Developing Writers in Higher Education

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SECTION ONE

Writing Is a Rhetorical and Social Activity

The rhetorical situation—the relationship of writer, subject, and audience—and its contextual variations embodies a foundational set of assumptions about writing. Without a solid understanding of the interactions of these three elements, undergraduates cannot address the writing challenges of higher education (and beyond). We open by focusing on the rhetorical dimensions of writing because understandings of the roles of writer, subject, and audience can grow as writers develop. Of the three, audience proved the most challenging for the students in our study. As they entered our study as lower-division undergraduates, our participants had a fairly clear understanding of their roles as writers, and they were well attuned to the need to focus on a specific topic or subject, but imagining or addressing an audience was more difficult for them. In interviews, a number of students said they would “just write” with no thought about the reader. The need to consider imagined or actual audiences, including what that audience knows and needs to know and their reasons for reading a given text, were largely beyond their ken.

Audience awareness took on major significance in our study because it was a site of growth and development for most students in our study. It wasn’t just that students became more aware of their audiences as they moved through their undergraduate years; they also became concerned about the effect they wanted to have, the sort of relationship they wanted to create with audiences, connections they saw between audience and genre, and the ways they could use the affordances of digital writing to reach and influence audiences. Accordingly we assert that audience awareness—in its fullest sense—is an essential concept for epistemological participation in writing for students, instructors, and researchers.

A number of mentions provided the first indication of the importance of audience for our students. In entrance interviews, held after writing minors had taken the Gateway course and all participants had taken first-year writing, students were asked what constitutes good writing, and audience awareness was a frequent re-
sponse, yielding over 600 coded entries. In part, students’ talk about the impor-
tance of audience may have been a consequence of its relative novelty in their expe-
riences as writers. Nicole’s response in her entry interview typifies comments made 
about audience by many students:

We had to talk a lot about audience at some point in the class. I think we had to write 
reflections saying who our audience was and like who our intended audience was. Hav-
ing to pinpoint that was where it really like stuck in my mind because I’d never had to 
say like “Oh, I’m directing this at my classmates.” I always thought it was a given, like, 
this is for my teacher, but it doesn’t have to be that way.

Explicit attention to audience was a new experience for this writing minor, and the 
requirement to write a reflection apparently helped to complicate and solidify this 
rhetorical concept for her. The observation that “it doesn’t have to be that way” sug-
gests a new perspective on audience, a transformation, as the language of threshold 
concepts would explain it. Since high school writing instruction, particularly that 
shaped by standardized assessments, frequently asks students to write to no one in 
particular, it is not surprising that thinking about or beyond the instructor as audi-
ence was novel for many students. In both first-year writing and the minors’ Gate-
way course, explicit curricular attention to audience in peer review and in required 
reflections helped move students toward a transformative rhetorical perspective.

The nature of that transformation varied, however. The default of the teacher 
audience remained strong for many students, and we found variations on “differ-
ent professors want different things” in many interview transcripts, indicating that 
students, particularly nonminors, did not easily reach beyond the familiar teacher 
or professor audience. At the same time, however, many of our second-year stu-
dents talked about the effects they wanted to have on audiences. Some emphasized 
clarity, so that readers wouldn’t be confused about the point they were making. 
They talked about being “audience-friendly” and “reader-friendly” and went on to 
explain the ways they wanted to engage audiences, imagining themselves sitting 
next to someone and saying, as Kaitlin put it, “This is what I want you to get out of 
this piece.” They also wanted to engage their readers; as Annie observed, “It’s not 
boring—when people read through my paper they’re not falling asleep.” The desire 
to be engaging or entertaining as well as clear suggests that students wanted to do 
more than convey information to their audiences. They began to imagine readers 
who would have affective as well as intellectual responses to their writing.

Already as sophomores, students also probed the relationship between audi-
ence and genre. For example, Helen talked about writing literature reviews while
working in a research lab during the summer and noted, “You learn from those
types of people how they want their writing done, and it’s not necessarily the same
as a professor from the school.” This nonminor makes it clear that the professor
audience has different expectations than a supervisor outside the university, and
those expectations extend to different types or genres of writing. Another student,
Olivia, reinforced the point that moving from one audience to another could mean
shifting to a different genre, explaining “The same core ideas can be transferred
across to different projects and to different audiences and to different modes and
different contacts too. . . . For example, if you want to write an article about shoes
for the general public you’re probably not going to overload them with your schol-
larly tones.” Although neither student mentions genre, language such as “how they
want their writing done,” “modes,” and “scholarly tones” shows that the concept of
genre was guiding their thinking. Even without the metalanguage to describe an
audience-genre relationship, students were able to talk about the complex ways that
audience interacts with other dimensions of writing.

The prospect of online audiences for digital writing also heightened students’
awareness of audience. Commenting functions on blogs, for instance, served as a
clear reminder of their “unlimited audiences,” a host of unknown but actual readers
of their writing. As Isabella put it, “You turn in a paper and it’s just gone and you
don’t think about the people reading it, but with the blog . . . people are reading this
because they are commenting on it.” Even students who didn’t like the blog require-
ment in the minor in writing acknowledged that it was helpful because it enabled
them to consider audience in their writing. Assignments that asked students to
re-mediate or repurpose a piece of writing by using multimedia also increased au-
dience awareness. For example, Kris, who wrote an academic argument debunking
the idea that vaccinations lead to autism, described a conversation about repurpos-
ing that material for an online audience: “I’m thinking about making it into like a
magazine article. What do you think about that? Everyone was like, ‘Oh my gosh.
That would be great, like you could do it as a parenting magazine.’” As this ex-
ccerpt shows, the shift to a new medium led the writer to see a different audience—
parents—for her academic work. The tools of digital writing made the rhetorical
capacities of writing more visible to students, in terms of both how it could reach
“unlimited audiences” and how it could be transformed to meet the needs of vari-
ous audiences.

Two years later, as they were graduating, students still talked about audience
awareness in their exit interviews in response to the question about what consti-
tutes good writing. In over 800 coded responses (as compared with over 600 in
the sophomore year), students referred to effects they sought, relationships they
wanted to establish, linkages with genre, and the influences of digital media on their connections to audiences. The desire to have a particular effect on an audience remained strong; students such as Gabi, a nonminor, expressed a desire to write “things that people actually would want to read and care about reading,” and to also get a point across, so that “whoever picks up and reads your essay, somebody who isn’t necessarily familiar with the topic, can read it, and can understand it, and point out what the argument is and how you supported that argument.” In specifying desired effects, students such as Natalie, a minor, described relationships with readers: “I love the feeling of . . . having someone else read my paper and they’re like, ‘Wow. I never thought of it like that before.’” They also called attention to the effect of audience response on themselves as writers, as Abby did: “It was nice to hear that other people really liked my piece and it had an impact upon them because it made me more confident with not only my writing abilities but what I have to say in general, people want to hear.” The affective dimension evident in these comments shows how students’ understanding of audience has become deeper and more complex. The delight in achieving a particular effect with an audience was echoed in students’ comments about the pleasure of becoming more intimately connected to other readers and writers via peer review. These expressions of positive feelings associated with audience awareness suggest the need for further consideration of the ways we conceptualize writing development. The relationship between confidence and writing ability has received attention from researchers (Pajares and Johnson; Pajares), but very little notice has been given to the ways that the pleasures of writing might contribute to writing development. The comments of students in this study point to the need to learn more about the relationship between positive affect and writing development.

Graduating seniors also continued to talk about the relationship between audience and genre in describing their own ways of producing good writing, as Madeline did: “I could leave it in one form . . . or . . . turn it into another form so now it’s maybe reaching double that amount of different people who the other form didn’t reach.” In using the term “form,” Madeline makes a more explicit gesture toward genre than did her peers when they were sophomores. And like those peers, she points to a connection between audience and genre; with a different genre, she will be able to attract a different and larger audience.

These seniors reinforced the claim that multimodal writing heightened their awareness of and attention to audience, but they were more explicit about ways they used technology to shape readers’ experiences; as Joy said: “[I was] trying to think about reader navigation while I designed [my electronic portfolio].” She continued, “I wanted it to be really clean . . . [for] you to stay in the site, not go outside
of it and be able to move through it. Not quickly but have it be succinct enough you weren’t overwhelmed by the amount of text.” Courtney commented on the ways “design creates a different kind of experience for the reader,” including issues of navigation, images, color, and overall “look.” Statements such as these indicate an increased sophistication about how the affordances of digital writing can shape audience experiences, and students saw themselves as capable of using these tools to achieve desired effects on their audiences.

Students also described using multimedia writing to become readers of, and thereby audiences for, their own writing, and they cited blogs as doing this especially well. For example, Sadie kept a blog during her summer in Europe, and the blog became a space for “reflecting on the trip and what it taught me. The last few [posts] were definitely just like what I learned and what I wish I would have known and what I knew now. . . . When I go back and read it now, I’m impressed with what I was able to write.” The pleasure this student expresses about rereading her writing echoes that expressed by students who took pleasure in audience responses from others. Taking on the role of audience not only gave this student a greater sense of audience awareness, it exposed her to the positive affect that the writer-audience relationship can evoke. Peer review inspired similar experiences and feelings. Carol explained, “I liked getting to know the other people through their writing because I felt I could really tell who they were by reading what they had written and where their heart’s at. . . . You get a little sight into their soul when you read something somebody else has written. I really liked that.” Susanne said, “It was just nice to be with a community of writers and just people who—and a lot of writing we were doing was really personal, so you got to make these personal connections.” Not only was having the desired effect on one’s audience a source of pleasure and of increased audience awareness for these students, but so was becoming an audience for one’s peers.

Tracing students’ expanding ideas about audience, reader relationships, genre, and medium suggests ways to broaden concepts that deal with rhetorical dimensions of writing. Audience awareness as represented by these students extends well beyond acknowledgment of readers to include perceptions and strategies that inform writing in specific ways. It is an awareness that positions the audience as a resource for insights about genre and digital tools as well as a motivating force for creating effects and building relationships. The growth of such expansive ideas about audience also speaks to writing development. Students did not move to complex views of audience uniformly or directly; they often stalled or moved sideways. Still, however, nearly all expressed different understandings of audience when they graduated than they had when they entered the study.
Despite the many common responses, there were important differences between graduating writing minors and nonminors. Writing minors evinced a wider range of perspectives on and approaches to audiences, while nonminors’ view of audience remained more focused on the classroom, with more of them holding on to the concept of instructor as primary audience than they had initially expressed. For these nonminors, variation in instructors’ expectations elicited frustration. Lauren recounted the experience of getting a low grade in her junior year because her instructor was “a new audience . . . completely and totally different than what [she] was used to writing for. You can be the best writer ever and get consistent A’s on papers, but then you meet someone that doesn’t understand how you write things, and he wants you to write it differently.” The frustration born of seeing the audience as the instructor, and the grade as an indication of the quality of the writing, typifies the responses of many graduating nonminors. They expressed a firm understanding of the importance of audience in writing, but a majority focused on the context of the classroom, with grades and instructors’ opinions assuming dominant importance. They could not see beyond the “local” to recognize that writers can push beyond one rhetorical context into myriad others. Minors, in contrast, more commonly engaged in what Elizabeth Wardle calls “creative repurposing,” expanding from an initial concept of audience awareness into new variations by intermingling their ideas about audiences with thinking about engagement, pleasure, genre, and digital tools to develop new formulations.

These differences between minors and nonminors raise interesting issues about what it means to develop as a writer. Conceptualizing and expanding on audience awareness certainly marks an important element of development for all writers. Still, for some, that awareness remained relatively fixed across the undergraduate years, focused mainly on the instructor as audience, while others developed a broader concept of audience along with a capacity for creative repurposing. To some extent these differences can be attributed to the writing minor curriculum, which gave a good deal of explicit attention to the concept of audience awareness. However, another way to think about audience awareness in relation to writerly development is to consider how feedback might contribute to audience awareness: how might the social dimensions of feedback from instructors and from peers serve as mechanisms for developing audience awareness in its multiple forms?

The two chapters in this section look at feedback in terms of instructors’ comments on and peer review of student writing, and show, albeit differently, how each contributes to audience awareness. Emily Wilson and Justine Post look at responses to instructor feedback in terms of critical engagement, which they define as seeing broad purposes for writing, imagining audiences beyond the instructor, reflecting
on one’s own writing, and evaluating feedback. Students who take up critical engagement develop an enhanced understanding of audience, because it becomes a more capacious category for them and because they come to understand the social nature of writing more fully. Students who face obstacles to critical engagement are frequently stymied by affective elements such as a poor relationship with an instructor, lack of confidence about high school preparation, or uncertainty generated by contrasting feedback. Such affective responses deprive students of the audience awareness made possible by critical engagement. Benjamin Keating’s examination of students’ varied experiences with peer review reveals a similar connection between affect and audience awareness, but in this case, affect centers on questions of authority. Keating posits collaborative and nonhierarchical authority as essential to effective peer review, a stance many minors and few nonminors embrace. Nonminors tended to express distrust of classroom-based peer review and doubt the abilities of their peers, thereby inhibiting their ability to develop the audience awareness that peer review can confer. A number of them do, however, see self-sponsored peer review in positive terms, because they have a different relationship to authority in groups they create for themselves. Minors, in contrast, tended to see authority in nonhierarchical terms and recognize their peers as authentic audiences. Together these two chapters demonstrate how the affect associated with feedback shapes audience awareness, a key element in writerly development.

WORKS CITED