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# Direction and Misdirection in Peer Response

Thomas Newkirk

The late sixties and early seventies saw a concerted attack on the teacher-as-audience. James Moffett claimed that the teacher's authority as evaluator disrupted any natural relationship that a writer might have with an audience.<sup>1</sup> Peter Elbow argued for a "teacherless writing class" where responses came solely from peers.<sup>2</sup> In response to these and other attacks, many freshman English textbooks began to identify the audience for writing as someone other than the teacher. Some urged students to consider their peers to be the primary audience; others advised students to define an appropriate audience (peers being one possibility) and to write for that audience. The writing would then be judged by its effectiveness and appropriateness for the intended audience.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the heavy emphasis on peer evaluation, there has been no systematic investigation of the responses of the peer audience. If students are asked to write for their peers, one must assume that the evaluation criteria used by these peers are consistent with the goals of the writing course. But is this the case? If students approach peers' writing with values, interests, and emphases different from those of writing instructors, the status of the peer response becomes problematical.

In order to examine possible differences between instructor and peer evaluations, I conducted a study which posed three questions:

- (1) Do instructors in Freshman English give four selected papers evaluations that differ significantly from evaluations given by students in Freshman English?
- (2) Are instructors in Freshman English able to predict the differences between their evaluations and the students' evaluations?
- (3) What are the reasons for the different evaluations?

For this study I selected one group of ten instructors in Freshman English at the University of New Hampshire and another group of ten students cur-

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rently taking the course. The ten students were selected from a group of twenty student volunteers. In order to ensure a range of writing abilities in this group, I asked the instructors of these twenty students to rate them in the top, middle, or bottom third of their class based on the four or five papers they had seen to date. From the twenty, I then selected three students rated in the top third, four rated in the middle third, and three rated in the bottom third.

I met with each of the twenty subjects individually for about one and a half hours. Subjects were asked to read four papers and were given as much time as they needed to read, reread, and review. After each paper was completed, I interviewed the student to explore his or her evaluation. This interview was taped and later transcribed. After all of the papers were read, each subject made two ratings:

- (1) They gave each paper a general impression rating of 1-10.
- (2) They ranked each paper 1-4.

In addition, instructors were asked to predict the students' rankings of the papers. Finally, subjects were asked to explain the reasons for their rankings.

The four papers chosen for evaluation were all written by students in introductory writing courses at the University of New Hampshire. All four are essays in which the writer uses personal experience to support generalizations. The spelling and punctuation of all the papers were corrected so that errors of this type would not figure into the evaluations.

To give a sense of the task for each subject, I will present excerpts and brief summaries of each paper.

- a. "Mailaholic." In this paper the writer attempts to show her addiction to receiving mail. Near the beginning of the paper, she writes

I am a mailaholic.

I am addicted to letters, receiving, sending, reading, writing, and addressing them. I revel in stationery stores; picking and choosing the "right" paper for me. Should I get the Muppets, Snoopy, or something sophisticated with flowers on it?

Stationery is nothing without stamps. Flag stamps, wild animal stamps, stamps with morals, purple stamps with B's on them. One-cent stamps, thirteen, fifteen, and now eighteen-cent stamps. Post offices drive me wild!

- b. "Friendships." This paper is built on an extended metaphor comparing the author's friends to the various positions on a baseball team. She begins the comparison with her own position:

I am on the mound. I am a pitcher. No one plays the game unless I throw the ball. Everything is determined by how I pitch the ball. The catcher would be my best friend, giving me advice, keeping my spirit up and my concentration on the game. If I threw a wild pitch, she would sacrifice her body to save the ball. She would dig bad pitches out of the

dirt and throw the ball back to me so I can get back on the mound and pitch again. When I am doing poorly she would call "time out" and walk to the mound to build up my confidence and when I strike a batter out, we rejoice together.

c. "Problems of Eminent Domain." This paper attempts to show the injustice of the law of eminent domain as it was used to purchase part of a farm owned by the writer's parents. Midway through the paper, she describes her parents' financial status:

At the present time, my parents' financial status is questionable. The amount they received this summer for the land is \$56,000. This payment was made for 64 acres of some of the most valuable land in New York State. The amazing fact that my parents received the same amount of money that a couple can earn in three years, for a section of land that took my parents a lifetime of work to obtain, reveals that something must be unfair. The state offered my parents \$56,000 for putting them out of business. To pay a couple \$56,000 for putting out of business a 36 dairy cow operation is outrageous. The amount wouldn't even be able to purchase a hot dog business from a local vendor.

d. "Grossmans . . . Love It or Leave It." This paper describes the writer's disillusionment with this summer employer and his sympathy for workers who don't consider alternative employment. In the paragraph below, he describes one of his co-workers:

I had heard stories about a salesman named Truman before I met him. When I started to work, Truman happened to be on vacation. If you worked full-time for a year you were entitled to a two-week vacation. Truman had worked for Grossman's for ten years. "Great to be back," he said as he came through the door. I remember how strange it sounded at the time; I guess it sounded funny because he really meant it. Truman, who never bothered to take his cigarette out of his mouth when he was talking, is the type of person you have many conversations with but you have difficulty remembering what any one of them is about; but you can always remember what brand of cigarette he smokes.<sup>4</sup>

The results of the ratings and ranking are shown in Tables I, II, and III. Table I compares the holistic (1-10) ratings given by the two groups. Table II compares the rankings (1-4) given by both groups, and Table III compares teachers' predictions of student rankings with the actual rankings. From these data, two conclusions seem justified:<sup>5</sup>

- (1) Students and instructors differed in their evaluations of "Grossmans . . . Love It or Leave It" and "Friendships."
- (2) Instructors were able to predict correctly some differences in the ranking of "Grossman's . . . Love It or Leave It" and "Friendships." But for "Friendships" particularly, they were unable to anticipate the magnitude of the difference.

**Table I**

Average Point Rating (10 = high, 0 = low)

	Mailaholic	Friendships	Eminent Domain	Grossmans
Students (N = 10)	6.5	6.7	7.0	6.6
Teachers (N = 10)	6.0	3.9	6.5	7.3

**Table II**

Average Ranking (1 = high, 4 = low)

	Mailaholic	Friendships	Eminent Domain	Grossmans
Students	2.5	2.7	2.3	2.7
Teachers	2.3	3.9	2.2	1.6

**Table III**

Accuracy of Predictions (1 = high, 4 = low)

	Mailaholic	Friendships	Eminent Domain	Grossmans
Students' Rank	2.5	2.7	2.3	2.7
Teachers' Prediction of Student Rank	2.1	3.6	2.3	2.1

The transcripts suggest three major reasons for the differences in the evaluations.

### **The Role of Identification of Peer with Writer**

In three of the four papers, the writers are dealing with experiences common to the experiences of students reading the papers. For that reason, many students claimed they could "relate to" the paper. The sheer frequency of statements of this type suggest that this willingness to identify with the author is a powerful determiner of student response. Some examples:

*Response to Mailabolic*

I thought it was a good paper. It was interesting to read. I feel the same way she does about mail, like when she says she feels depressed when she doesn't get mail in her mailbox, and somebody else had like 10 letters in their mailbox, it kind of makes you unhappy.

*Response to Friendships*

I could understand her analogy. When she started talking about her mother being the umpire and how her beer drinking friends her mother would always say are illegal, I could see a mother doing that because that's what my mother always does.

*Response to Eminent Domain*

Having lived in New England I've heard of people having their land taken. In fact, I knew a family who had their land taken for a highway to be put in and it's especially bitter after you've worked the farm for so many years.

*Response to Grossmans*

I worked at a company and there were people there that worked there full-time, and I just look at them and laugh like he (the writer) did and just say "Are you going to do this for the rest of your lives?" Don't they want to get out of that rut? Then they'll say, "I'm making a lot of money now," or "I have this and I bought a new car with this." He doesn't know about the interest and stuff, but at least he has a car.

One student defined the general principle upon which these responses are built as follows:

I suppose when a reader reads a paper, it's a lot easier if the person can relate to it, has some background and says, "I can relate to this because it seems the same kind of thing happened to me." And it's a lot easier if the reader knows something about what the writer is talking about.

This kind of personal identification, however, was virtually absent in the teacher protocols.

This discrepancy could account for some of the disagreement in the evaluation of "Friendships." For instructors the extended metaphor was unsuccessful; one even claimed that the paper would make for a good Abbott and Costello comedy routine. But the general criticism was that the metaphor ends up keeping the writer from exploring friendships. A typical response:

. . . it's a fairly simple paper. The author takes one metaphor and extends it for three pages. It doesn't work well because the author stayed too long in the realm of images. It doesn't really say very much about friendships.

A number of students agreed with this assessment, but many found the analogy far more informative than the instructors did.

Contrast this instructor's evaluation with that of a student who chose "Friendships" to be the best of the four papers.

I really liked the idea because you can really tell that they're complex relationships she has with each friend. You can tell that she has different

relationships with every friend she has. And she wants to convey that to us and I think this idea (the baseball metaphor) gets that point across in the paper, that she has a really complex relationship with her friends.

What to most instructors was “simple” is to this and several other students “really complex.” A possible reason for this discrepancy is that the instructors expect elaboration to be done by the writer; for example, they claimed the connection between the spectators and the pitcher in the metaphor needed to be specifically drawn out. Students are more willing to do some of this elaboration as readers. If readers have had a similar experience, they are ready to use that background to extend what has been written. Because they “read in” details, they see a complexity that the teacher does not. Because the very limited comparison of mother to baseball umpire reminds them of their own mothers’ rule-making authority, those few sentences are invested with a richness not granted to them by instructors. This contrasting willingness to “read in” elaboration is one of the distinguishing differences in the strategies of the two groups.

On two occasions students commented on this difference. One student noted that “Mailaholic” has “the tone of an English paper.” Curious, I asked what he meant by that:

It’s more declaratory than inspired. It’s very much plotted; it’s not pulling along by its own weight. When you write a magazine or newspaper article what you put and how much you put is controlled by whether or not you’re going to be exciting or interesting. *Whereas in an English paper you know you can develop as far as you want, as long as you do it well. I think she’s taken a little advantage of the reader.* She’ll ask a question at the beginning of the paper and then elaborate on it. Make a blanket statement, elaborate on it. (emphasis added)

Another student when asked to predict which paper teachers would select as the best, chose “Mailaholic”:

*She’s taking something that seems menial to people and she’s making it a big deal. And I think they like to see stuff like that.* I think they like to see students write about something like a tree and make it flowery, make it come alive. So I think they would like [Mailaholic] because it’s no big deal to get mail and she made it sound like it was really something. *She talks about different characteristics and stuff.* (emphasis added)

Both students seem to suggest that elaboration pays off when writing an “English paper” but for themselves and for real world writing, it can be a bad habit.

### The Role of Originality

One reason for the relative popularity of “Friendships” was the fact that the writer tried a method of exposition that students found original. Note the similarity in the following three responses, written by three different students:

I thought it (Friendships) was very creative and imaginative and I think it was well put together. And the writer wasn't just telling a story. I think that teachers would feel the same way about that; they like to see a creative mind instead of just reading about certain events.

I never thought of friendships like this. I wrote a friendship paper for English and I never thought of it. I thought it was really neat in a way. I would have never thought of my friends as a baseball team like this is doing. . . . It's like a different way of writing a paper on friendships. I've never seen one done this way.

I like the Friendships one because I liked the way she applied the baseball diamond comparison. I would have never thought of that. . . . I think teachers {would prefer "friendships"} because they'll like the unique approach to the friendships whereas "Grossmans" [the first choice of this student] was just a straightforward kind of paper.

A similar scale of values underlies all of these responses. All three students compare the approaches taken in "Friendships" to another possible approach to the topic. In the first, the students claim that the writer "wasn't just telling a story"; one suspects that the second writer, in comparing her own paper on friendships to this paper, realized that she had taken a more conventional approach (written a "story?"), and she was humbled by the comparison to this new approach; and in the third the student predicts that teachers will prefer an original to a "straightforward kind of paper." All of these responses suggest that there is a genre of English paper which they call a "story" that they feel comfortable with. A "story" is not necessarily a narrative, but is more a presentation of facts and experiences in which the shaping hand of the writer is not explicitly evident. In "Friendships" the shaping hand is clearly evident; the metaphor precludes a "straightforward" presentation of facts or experiences. Even one student who found problems with the metaphor predicted the "attempted use of the [comparison] would probably impress teachers."

**They were wrong.** While instructors occasionally acknowledged the originality of the approach, their major complaint was that the metaphor ended up limiting the student:

. . . . it seems that the author while writing this paper had that metaphor and thought, "Gee, this is really neat" and just filled it out completely. I haven't found out much about this person's friendships. The metaphor is so all-encompassing that it sort of sucks up the whole idea.

This discrepancy in responses may be due to different reading backgrounds in the respondents. Students reading "Friendships" probably have had few previous reading encounters that dealt with extended metaphors. Consequently, they are not familiar with the conventional criteria for the use of extended metaphors, specifically with the usual requirement that they must be used to clarify the subject. Instructors who, as graduate students in English, are immediately familiar with the use of figures of speech, could easily see that this student's use of the figure violated a basic convention for its use. One still might question, however, whether the student should have been given more



credit for “the attempted use” and whether a uniformly critical reaction might convince a student to return to writing “stories.”

### The Role of Stance

The question of stance goes beyond differences in specific criteria used by the two groups; it deals more with the role the reader takes in reading a student paper. The issue of stance can be illustrated by the example of a teaching assistant in a writing course. On the first day of class he informed his students that since he would be the audience for their papers, he would put on the board a list of subjects that he was interested in and encourage students to write on them. The director of the Freshman English program was horrified to hear of this; he felt that it was highly inappropriate to force students to write to the instructor's *individual* interests.

But the instructor was doing nothing more than any reader does; we generally choose to read in areas of interest and avoid styles of writing or subjects that do not appeal to us. We indulge our idiosyncracies—and call it “taste.” This private stance is counterproductive in the classroom, though, because the instructor must acknowledge a wider range of interests and stylistic possibilities. In a sense, the instructor represents the standards and range of interests of an evaluative community. Take as an example a paper I received a couple of years ago, “Why Cheerleading is a Sport.” Now, as a jaded product of the late 60's, I would not choose to read this piece unless the approach was satirical (which it definitely was not). As an instructor, though, I took it seriously and worked with the writer to develop arguments that might persuade an intelligent reader unafflicted with my biases. I suspect that much of the criticism of the “teacher-as-audience” is actually criticism of teachers who allow their idiosyncracies to become the source of evaluation.

Not only is the instructor's range of interest wider, the focus is different. To evaluate writing the instructor must direct considerable attention to ways in which the text meets or fails to meet criteria implicit in the genre in which the student is writing, for at some point the teacher must give a critical response. In order to give a response, an instructor must view the text as opaque; it is a tangible, seeable representation of a set of decisions made by the writer.

The student responses suggest that students have only partially been able to adopt this stance; many still read like private readers. In some cases this was evident when students said they could “relate to the paper”; in others it appeared when they claimed that they liked a paper because they liked the topic. But in some cases the students' responses suggested that they were reading to learn, to be persuaded, to be amused. They were granting the text transparency. They were not looking at the window but the view the window allows them. For example, one student reacted as follows to the description of Truman in Grossman's:

It was especially effective for me when he started talking about Truman in the three-room apartment with his wife and five kids. I can't even think about that. It just makes you think that these people are so much poorer than most people I know.

An instructor commenting on this section of the paper would more likely have referred to the writer's effective characterization of Truman or to the effective choice of details that describe the situation. But this student talks, not about the strategy of the writer, but about the reality being described, not the window but the view.

## Implications

The results of this study are consistent with those of an earlier study I conducted<sup>6</sup> and suggest strongly that students and instructors in Freshman English at the University of New Hampshire frequently use different criteria and stances in judging student work. For this reason, the two groups might profitably be viewed as distinct evaluative communities. This position has powerful implications for instruction.

The study raises serious questions about the advice given to students encouraging them to "write for their peers." Such advice embodies two critical assumptions: that the teacher is fully aware of the criteria that the peer audience applies to students' writing, and that those criteria are consistent with the aims of an introductory writing course at the college level. In the case of "Friendships," instructors were unable to anticipate its appeal to students, and one might argue that even if they had been able to anticipate its appeal, they would have been reluctant to accept the students' judgment. They would have been reluctant to reward a paper that fell so short of their expectations about explicitness and about the use of the extended metaphor.

If teachers have this difficulty in anticipating—and accepting—the standards of the student audience which the teachers meet regularly, how much more difficult is it for the teacher to anticipate responses of less familiar audiences. If students are encouraged to write for any audience with the assurance that the paper will be assessed on its effectiveness with the intended audience, one must assume that the instructor possesses a virtually complete knowledge of how various audiences respond to prose. I suggest that few teachers have this complete knowledge; we fall back on using the criteria of the community to which we belong.

The danger, then, is to say one thing and do another: to claim to take one position (assessing writing on its probable affect with any intended audience) and to actually take another (assessing on the basis of the norms of the academic community). This discrepancy will only heighten the cynicism that many students have about evaluation.

This study also suggests the limitations of peer groups for providing a fully

adequate response to a student paper. My own experience working with beginning teaching assistants suggests that many begin with unrealistic expectations about the peer audience; when peers respond in a way that “misdirects,” the instructor is caught in a dilemma—either to allow the “misdirection” to occur or to enter a dissenting opinion and thereby seem to veto a class decision. Even when the instructor has been careful to go over criteria with the students, he or she will often find these criteria applied with different results by students and teacher. The teacher’s “detail” may differ from the student’s “detail.”

Nothing I have said should be construed as arguing for the elimination of the peer workshop; students need practice applying the criteria that they are now learning. But rather than being viewed as the “natural” audience for fellow-students’ writing, they might more profitably be viewed as apprentices, attempting to learn and apply criteria appropriate to an academic audience. It follows that the teacher’s role in the workshop should not be passive. If students are to enter into the evaluative community of the instructor, they need to see the norms of their new community applied to student work. To use Frank Smith’s term, they need access to demonstrations; terms like “detail,” “transitions,” “order,” have meaning only as they are applied; the instructor needs to make his or her application of these criteria as accessible as possible.

This study also raises questions about the shorthand comments that teachers frequently use to mark papers. Many of these comments are informative only if one can assume a common critical vocabulary. For example, James Macrimmon in his much-used text *Writing with a Purpose* suggests the use of abbreviations like “det” for “detail inadequate.”<sup>7</sup> But the use of this correction symbol will be successful only if instructor and student agree on what constitutes a detail and on what constitutes adequacy. The results of this study suggest that students are more willing to identify with a text and “read in” details that the writer has not included; their view of adequacy may differ from that of their instructors, who expect greater explicitness.

As the student masters the norms of this academic community, comments like “detail inadequate” can take on meaning. It is not uncommon for an abbreviated comment to be fully informative to an experienced student. But for the student about to enter a new community, “det” is not enough.

The instructor stands as the representative of a larger community and has the responsibility of making the norms of that community clear and plausible—even appealing. Correction symbols, checklists, grades, rating scales or even peer workshops do not offer beginning students a full enough picture of how these norms work. Most presume that the major work of teaching has been done, that teacher and student are working on the same wavelength—when in many, if not most, cases they are not. These norms will be made clearer if we as teachers expose what goes on when we read—if we illustrate, if we demonstrate how they work.

In addition to the need for clarity and fullness of response, the study sug-

gests, I hope, the value of paying serious attention to students' own comments about writing. When I began collecting student responses, I tended to view those that differed from my own as "misreadings." Like one of Plato's advantaged souls, I assumed that I soared higher and had a clearer view of The Good than my lower-altitude students. My job was to help them ascend. But as I reread the student comments, I began to see their plausibility, their coherence. They no longer appeared erratic; rather they seemed to arise from reasonable assumptions about writing. I was no longer confronted with misreadings, but with different, equally logical readings.

As a result I try to listen longer and better when a student explains a judgment, always assuming it makes sense. Previously I would have rushed in, eager to change what I had not tried to understand.

## Notes

1. James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968), p. 193.
2. Peter Elbow, *Writing without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
3. See, for example, Sylvan Barnet and Marcia Stubbs, *Practical Guide to Writing*, Fourth Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), and Maxine Hairston, *A Contemporary Rhetoric*, Second Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).
4. Full copies of the papers used in this study are available upon request. Write to Thomas Newkirk, English Department, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 08324.
5. A subsequent study with a larger sample, 72 students and 20 teachers, found the same discrepancy for "Friendships" and an even greater discrepancy for "Grossman's."
6. Thomas Newkirk, "How Students Read Student Papers: An Exploratory Study," to be published in the new journal, *Written Communication*.
7. James McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose*, Seventh Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), inside cover.

### *Journal of Basic Writing* Resumes Publication

The *Journal of Basic Writing* has resumed publication. One issue has been published for 1984, and two issues are in place for 1985, edited by Sarah D'Eloia Fortune, whose term has ended. Lynn Quitman Troyka has been appointed editor starting with the 1986 semi-annual issues. Manuscripts of 10-20 pages on any topic related to basic writing will be welcome as of January 1985, in the new MLA style (3rd edition, 1984) and, for the referee process, in quadruplicate with identifying information on a cover page only. Prospective authors can send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to request the new "JBW Editorial Statement and Style Sheet." Subscriptions are \$8 for individuals and \$12 for institutions for one year (two issues). Address: *Journal of Basic Writing*, Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, 535 East 80th Street, New York, NY 10021.