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The Aware Audience: Role-Playing Peer-Response Groups

Peter Smagorinsky

In “The Rhetorical Stance” Wayne Booth (1970) describes an experience from early in his career in which he taught his students expository writing. Much to his dismay, their exposition was vacuous. One student in particular, Booth reflects, had

no audience except me . . . [and therefore] no rhetorical purpose. Because he has not been led to see a question which he considers worth answering, or an audience that could possibly care one way or the other, the paper is worse than no paper at all, even though it has no grammatical or spelling errors and is organized right down the line, one, two, three. (28)

Anticipating—or perhaps inspiring—the movement towards composition for personal growth, Booth found that writing, even in his university setting, needed some “human point, and therefore some educative value,” unlike the “complete and pedantic divorce of writing from human purposes” he had found in his students’ writing (29). He determined that writers need a rhetorical balance among speaker, audience, and argument.

What makes the rhetoric of Milton and Burke and Churchill great is that each presents us with the spectacle of a man passionately involved in thinking an important question through, in the company of an audience. (32)

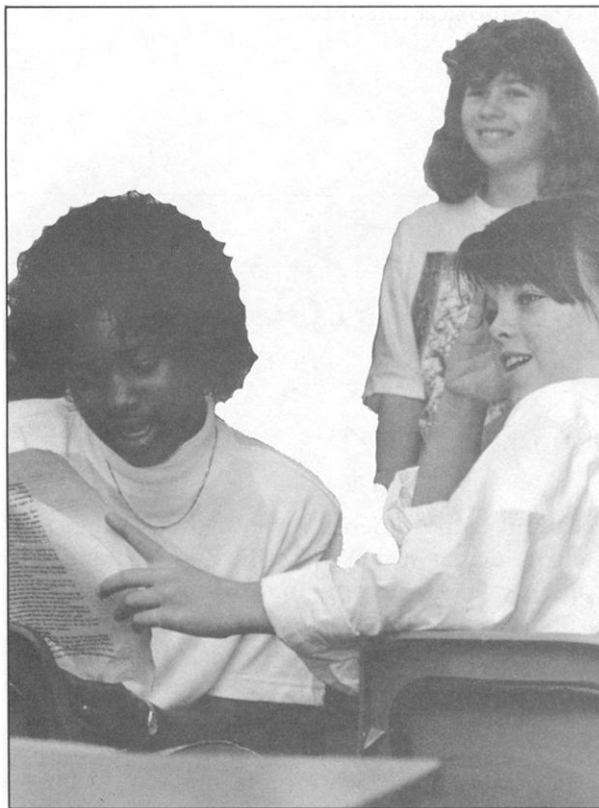
Booth’s revelation has reinforced the notion that school can be a place that nurtures both personal and cognitive growth, a place where students involve themselves with problems that matter. Teachers who have adopted this attitude empower students to express themselves with both a human and rhetorical purpose, achieved through a balance among speaker (passionately thinking through an important problem), argument (which we can broaden to mean the medium of commu-

nication), and audience (even if that audience is some anticipated sense of self). Booth found that students who write only to satisfy a teacher compromise both the content and form of their expression. He recognized, however, that writers do communicate with audiences, a condition that introduces constraints. Knowledge of audience characteristics does shape communication, and if writers aspire to convey important ideas effectively to particular readers, they must write within certain limitations.

The use of role-playing peer-response groups can be, for certain composing situations, a means of response that provides effective feedback for writers and helps students develop a sense of the particular characteristics of certain audiences. By responding to writing in terms of their own anticipated audience, writers learn to think in the manner of their readers and thus understand the reasons behind audience demands. For instance, my own experience as a reviewer for a scholarly journal has taught me to think the way editors think, helping me in the production of my own professional writing. Students who assume the role of their audience gain similar benefits in understanding constraints and adjusting their writings accordingly. Furthermore, students who critique the writing of other students provide objective response to guide revision.

Sample Lesson: College Application Essay

Let me illustrate with a lesson I’ve used with high-school juniors who are learning to respond to essay questions that typically occur on college applications. The applications often ask students to write on open-ended personal topics:



- Discuss your goals, values, or ideas
- Describe a special interest you have
- Evaluate one of your most important personal achievements
- Describe a significant experience in your life
- Describe a change you have noticed in yourself

These assignments are amenable to the sort of balance described by Booth. The topics allow the writers to consider important problems from their lives and to explore them through media of their choice. Should they be college-bound, students write for an important audience, one perhaps quite different from their teachers, peers, or other familiar readers. It is an audience they need to understand, one whose perspective they must learn if they aspire to influence an admissions decision. The assignment thus lends itself well to an activity in which students respond to one another's writing in role-playing peer-response groups, with each group playing the part of a college admissions committee to evaluate the essays of other students.

Some research has indicated that "thinking about one's audience is a question of *when* not *whether*" (Rafoth 1989, 286). Bennett Rafoth found that "early attention to audience does not by

itself facilitate good writing" but that audience awareness effects writing most favorably during revision (283). Therefore, we might encourage students to discover their voice and topic *before* introducing constraints that could inhibit expression.

The following sections elaborate the first five steps of the unit on writing a college application essay.

Learn Appropriate Procedures for Producing the Essay

Students first need procedures for finding a topic. One effective method for topic discovery is to identify possible areas for composing and then probe memory networks through free-association activities such as freewriting or clustering. Gabriele Rico maintains that such nonlinear thinking strategies allow writers to "tap the often latent pattern-perceiving potential of the right brain," a skill that facilitates their search for an appropriate topic (1989, 16).

Students generate examples in a similar way. After having identified some characteristic, value, or other attribute, students engage in a free-thinking activity to generate examples. A student identifying "computers" as an interest, for instance, freewrites to identify potential examples of illuminating experiences with computers.

Determine Audience Expectations

Students need to have some idea of what colleges are looking for in candidates. Of course, this varies from college to college. Guidance departments provide materials which suggest characteristics that different colleges value, and students examine a set of documents in small groups to identify them. One such document, for instance, appeared in the *Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin*. Entitled "Getting into Kenyon," it includes a discussion among members of the admissions committee regarding the characteristics they look for in applicants.

Anderson: Students at Kenyon are people who are very much involved in the life of the college and the community, through extracurricular activities, jobs, clubs and community service.

Morse: As students have those experiences, they tend to develop a tolerance for and interest in differences among people, and of course that benefits everybody in the community.

Reprinted with permission of *Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin*.

Monheim: We also want diversity in terms of students' interests, what they'll be involved in here. For example, if we had four hundred freshmen all interested in theater, how exciting would this place be?

Leftridge: We're not looking for certain opinions and interests in our students, but for students who do have opinions and aren't afraid to explore and express them.

Monheim: For those who don't interview, the essay part of the application is the only chance to say "This is me" and to talk about something that's important to them. My advice is to spend some time on them.

York: I remember an essay about growing up with a handicapped sister. That gave us information about the student's background and values. Through the essay we got to know that student a little better.

Anderson: We want students who took advantage of what's available to them in their schools and community. I like to see that students sought out a challenge or took an extra step to educate themselves. (Rosenberg 1988)

A recent study by John R. Hayes (1990) suggests that the attitudes of the Kenyon admissions committee are representative of many committees. He examined readers' perceptions of writers' personality traits by studying the decisions of the admissions team at Carnegie Mellon University in evaluating the application essays of their prospective freshman class. The admissions team showed a strong inclination to *admit* students who appeared positive, mature, sensitive to others, down-to-earth, or likeable; it showed a strong inclination to *reject* students who appeared dull, narrow, naive, or egocentric. Less influential traits were:

positive—being socially adept, serious, determined/persistent, broad, or self-sufficient

mildly positive—being hard-working or modest

negative—being socially awkward/nerdy, weird, negative, ambitious, or immature, and

mildly negative—being assertive or arrogant.

Knowledge of these audience preferences can help students develop standards to guide both the production and evaluation of their essays. Many students, for instance, believe that being hard-working is a highly desirable trait; Hayes' research suggests that this is a questionable characteristic to highlight for this audience.

Produce a First Draft

Students use the material generated to produce rough drafts of their college application essays,

taking into account anticipated audience expectations.

Form Role-Playing Peer-Response Groups

Students then submit their rough drafts to role-playing peer-response groups consisting of about four students each. Rather than allowing students to form their own groups, which produces homogeneous committees, teachers can form the mock committees by assigning a diverse set of students to each group. Prior to forming committees, the class benefits from evaluating a sample composition together to ensure that students understand their responsibilities. Next, using pseudonyms, students submit their essays, and the teacher distributes about four to each committee. Teachers with two sections of the same course may even distribute the essays from one class to committees in the other. Each committee uses the guidelines determined during the class discussions to evaluate the essays and judge the candidates, making one of four possible decisions:

1. Admit to honors program—The writer shows exceptional skill in satisfying all standards
2. Admit—The writer satisfies all standards
3. Waiting list—The writer satisfies most standards
4. Reject—The writer satisfies few or no standards

The mock admissions committee provides a written justification for its decision on each essay evaluated, offering suggestions on how to change the writing. Thus, students play an important role in improving the writing of peers while developing critical standards to guide their own writing.

Revise and Resubmit

Students use this evaluation to guide a revision and then submit the revision to a different committee. The committees evaluate this second set in the same way, except this time their decision stands. Teachers can use this final judgment to assign a grade, with the honors admission equaling an *A*, a regular admission receiving a *B*, and so on; or they can simply let the evaluations speak for themselves and not issue a formal grade. The evaluation of the lesson is problematic, for students still make highly idiosyncratic judgments in spite of their experience on the committees. Teachers may decide in such cases to issue their own evaluations along with those of the admissions groups or to use examples of unusual judgments as the basis for a class discussion on audience characteristics.

Benefits

To the Students as Critics

The mock admissions committees serve several purposes. They allow students to play the role of their audience, getting inside their minds and making decisions in their terms. The experience of playing the critic helps students learn evaluative skills to bring to their own writing; their role of responder, then, helps make them more autonomous critics of their own work. Here are some remarks made by students in their unit evaluations:

Evaluating other people's papers gave me insights into what college boards might be looking for in an applicant. It gave me the opportunity to objectively look at my own work. I felt that I even had to distance myself from the paper I was reading over. Even though it was a mock committee I still had to take my decision making serious. I learned what it is like to be on the other side of the issue. To see how my own paper looked. I saw what it was like to evaluate something close to my own essay. I kept thinking about my own paper and critiquing it like the four papers before me. It boosted a lesson I learned over the summer, and that is what it is like to be a teacher.

Looking at other papers I rejected most of them because they didn't contain the things I was looking for. I've learned that when I was the judge I was hard on the people who applied. I was able to explain the things that were wrong. I should be able to use these pointers in my essay.

1. To the point. Not a lot of stories that don't really relate.
2. When talking about the goals you have in your field include earlier experiences that have to do with this field.
3. Relate your subject to the school. Why is this value, characteristic, etc. good for this particular school.
4. Sell yourself. Watch the negative things you say about yourself, always give a positive outlook afterwards. Let positive things outweigh the negative.

To the Students as Writers

The activity also provides feedback which helps them improve writing for a particular audience. Here is a sequence one student went through in writing a first draft, getting peer response, writing a revision, and getting final peer response.

First Draft

Helping is, I think one of my greatest qualities. I love helping people out. In highschool I was in the Service club which was a club that did different things around the community. From the service club, I got

started at the [community] Hospital where I served dinner trays to patients and did some work in the foodservice office. Working with people and helping them out is something I really enjoy I sometimes enjoy volunteering more than working for money.

Response from Mock Admissions Committee

Waiting List. Tell more about how you have helped individual lives. What did you exactly do in the service club. "helping" is soo broad. At the beginning you write Helping is; I *think* is my greatest qualities.

You need to be alittle more sure of yourself. In your paper you continued to say helping helping helping use some syninims. Shows it hasn't been thought through well. How does all this effect you?

Revision

I'm not quite sure of what I want to study, but I do have some idea. Helping is one of my greatest qualities. Everyone says how good it is to have me around because I can always be counted on to help someone out in a time of trouble. In my school I am in the service club which is a club where students can choose what activity or event you want and volunteer your time.

In the service club, I helped [an office] that comforts and discusses with rape victims and/or their children, relocate to another office. It took about five hours, but it was worth it, because in one day we packed, loaded, traveled to the new location, unloaded and unpacked, cleaned the rooms and set all the offices up. I also bowled to raise money for handicapped children, and volunteered for a while at [a community school] playing with children. One day, a nearby hospital was having a "Children's Day" celebration, and they needed a few highschool students to supervise some activities, so for a few hours, I face painted kids. At my school library, I used to volunteer my study hall time working with the librarians. I did light filing, labeling, or typing. I still do it, but now I get paid for the job. Every Friday, I volunteer at [a community] hospital filing and picking up menus, and passing out and picking up dinner trays to the patients. Working in the hospital is really a lot of fun, not that I want to be a nurse, or work in a hospital environment or anything, but it's nice to know that I can help them since they're short on nurses.

What I really want to do is manage an advertising agency. Whenever I watch a commercial I think to myself "Oh I can do better than that! I can think of a better commercial that will catch the eyes of the audience!" Because I'm pretty creative, I think I would succeed in this career. I want to be able to help consumers to buy what is best. I believe your college will help me with my career.

Response from Mock Admissions Committee

Accept. You seem pretty helpful, and care about other people, but you don't say what or how our facilities can help you.

This writer has clearly improved the quality of her essay, providing many more specific examples to illustrate the traits of being caring and helpful. The remarks of the mock admissions committee are supportive and constructive and seem to help her recognize the need for concrete support for her claim. The feedback, along with the experience of evaluating the essays of other students, appears to have pointed her in the right direction.

Other Uses of this Practice

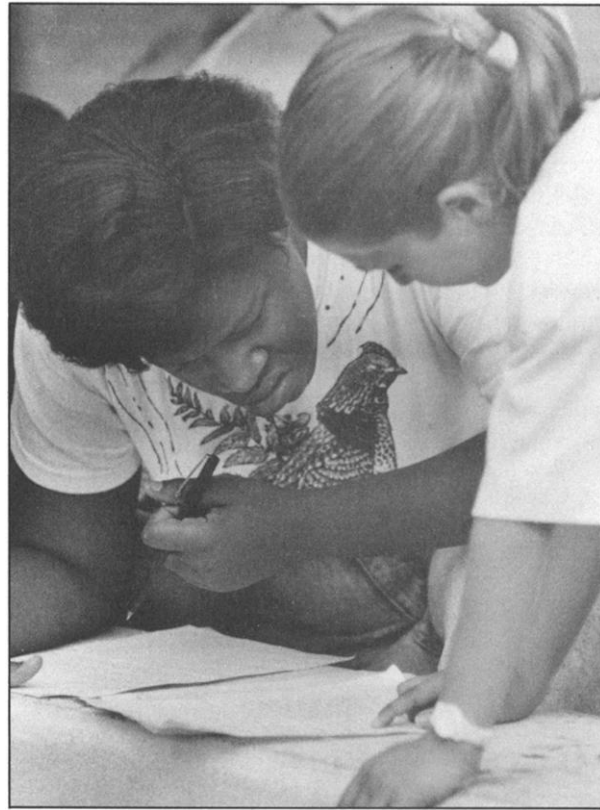
Students can form role-playing peer-response groups any time they may ultimately submit their work to an external audience. Students preparing creative writing for submission to a literary magazine or competition might form mock editorial boards to critique one another's work. Students learning argumentation could write essays in support of candidates for school elections and submit them to a mock electorate. Students writing letters to corporations could form mock corporate boards to evaluate the presentation of ideas. Students writing Advanced Placement exams could gather information about AP readers and form mock AP committees to evaluate one another's practice exams (an activity suggested by Pamela Fly [1991]).

Sandra Stotsky asserts that teachers can help students grasp the notions of purpose and audience by

extending the notion of reader beyond what is real to what is imaginary. . . . [So] long as the information and ideas are real, the audience and/or the point of view of the writer may be imaginary. (1985, 7)

She contends that the ability to project an anticipated readership enhances the immediacy of the writing whether the writing springs from a personal need to communicate or is done for the purpose of conveying ideas on issues and texts. She identifies an increasingly complex series of ways for students to produce imaginative informational writing across the curriculum (1984). The strategies below can be used to adapt her suggestions to the English class.

1. *Write informally from the perspective of a particular role.* Write a letter from one literary character to another.
2. *Write informally to convey understanding of historical or cultural settings.* Write a letter from a citizen of Salem to a relative in England describing the plight of Hester Prynne.



3. *Write in some conventional form to reveal understanding of a text or an issue.* Write a book or film review with the audience being the editor of a particular type of magazine.
4. *Approach the same topic from multiple perspectives.* Assess the candidacy of Holden Caulfield for readmission to prep school from the perspectives of old Spencer and Phoebe, with the audience being Pencey's headmaster.
5. *Reconstruct ideas and information for a new context.* Write from the point of view of Martin Luther King, Jr., to suggest solutions to modern social problems, with the audience being a conservative think tank.

As with the college-application essay, all these alternatives would be enhanced if students formed role-playing peer-response groups to evaluate drafts and recommend revisions.

Conclusion

Giving students an authoritative voice in the evaluation of other writers can help them develop a sense of control over their own writing. Provided that the impetus to write is important to them, activities such as these should help students achieve the balance among speaker, argument, and audi-

ence that Booth found so important, and make writing an important means of expression and growth.

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EJ FIFTY YEARS AGO

The Race Is Not Always to the Swift

Ten years ago I began an experiment to determine what slow students in high school like to read and whether or not they can be encouraged to do extensive reading. I now feel that I have a partial answer to the first question and a complete and enthusiastic one to the second.

For this experiment I have kept a record of every book read by the lowest third of ten successive tenth-grade English classes, with notes indicating the pupil's reaction to each book. The experiment has included more than four hundred pupils, with I. Q.'s ranging from 75 to 105 as rated by Henmon-Nelson intelligence tests. School records for these pupils show consistently low grades and repeated assignments to the slow section of the class.

* * *

[Of what value is such reading?]

1. Improved reading ability. Experiments seem to prove conclusively that much easy reading means increased reading skill.
2. Added experience with life problems—work, play, love, family life, hobbies—on a plane that he can understand. That there is a lack of literary style and subtlety of thought does not invalidate this statement.
3. An interesting leisure activity. The slow section usually has a larger percentage of pupils from unfavorable home and community surroundings than do the superior groups. Therefore, merely as a means of supplying a much needed recreational activity, such reading is of definite benefit.

Beryl McAdow. September 1941. "Ten Years with Slow Readers," *EJ* 30.7: 573-79.