Teaching Audience Post-Process: Recognizing the Complexity of Audiences in Disciplinary Contexts[1]

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      In a recent critique of writing across the curriculum that appeared in *Business Communication Quarterly*—an article aptly entitled "Whacking WAC"—Mary Munter proposes that business schools abandon WAC programs altogether. Topping her list of concerns are writing assignments that fail to address "defined business context[s] and audience[s]," envisioning instead the instructor as the primary audience (108). Professional communication scholars have long complained that writing in the academy assumes a monolithic audience instead of envisioning multiple readers with different needs and uses for information. Distinguishing between classroom views of audience and audience perspectives in professional or disciplinary organizations, Elizabeth Huettman agrees with Munter, noting that "academic writing assignments which place the teacher as the primary audience are atypical contexts for writing…[and] fail to account for the input that multiple audiences located within and outside the organization have on the creation of text" (270). Without going so far as "whacking WAC," how can we reconcile this vision of the monolithic audience (usually the instructor) with the potentially multiple and conflicting readers and reading roles students will encounter in various professional and disciplinary contexts? In this article, I argue that the answer lies in a shift from traditional process views of writing that stabilize audience to post-process views that focus attention on the multiplicity of audiences, perspectives more in keeping with the complex communication that goes on in various disciplinary contexts.

      The process view of writing has dominated our teaching of writing in the academy, from first-year composition courses to workshops on writ-

ing across the curriculum. Currently, process views of audience inform one of the central tenets of WAC, "writing to learn."   The concept of writing to learn, with its emphasis on writing as a tool for learning and problem solving, has its basis in early cognitive process models. Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon explain the function of the writing-to-learn approach and its limited conception of audience:

> The purpose of writing to learn assignments—journals, discovery drafts, in-class writing—is to use writing as a tool for learning rather than a test of that learning, to have writers explain concepts or ideas to themselves, to ask questions, to make connections, to speculate, to engage in critical thinking and problem solving. The audience for this kind of writing is the student him- or herself; it is writer-based prose. (579)

The process-oriented, writer-based nature of "writing to learn," however, may be incompatible with its WAC counterpart, "learning to write" in multiple disciplinary contexts and for multiple audiences. McLeod and Maimon remind us that "writing across the curriculum includes both writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines" and that "assignments that encourage students to learn disciplinary discourse can expand students' notions of audience" (580). In the remainder of this article, I will explore how the movement from a process approach to writing to a post-process view challenges the cognitive constructs of an imagined or invoked audience and, with its emphasis on public, situated communicative interactions, shifts the attention to multiple audiences who co-construct meaning. I will also examine writing assignments from across the curriculum that envision audience as a more dynamic, interactive concept and acknowledge the potentially multiple and conflicting audiences writers will encounter in various disciplinary and professional contexts. Finally, I will explore the implications of post-process perspectives for our teaching of writing and audience. By challenging the stable, monolithic audience of the classroom (the instructor or writer as sole audience), a post-process approach offers an alternative to "whacking WAC."

Writing specialists—particularly those who lead WAC workshops and assist in WAC curriculum development and assignment design—would do well to challenge the perspective of audience aligned with the process tradition, which posits an abstract, generalizable collectivity. Much of the discussion of audience in the field of rhetoric-composition during the 1970s and early 1980s comes out of the process tradition and focuses on

"audience analysis" as an initial step in planning to write or as a prewriting activity. Audience analysis is primarily a writer-based activity that involves collecting facts about the potential audience imagined by the writer. Often following heuristic models, writers are taught strategies for identifying audience based on the description of demographic variables and analysis of shared beliefs, values and background knowledge. The process is very linear, with writers first defining audience in response to questions such as, "What is the audience's physical, social, and economic status?" and then trying to adapt the discourse (through organization, stylistic devices and tone) to the audience. This approach has several limitations, such as the failure to acknowledge the co-constructive role of the readers who interact with writer and text. In the process tradition, audience analysis comes at the beginning of the process while audience participation comes at the end, casting readers in roles of passive recipients who exist apart from the discourse.

This fixed and linear process approach has been challenged recently by post-process theories that call such stabilizing strategies into question. A leading proponent of the post-process movement, Thomas Kent, identifies three main tenets of post-process perspectives: that writing is public, that writing is interpretive, and that writing is situated. Communicative interactions, according to post-process theory, are dynamic, relational and situated in shifting contexts and thus cannot be reduced to a generalizable process. As Kent (1999) explains, "writing requires interpretation, and interpretation cannot be reduced to a process" (3). What, then, does this mean for our approaches to audience in writing instruction? For one thing, it means that our writing-to-learn approaches—process-based approaches that emphasize the production of discourse and envision the writer or instructor as the sole audience—need to be balanced by an emphasis on the reception of discourse. A post-process approach shifts the focal point from the writer's process of analyzing audiences to the roles of readers who participate in and, along with writers, construct meaning. It is this more complex approach to audience that Munter calls for, an approach that situates communication and defines the various audiences and contexts that shape writers' responses.

Traditional writing process perspectives —what Kent labels "Big Theories"—cannot capture the complex and shifting roles of readers who meet writers halfway and participate in these acts of communication. These "Big Theories," such as cognitive process perspectives, envision the au-

dience as a mental construct of the writer—a unified image of readers that exists in the writer's head, prior to discourse. This mental picture of audience is often described as the writer's "sense of audience." For example, in her study of actively publishing writers, Carol Berkenkotter notes that "the internal representation or mental sketch a writer makes of audience is an essential part of the writing process" (396). Typical of the writing process movement's emphasis on the writer's control over the text, it is the writer alone who imagines an audience and invokes the reader, a view that ignores the public and interpretive nature of communication in the post-process perspective. A post-process view would acknowledge that the writer participates in communication with multiple language users and that, given the situated nature of the interaction, the writer's internal representation of those readers may not match up perfectly with the actual roles that multiple readers play.

The process movement's privileging of the individual writer over the interactions between writers and readers is continued in later expressivist process theories, where the audience is envisioned as a heuristic used by the writer to motivate expression or, in contrast, is seen as a hindrance to the writer's "authentic voice"—a concept the writer is better off ignoring, as Peter Elbow has argued.[2] Elbow advises writers to push audience into the background during the composing process so as not to impede the creative act. As a result, in the process movement, whether manifested in cognitive or expressivist perspectives, the audience is an abstraction created by the writer—a static component of communication that can be isolated and even tossed aside when it is not conducive to writing.

We need look no further than writing process textbooks to see instances of homogeneous and monolithic conceptions of audiences in the academy. For example, in a popular and widely used writing process textbook, Lisa Ede's *Work in Progress*, student writers are given the following advice on ways to stabilize their various academic readers:

> No matter what their discipline, your instructors are members of an academic community. As such, they share a number of intellectual commitments and values. . . . Although they might disagree about specifics, those who teach in colleges and universities generally agree about what it means to be a well-educated, thoughtful, knowledgeable person. (249-50)

Ede goes on to describe the shared values and beliefs of college instructors, who—regardless of discipline—expect well-developed and well-

organized papers with adequate details and evidence, and appropriate and concise language. However, such descriptions posit a unified, stable group of academic readers. Why not focus instead on the "specifics" about which the instructors disagree? This knowledge—that different instructors read with different disciplinary expectations and thus value different writing conventions and styles—could potentially empower students more than knowing what traits and values are shared. Instead of giving writers a "one-size-fits-all-readers" approach to audience, we need to enable them to navigate the multiple reading roles that they will likely encounter as communicators in various disciplinary and professional contexts.

To illustrate that these more complex views of audience do, in fact, exist in various disciplinary contexts, I examined sample writing assignments from across the curriculum. The assignments, which were collected as part of a recent WAC study,[3] indicate that instructors are already embracing more complicated notions of audience coinciding with post-process perspectives. It is not unusual, for example, to find writing assignments that challenge the abstract, unified audience of process perspectives and that instead identify multiple, layered audiences. For example, an engineering report assignment identifies multiple readers, including internal industry reviewers as well as external readers. Student writers are given the following description of audience:

> Professional reports in industry will be read and used by many people with various backgrounds. Some will be engineers and others may not. Do not write your reports to the instructor . . . . The beginning of the report should be written to a general audience with later stages of the report getting more technical in nature. The president of a company who may be a non-engineer should be able to read the beginning of the report and get a general idea of what was done and any conclusions or recommendations reached. Engineering personnel should be addressed in the report where specific technical points are developed.

The assignment identifies roles outside of the monolithic audience of the instructor as reader; in fact, students are cautioned to "not write…to the instructor." The assignment then goes on to identify multiple audiences with various levels of experience, such as the non-expert company president and the expert readers consisting of engineering personnel. When it is no longer just the teacher who is defined as reader and when the context for the writing is defined outside the academic context, student writ-

ers must more carefully consider their readers' input and how that input shapes their responses. For instance, in the report assignment mentioned above, writers may need to define technical terms in the introduction while shifting to incorporate more technical terms, descriptions and illustrations as they draft the body of the report, which gets "more technical in nature." The assignment acknowledges that there is no generalizable process that describes the complex interactions of writers and readers. As readers' roles shift (from expert readers to nonexpert readers), their expectations also shift, thus creating a more dynamic interplay between writers' and readers' interpretive interactions.

In another assignment, an advertising professor assigns a magazine ad which will be "placed in *People* magazine for a national client, AT&T," indicating varying and conflicting reading roles of the primary readership for the ad (the readers of *People* magazine, who make decisions about the service) and a secondary audience (the client, who is affected by the decisions). Like the engineering assignment, this assignment challenges the monolithic audience and one-way communication between writer and reader in process perspectives and calls on student writers to negotiate among multiple and conflicting reading roles. This assignment illustrates how, from a post-process perspective, interpretation shifts with context and audience as writers strive to meet both the needs of the general readers of *People* and the needs of corporate clients of AT&T. Kent notes that "when we write, we interpret our readers, our situations, our and other people's motivations, the appropriate genres to employ in specific circumstances and so forth" (2). As writers consider various rhetorical strategies that they will need to employ to communicate with multiple readers—as in the assignments described above—they better understand the interactive and public nature of communication.

Robert Roth notes that having students envision multiple reading roles is "a way of opening up the possibilities of the text" (182). An openness to a wide range of potential readers, Roth argues, can expand reflection, exploration and development of ideas. Thus, while juggling multiple notions of audience may complicate the communicative act for students, such an approach allows more flexibility than following a rigid definition of audience and responding to a set of heuristics designed to describe this monolithic audience through analysis of character traits and demographic variables. The multiple-audience situation—which reflects the dynamic, interactive communication in post-process approaches—is much more

dynamic and fluid than prevailing audience- adaptation models, process-based models that portray readers as static and homogeneous.

Since, from a post-process perspective, moments of communication cannot be codified and communicative interactions are shifting and contingent, what matters is not the writer's consideration of audience prior to writing or the writer's guesses about what textual conventions will best invoke readers. What matters is the actual interaction between writers and readers as they enter into a "relation of understanding." Kent, drawing on the work of language philosopher Donald Davidson, distinguishes between what he calls "prior theories" (interpretive strategies like analyzing the audience's background or guessing their demographic makeup) and "passing theories" or strategies that writers and readers employ in the actual moment of interaction. All readers and writers, in order to communicate effectively, call on "codifiable shortcuts" like their knowledge of textual cues or disciplinary conventions, but more significant are the "passing theories"—the interpretive guesses that readers and writers make as they seek to match up interpretations during the actual moment of communication.[4] If entering into communication means entering into shifting relations with other language users in particular contexts, how can we create opportunities for student writers to engage in such interactions?

One answer to this question is to provide students with opportunities for encounters with readers who approximate their real readers (instructors who are members of the disciplinary community) but whose "prior theories" might not match up exactly with the writer's. For instance, consider the following description of audience for a Geology 505 assignment, a scientific paper describing rock formations:

> An important consideration in a scientific paper is your audience. Who will be reading this paper? Assume that you work for a private/government agency and that your paper is going to be a technical report to your boss. You can further assume that the reader is familiar with basic (Geology 505 level) terminology. However, be sure to explain any advanced terminology that may be unfamiliar to anyone but an expert in your field.

In this case, the reader has a basic grasp of terminology used to describe rock formations but may not share in the writer's more expert understanding of "advanced terminology." Therefore, the writer, in constructing "passing theories" or interpretive strategies, must negotiate the boundary between an expert and non-expert audience. Put a different

way, the writer must negotiate between the teacher who will read as a member of the disciplinary community and the teacher who will evaluate the writer's knowledge of basic geology, thus mediating between writing to learn (in the classroom context) and learning to write (in the disciplinary context). A similar approach can be seen in this description of audience for a chemistry report assignment:

> Write as though your report is to be read by a person knowledgeable in mass spectrometry but not familiar with this particular article, somewhat as if you were a referee reviewing a manuscript submitted for publication and you were reporting to the journal editor.

Once again, while writer and reader share some prior theories (knowledge of mass spectrometry), the reader is unfamiliar with the writer's particular subject of the report. As a result, the writer must develop strategies or "passing theories" that address these gaps. Since writers in various disciplines will very rarely encounter a unified audience with shared prior theories, practice with negotiating the audience's various levels of knowledge will better prepare writers to perform in various disciplinary, professional or public contexts.

Another way to give student writers experience with negotiating prior and passing theories is to focus class time on "passing theories" and the strategies that writers employ during actual moments of interaction with real readers. Marilyn Cooper emphasizes the importance of interacting with real readers in her 1986 article, "The Ecology of Writing," a precursor to post-process perspectives. Cooper critiques the process view of audience as originating with the writer and offers a perspective on audience that can be aligned with post-process theories—a perspective of audience based on the readers writers know through real social encounters and receive actual feedback from. Cooper agrees with the distinction between prior and passing theories, noting that "writers not only analyze or invent audiences, they, more significantly, communicate with and know their audiences" (10-11). She would transform the cognitive constructs of "invoked" or "addressed" audiences (based on process theories) into "real readers"—friends, colleagues, and roommates who actually read and respond to drafts. Cooper shifts the focus from the abstract "general audience" to a focus on "readers as real social beings," (11), which is in keeping with post-process perspectives.

Other assignments across the curriculum that bring students into direct contact with the shifting relations within communities of readers and

writers help to emphasize the public, situated nature of writing. An assignment in dental hygiene asks students to carry out a case study report that brings student writers into direct contact with members of these social organizations. The goals are "to provide students with an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned…to actual settings" and "to provide actual clinical experience for students at a public health center." Unlike the private act of writing in the process tradition, this assignment brings writers into direct relation and communicative interaction with others. Writers develop a case study that describes a problem and recommends a program to solve the problem (such as access to dental care for rural residents or provision of dental services to veterans). As a result, writing becomes a situated and public act, an act "that requires interpretive interaction with others" and that ensures that writers "always write from some position or some place" (Kent 3).

In addition, ethnographic assignments that allow student writers to directly observe and participate in the rhetorical interactions within particular communities and cultures, are increasingly being used as pedagogical tools in a variety of disciplines, from clinical psychology, social work, women's studies and ethnic studies to education, journalism, speech communication and even business. Having student writers observe and participate in a community's actions exposes them to the public, situated nature of discourse and the conflicting interpretations and shifting relations within communities. Through their observation and participation in a culture, students come in contact with multiple, conflicting reader identities that are always in flux, challenging a unified and stable audience. According to James Zebroski, "Ethnographic writing encourages writing for multiple audiences" (33). In addition, instead of learning a static set of writing skills (including heuristics for analyzing audience), students take with them an awareness of contingent interpretative strategies, which better prepares them to move to other contexts and communicate effectively within them.

This attempt to situate writing by focusing on public acts of communication does not negate the importance of one very real communicative situation, the classroom. A post-process approach might acknowledge that the classroom is a "public" too and includes its own multiplicity of audiences, whether peer reviewers, instructors or members of the disciplinary community. While Munter argues that writing assignments are geared too much toward an academic audience of one, the instructor, writ-

ers cannot afford to overlook this very powerful real reader—what pro-
fessional writers might call the "watchdog" audience, the reader who is
evaluating the writing and observing the writer's success in meeting the
expectations of the assigned audience. Instead of trying to ignore these
multiple audiences or trying to reconcile them by pretending to "become"
the president of the engineering company or the AT&T client that stu-
dents are addressing in their papers, teachers might begin to acknowledge
the existence of multiple readers and reading roles—not just in disciplin-
ary contexts but in classroom contexts—and to be upfront with students
regarding the challenging task of negotiating these audiences. In this
way, teachers would not have to deny the fact that an actual audience
exists—the teacher as reader—a reader who belongs to the academic com-
munity and evaluates texts according to the conventions of this commu-
nity. In addition, teachers could acknowledge the valuable input of an-
other group of real readers, peer readers, defined by Cooper as "real read-
ers, not just stand-ins for a general audience" (11). At the same time,
writing teachers would not have to ignore the benefits of giving students
practice in "learning to write" for other public situations—for a variety of
disciplinary contexts that have their own multiple and layered audiences.
A post-process perspective recognizes that communicative interactions
are complex and that "writing is a thoroughly interpretive act" (Kent 2).
Because this interpretive act is shared with multiple readers who play
multiple reading roles, there is no one generalizable process that can de-
scribe this act, whether carried out in the classroom context or in contexts
beyond the classroom.

Instead of "whacking WAC," as Munter proposes, we should instead
shift our thinking from process views of simplified, one-way reader-writer
exchanges to more complex post-process views. Whether focusing on
writing to learn in the classroom context or learning to write in disciplin-
ary contexts, post-process perspectives emphasize the public, interpre-
tive and situated nature of communication. Consider Munter's explana-
tion for abandoning WAC in her discipline, business:

> Business writing is about writing performed in business—with a
> defined business audience and context. Writing in most business
> school courses, on the other hand, is about writing performed in
> academia. The audience is the instructor, who is trying to evaluate
> student understanding. . . . Except in those rare cases where instruc-
> tors . . . not only give writing assignments with a defined business

audience and context but also grade those assignments from the point of view of a business reader, not a professor, teaching writing in other courses serves only to confuse and frustrate students. (108)

As writing teachers, we need to make the cases for situating writing and recognizing multiple audiences less "rare." Student writers should recognize that audience is not a collectivity that they can easily generalize about and define but is instead a dynamic social interaction that often involves multiple and conflicting reader roles. In addition, writers should have opportunities to develop rhetorical strategies (passing theories) that mediate among multiple reader expectations (prior theories). Furthermore, we can address what Munter describes as students' frustration and confusion about audience by acknowledging that the classroom is also a "public" with its own multiple audiences, including the teacher and peers as real readers who engage the text along with "external" audiences that might be identified in the assignment. In this way, writers might see beyond "writing for the teacher" and begin to envision audience as a dynamic, interactive concept—rather than the answer to a set of questions that writers fill out or an abstract sketch the writer makes in his or her head. It is especially important that WAC instructors embrace this more complex, post-process view of audience because it "expands students' notions of audience" (McLeod and Maimon 580) and recognizes the potentially multiple and conflicting audiences writers will encounter in various disciplinary contexts and in public and professional contexts beyond the classroom.

Endnotes

1. The current article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Fifth National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference held during May 2001 at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

2. See Peter Elbow's article, "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *College English* 49 (1987): 50-69.

3. The writing assignments from teachers across the curriculum were collected as part of a 1997 study carried out at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. Most teachers submitted their assignments anonymously. The study, entitled "Going Online with WAC: Enlisting

Campus-Wide Participation in a Computer-Supported Writing Curriculum," was funded by a grant from the Council of Writing Program Administrators and was carried out in collaboration with Dr. Kelly Belanger (University of Wyoming) and Dr. Clyde Moneyhun (University of Delaware).

   4. For a fuller discussion of Donald Davidson's philosophical perspectives on communication and their implications for rhetorical theories, see Thomas Kent's *Paralogic Rhetoric: A Theory of Communicative Interaction*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1993.

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