

WAVING TO THE DISTANT READER: AN APPROACH TO BASIC WRITING

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With the publication of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, basic writing emerged as a discipline worthy of research and its own pedagogy. But beyond suggesting important practical implications for the classroom, Shaughnessy identified the basic writer as a beginner, an apprentice, a student who struggles to write not because she lacks intelligence or perseverance but because she lacks practice and familiarity with the world of written prose.¹ This compassionate conception of basic writers has guided current theoretical and pedagogical approaches to teaching basic writing. While the suggestions in the journals are helpful, basic writing teachers need a theoretical framework in which to place those activities and assignments as well as a way to put students' numerous structural, syntactical, and grammatical problems into perspective.

One current question concerns the egocentricity of basic writing, which Shaughnessy described as "an orientation that is reflected in the assumption that the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs therefore no introductions or transitions or explanations."² This issue deserves study because our students must write for academic audiences, must understand what those readers expect, and must know how to accommodate their needs. To better prepare them, we should systematically structure assignments to meet two goals. We must help students become aware of the reader and aware that the presence of a reader makes tactical changes necessary, and we must assist them in recognizing the actual writing stages and processes they will go through.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with what Linda Flower calls writer-based prose (even experienced writers

often write egocentrically), there is a problem when readers enter the rhetorical situation, for their presence places constraints on the form and content of the text. By identifying the features of egocentric writing, we can guide our selection of theories and strategies to include those that help transform prose from writer-to reader-based. Flower notes the organizational logic of much basic writing: "Its underlying focus is egocentric, and it uses either a narrative framework or a survey form to order ideas."³ These natural strategies help all writers discover what they want to say or how they arrived at an insight, but only the basic writer, struggling with diction, syntax, grammar, and mechanics, does not eventually revise her prose for an audience.

Because egocentricity and inner speech are commonly associated with cognitive psychologists' descriptions of children, teachers may erroneously assume that their students lack the cognitive development necessary to write for a remote audience. Observation of inexperienced writers outside the classroom reveals, though, that this is not the case. As Mike Rose reminds us, "We must assume, as Piaget warns, that in their daily lives our students can generalize and analyze, can operate formally."⁴ What they cannot do, however, is translate this ability into the unfamiliar medium of writing. Our task is not, as some teachers claim, to teach basic writers to think, but rather, as Andrea Lunsford notes, to make them aware of the processes they already employ, enabling them to "infer principles from their own experience."⁵ We can help students discover and refine those processes by creating a series of writing projects which move the writer away from his audience in stages.

James Moffett's theory, that writing involves internal operations which must be developed in stages of abstraction, addresses the de-centering skill absent in basic writers' prose. His categories of discourse — recording, reporting, generalizing, and theorizing — require a progression of increasing time and distance between writer and audience.⁶ Specific writing exercises based on this theory enable basic writers to practice the process necessary to move from writer- to reader-based prose. If allowed to begin with relatively familiar and natural egocentric writing, students develop confidence in their ability to write — confidence they need before tackling those skills more removed from their writing experience. Also inherent in the application of Moffett's theory is the incorporation of writing as process, with each assignment reflecting a stage of increasing cogni-

tive difficulty. Because Sondra Perl's case studies reveal that inexperienced writers *have* internalized a process and *do* employ strategies,⁷ if we raise those stages to consciousness, our students can recognize what they do and why they do it and better prepare for future academic writing assignments.

Ideally, a basic writing course of this design should allow adequate time for each composing stage and offer multiple sets of assignments that increase audience distance. However the teacher modifies specific assignments, she should retain the key theoretical elements: a progressively abstract subject and progressively distant audience. When designing written tasks, we should heed Moffett's suggestions never to assign a subject,⁸ for all too often we choose topics which engage us rather than our students. Obviously, we must offer heuristics to help students choose their topic, for any such problem-solving approach to invention can yield a wealth of student-generated ideas. If we initially draft assignments which provide possible audiences, potential forms, and realistic contexts in which to search for dissonance, we allow the basic writer to concentrate on finding a subject he truly cares about.

Students entering the basic writing classroom do not come alone: they bring with them their previous failures and their present fears. Because they may be expecting tedious grammar drills, mysterious red marks, and frustrated instructors, we can successfully introduce the course and perhaps surprise students if we concentrate on finding a topic rather than on eliminating error. We might ask them to record a recent argument or the last time they were puzzled by someone's behavior. Assuring them that they alone will read this ungraded task and that they are recording it in order to better understand what was happening at the time, we can lessen their overriding concentration on correctness. (I would discourage an editing stage during this first set simply because our students have devoted too much of their previous writing time to this frustrating step.) Several topics might be recorded during the first step so the writer can choose the one she would most like to pursue. Using one subject for several assignments eliminates the initial and sometimes lengthy search for a suitable topic, and allows the student to develop and refine her content for various audiences. This initial exploration requires that students find a dissonance in recent experience, and if we direct them to problems or confusions in their lives, they often find areas rich for writing. Since they will be articulating their inner

speech, these first tries will be quite egocentric but will provide confidence-building practice and prepare students to move to the next stage.

The next assignment should report the experience to someone directly involved, refreshing her memory and explaining why the writer is troubled, puzzled, angry. The distance between writer and audience increases slightly, and the form of this report might be a letter or a dialogue. Because the writer knows the reader, she can clearly imagine her needs and, perhaps unconsciously, begin to accommodate them. Before moving to the next step in Moffett's progression, it is important to have students record the observable changes in form and content between the two drafts. These variants — word choice, word order, extra/deleted details — can simply be transcribed in a notebook and saved for later analysis.

Once the writer feels comfortable writing to the involved party, he can relate the event to someone both parties know, conveying how this experience is typical or atypical of his behavior, reactions, or beliefs. While still familiar to the writer, this reader has not witnessed the event and is thus further distanced from the writer and his experience. The additional aim of conveying the typicality or uniqueness of the situation forces the writer to generalize, the third of Moffett's writing functions. We can facilitate the abstraction this task requires by including the simple heuristics of comparison/contrast to provide additional experiences. Once the basic writer generates these, he can look for similar qualities in those events and situation contexts and begin to locate key concepts. Changes in this third draft, which should again be recorded, may include condensing the narration or expanding the emotional elements. At this point, perhaps the teacher has not even officially looked at these exercises, preferring to walk around the room consulting with those who wish advice.

The final assignment of this initial set would challenge students to predict what might happen if the situation occurred today or sometime in the future. To avoid lapsing into an egocentric purpose and structure, the student might address an audience of peers who would benefit from the writer's experience. While this audience is more distant and anonymous than the last, the writer will probably have specific individuals in mind, which allows her to abstract those qualities representative of the audience. The attempt to theorize will force the author to draw some helpful

inferences from her experience. Some students may subordinate the initial experience and be able to theorize about their behavior in certain situations while others may not. But because the writing project progresses through each step of increasing time and distance and moves from recording to theorizing, the basic writer has accomplished the kind of writing task she will face all semester. With a non-threatening, non-graded first attempt, the student practices and grows comfortable with pen, paper, words, and ideas.

The student also now has a document of the changes that he made as the audience grew less familiar with the problematic situation. It is only after the writer has completed the first set that he should begin working with the changes themselves. Collectively listing representative changes on the board in chronological order provides a set of data from which to draw conclusions. A discussion can first focus on simple description of the data — word choice, order, arrangement, etc. — and then grow more abstract as we elicit conclusions, however tentative or mistaken, about the nature of the changes and, more importantly, the reasons for them. Inevitably, some students will discover that the addition of audience guided many of their decisions.

This method of change analysis is a crucial step, for it develops the skills of inference — drawing, conceptualizing, abstracting, classifying, and organizing. It is similar to the data-based exercises proposed by such experts as Shaughnessy, Lunsford, and Fortune,⁹ but it differs from these activities in its content — the writing process. Writing-change analysis requires that students talk about their writing, and that articulation raises to consciousness the nature of the process itself. An awareness not only of the changes demanded when considering a reader but of the stages in the writing process places students in control of their writing — a first experience for many basic writers. Once this familiar data has been generated, recorded, discussed, analyzed, and reorganized, other data exercises might be introduced to prepare students for future academic tasks.

While we would all like to teach in this safe, non-graded atmosphere, inevitably we must evaluate students' performances. If, towards the end of the semester, the writers have over a dozen works from which to choose, they can select pieces to include in a portfolio. This evaluative method offers a number of benefits: by reviewing an entire

set of several drafts from each stage, we actually evaluate the process — not only product — of their writing; by allowing students to select their best work, we evaluate their achievements rather than their failures; and by delaying formal evaluation until the last portion of the term, we provide, in a risk-free environment, the practice essential to beginning writers.

Inexperienced writers need time and space to become comfortable in the world of writing. Through a variety of writing tasks, they can explore their experiences, develop their voices, and recognize their readers. While noticeable changes may not occur in the first week or even in the first month, with daily practice and an ongoing discussion of writing, students can begin to articulate those once-mysterious processes and find their places in academia. Why not explore the functions, problems, and rewards of writing before we focus on specific errors? This is not to ignore error but to place it in perspective, actually give it the importance we say it deserves.

Adopting Moffett's theory in the basic writing classroom may provide an answer to inexperienced writers' many difficulties. Moffett's levels of audience distance address the common problem of egocentric prose, and the curriculum provides a viable pedagogical starting point from which to transpose our students' cognitive abilities into the academic medium, writing. If firmly based on sound theory, our efforts, dedication, and wisdom can more truly prepare our students to face the personal, academic, and social tasks ahead.

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NOTES

¹Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 5.

²Shaughnessy, p. 240.

³Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English*, 41 (Sept., 1979), 19-37. Reprinted in *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*, ed., Gary Tate and Edward P.J. Corbett (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 276.

⁴Mike Rose, "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," *College English*, 45 (February, 1983), 127.

⁵Andrea Lunsford, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English*, 41 (Sept., 1979), 39-46. Reprinted in Tate and Corbett, p. 259.

⁶James Moffett, "I, You, It," *College Composition and Communication*, 16 (1965), 246.

⁷Sondra Perl, "A Look at Basic Writers in the Process of Composing," in *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators*, ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoerber (Urbana: NCTE, 1980), p. 22.

⁸Moffett, p. 247.

⁹See, for example, Chapter 7 of *Errors and Expectations* and Lunsford, p. 266. Sarah D'Eloia Fortune, "A Sequence of Pre-writing Activities for the Analysis Paper," unpublished paper presented at the Penn State Rhetoric Conference, July, 1983.

