (Mamchur, 2015). The interviewer queried about the teaching of composition at the high school level, with a focus on two specific questions: "Do you teach the importance of audience as part of your curriculum?" and "If the answer is yes, how do you do that?"

To the opening query, addressing awareness of the importance of audience to the writing process, the responses were a consistent "yes, of course they were aware of its importance." Only two of the 40 reported that they didn't address audience in any direct way, but that it was "generally included." Teachers reported letter writing, editorials, opinion papers or speech making to be major genres in teaching the importance of audience. Preparing for the person who was going to mark compositions in final examinations was the most often reported "audience" focuses for teachers teaching grade twelve.

A typical teacher response (transcribed from interview 1) was that "perception of audience is extremely important in terms of student writing, in terms of student voice…I give exercises…such as write a letter…give a topic…your 'favorite band'…then write a letter about their favorite band to three different audiences…such as friend, parent and the band." Teacher 1 reported great success. The three letters were very different. When questioned further about any specific teaching around the writing of letters, the teacher reported using a standard form letter regarding salutation, etc. No direct teaching was done regarding clarity of purpose, affecting audience response, etc. However, one can imagine that students would instinctively pay attention to such things when thinking about an audience. Practical references to audience occurred. For example, teachers might warn students to be aware of audience when writing for the finals. "Be politically correct so as not to offend the marker." "Don't swear or talk about sex or doing drugs." The "appropriateness of language" was a consideration for many teachers.

A variety of creative ways were reported. "Create a lecture based on the house that Jane Eyre lived in. You are trying to 'sell' the houses to a real estate board." Write a "most wanted" bulletin from the FBI based on characters in the heat of the night. One teacher reported using peers as audience; one reported encouraging students to explore assumptions about the audience. This is a beginning.

The students were writing for a purpose and an audience. However, there was disappointment when the responses were coded for any common themes of specific teaching practices to "organize people's subjective experience into a coherent story" based on the frameworks that emerged. (Auerback 2003, 73) Under the heading, "common practices," the following categories emerged as most prevalent: teacher assigns subject, teaching for final exam, teacher assigns various "pretended" audiences, (but the teacher is the actual audience), and creating opportunities for 'authentic' audiences.

Researchers found that the most common practice was to assign teacher-selected subjects to various "pretended" audiences, but the teacher really was that audience. Only three of the teachers taught specific skills, three-used classroom as community, two referred to the teacher as interested in student work, two referred to the teacher as a knowledgeable editor. Only one teacher directly linked a specific skill to awareness of audience: "I teach my students to use transitions to make sure the reader gets a warning of what's to come; otherwise readers may get confused in the middle of a paragraph"(responded 24).

One teacher reported that "students are evaluated on their ability to write for a specific audience and with a specific purpose in mind," but confessed that "for the most part, there is not enough time in the classes to go into depth of the relevance of audience. Instead, it is integrated broadly across the curriculum" (respondent 37). Several reported that the truth of the matter was that teachers were the real audiences and students knew the other audiences were "fake" and didn't really get into it. The researchers concluded that teaching awareness of audience was commonly accepted as important by teachers, pseudo-transactional writing was prevalent and few of the skills associated with the precise teaching of how to incorporate audience awareness into writing were reported as being taught. Teachers seemed to feel it was enough to tell students to think of specific audiences in their writing and to "pretend" to write to them.

The Challenge

The Challenge for educators is to use the writing for an "audience" concept and move it into the domain of "writing" for an audience. What are the things writers say about audience? What are the writers' tricks of the trade that influence the audience, that give the writer the power to affect audience? When students learn such techniques as: "show, don't tell", "use effective leads and conclusions", "infuse your work with truth", "use the detail that most affects the audience", the reasons for the strategies has real purpose and meaning. Metaphor changes from a definition to a strategy to cross the bridge from something the author understands and has experienced, but the reader hasn't by comparing the unknown to a common thing that both understand.

Purpose and audience join. It is all about meaning. The writer clarifies meaning so the reader can understand. Now grammar comes into the picture. Spelling is not about "a spelling bee," it is about helping the reader understand what you are trying to say. Grammar is not about "correct usage" or "worksheets" it is about getting the words in the right order with the right subject verb agreement so that the reader gets the meaning of what you are saying. Style isn't about memorizing certain strategies, such as sentence combining. Strategies serve a purpose. They have an impact on the reader. Using descriptors that appeal to the senses is not about going for a walk and writing down adjectives, it is about being concrete rather than abstract because it presents to the reader exactly what the writer wants to present. It gives the writer power and the reader understanding and pleasure.

Once the student achieves this sense of power, the power in having the meaning understood, in having the reader feel surprise or fear or sadness, the motivation to write explodes. The audience so available is right there, other writers. In a classroom, it is other students. It doesn't have to be a pretended audience. It is such a fallacy to think that students will be excited about writing about a teacher assigned topic just because they are invited to write for a pretended audience. The writer wants voice. "Voice is the most important element in writing. It is what attracts, holds, and persuades your readers" (Murray 179). Is this not the kind of relationship we want to create with our readers? "One of the marks of good reading is wholehearted investment in the words and meanings and no attention to the self. If a reader can remember nothing at all about what was happening as he reads your words that may be a sign of total success" (Mamchur, 2, 2.6). Students express that this method is certainly more exciting, more motivating, more satisfying than writing a letter to the editor or Aunt Matilda.

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