

Chapter 4

Preparing Young Writers for Invoking and Addressing Today's Interactive Digital Audiences

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century technologies, in particular the Internet and Web 2.0 applications, have transformed the practice of writing and exposed it to interactivity. One interactive method that has received a lot of critical attention is blogging. The authors sought to understand more fully whom young bloggers both invoked in their blogging (their idealized, intentional audience) and whom they addressed (whom they actually blogged to, following interactive posts). They studied the complete, yearlong blog histories of fifteen fifth-graders, with an eye toward understanding how these students constructed audiences and modified them, according to feedback they received from teachers as well as peers and adults from around the world. The authors found that these students, who had rarely or never blogged before, were much more likely to respond to distant teachers, pre-service teachers, and graduate students than to their own classroom teachers or peers from their immediate classroom. The bloggers invoked/addressed their audiences differently too, depending on the roles that they had created for their audiences and themselves. The authors explore how and why this came to be the case with young writers.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century technologies, in particular the Internet and Web 2.0 applications, have transformed the practice of writing (Andrews & Smith, 2011). Where once the concept of a

writer's "audience," in distinction from that of a speaker's, was described as "at best, an abstraction, a theory, or a metaphor" (Magnifico, 2010), the advent of social networking has now provided many Internet writers - or bloggers, as they are more often known in these media - immediate feedback from a variety of responders. These

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responders form a potentially international, and very “real” audience (Jenkins, 2006).

The construct of an audience, whether real or imagined, has suffused the large literature about teaching writing for a substantial period of time (Barbeiro, 2010; Graves, 1975; Kos & Maslowski, 2001; Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2010/2011; Long, 1980; Ong, 1979). When Ede and Lunsford (1984) first grappled, more than a quarter century ago, with the dual questions of whether an actual audience existed for an individual writer, and, if it did, whether it should influence that writer’s output, they took the position that then-current models for and against such a construct were inadequate to describe the process of actual writing. At that time, Mitchell and Taylor (1979) had observed that some scholars were urging teachers to instill in students a desire to privilege their own messages’ sincerity and integrity, while others were advising them to be hyperaware of their audience and its particular needs (Hairston, 1978). Pfister and Petrik (1980) were exhorting students to “construct in their imagination an audience that is as nearly a replica as is possible of those many readers who actually exist in the world of reality” (p. 214). Despite this, prior to the late 1990s, however skillful one might be in such an exercise, “[f]or a writer, the audience [was] not *there* in the sense that the speaker’s audience, whether a single person or a large group, is present” (Ede & Lunsford, 1984, p. 161, italics theirs). Ong (1979) explained this challenge from the student writer perspective in this way:

The problem is not simply what to say but also whom to say to. Say? The student is not talking. He is writing. No one is listening. There is no feedback. Where does he [student writer] find his ‘audience’? He has to make his readers up, fictionalize them (p. 11).

That was then. Now we possess the technologies and predilection to textually communicate with and potentially witness and counter-respond

to a few, some, or many others from around the world who comment upon our work (Andrews & Smith, 2011). Within this context, “writers and readers can become active listeners and conversation partners for each other” (Magnifico, 2010, p.168).

What is different about composing for such an audience, compared to writing using traditional technologies such as pen and paper? And what are the implications for writing with a digital audience in mind for audience awareness development and the teaching of it to young writers? This chapter attempts to explore these questions, by drawing insight from a year-long research project with fifth-grade bloggers. During the project, these young writers engaged in written conversations with a truly worldwide digital audience about what they were learning in and beyond their classrooms. The blogging community they joined was interactive and diverse; it consisted of audiences from different age groups, cultures, nations, continents and geographical locations.

Defining Blogging

Blogging has been defined and conceptualized in several different ways. For example, some scholars see blogging as “a personal knowledge artifact” (O’Donnell, 2006, p.7), which reveals the writer’s emerging knowledge that is documented in writing and reflections posted on a blog. Others see blogging as a hybrid of conversations with the self and with others (Efimova & de Moor, 2005)—a practice and authorship that “combine two oppositional principles: monologue and dialogue” (Wrede, 2003, para. 1 Weblogs and Discourse).

Blogging has also been characterized as public and private spaces for individual reflection and social interaction (Davies & Merchant, 2007; Deng & Yuen, 2011). Self-expression and self-reflection support the individual in “expressing one’s thoughts and emotions, as well as recording one’s experiences” (self-expression) and deriving meaning from them (self-reflection) (Deng

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