

Discussion / Débat

Audience, Empowerment and Student Writing: A Response to Harker

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The *CJE/RCE*'s colloquium on student writing (vol. 12, no. 4; 1987) raised a number of important issues about education students' difficulty in coherently and logically presenting ideas in writing. W. John Harker (1987) raised one such issue—the problem of audience—in response to the work of Trevor Gambell. Harker argued students' writing is often muddled partly because its aim is to please a professional audience. As a remedy, he suggested having students write for other students (in addition to professors) so that classes might be enlivened with thought-sharpening discussion and debate about students' ideas. This would immerse them in the process of peer critique that faculty members, through participation in conferences and in consuming and writing for professional journals, take for granted. Furthermore, Harker argued, it is necessary that professors abdicate a measure of classroom authority to enable students fully and freely to participate in developing and criticizing written ideas.

When the *CJE/RCE* colloquium appeared, we were co-teaching a course in which students were required critically to read and to evaluate each other's writing. Our experience deepened our understanding why student writing should be emancipated, even as it revealed difficulties we had not considered. We describe our experience with the aim of enlarging Harker's discourse on the desirability of audience shift, and providing guidance to those seeking to teach this way without encountering the pitfalls we did. Although one of us compares our course experience to the *Hindenberg* disaster and the other does not, we agree our expectations for the development of student voice went largely unfulfilled.

The course, entitled "Models of Education," is required of preservice education students at York University. We taught collaboratively, intending

to model collaboration, inquiry and dialogue, and committed to develop emancipatory and critical ways of knowing among students.

"Models" introduces students to the philosophy of education, familiarizing them with various perspectives on the aims and purposes of education and on their respective implications for practice. The course also permits students to develop critical tools with which to think about their concurrent practicum experiences. As the primary vehicle for analysis of school experience we assigned a paper to be written collaboratively by groups of four to six students concerning their experience, emphasizing issues, philosophically informed. The paper was to be thirty to forty pages long. Its audience was six other student groups, in addition to the two of us. We thus broadened the papers' audience, and gave students authority in evaluation. Grades from each of the six working groups were averaged and weighted equally with our jointly determined grade in order to arrive at a final mark for each paper.

But despite our having (1) provided the occasion for students to collaborate with others in the process of writing, (2) broadened the audience for their writing to include peer groups, and (3) abdicated some of our authority over evaluation, the written work we received resembled overall the muddled writing samples we have seen in other, more conventionally taught classes. Of fourteen group papers, we considered three to be excellent, most to be muddled in varying degrees, and three to be unmitigated disasters. These proportions are what we would expect in a class in which students wrote only to please the professor.

The usual problem in student papers was their superficial, global, and largely opaque recommendations for non-analyzed and unspecified educational problems. We are sure that our colleagues at other institutions are also familiar with this type of "educationese," not just in students' writing but also in much of what is published about education (Barrow, 1979). For example, students stated that "education must meet the needs of each and every child" and that "in order to live on this planet it is first necessary to understand it." In these comments we recognize the type of filler that students resort to when they are unsure what to say and wish to please an external authority, that is, when they seek to mask rather than to express their own views. Our intent is not to ridicule these responses but to take some measure of responsibility for them. They represent the kind of tentative and stumbling utterance to which all of us are prone in such situations as employment interviews, where we have little control and wish to impress others.

We learned from our course evaluations that although a small group of students prized the freedom and responsibility they were able to exercise, a larger group were indifferent. Approximately one-fourth of the students deeply resented the alternative structure of the course. For this last group, the course was not emancipatory but a frustrating ordeal.

What went wrong? We reject the temptation to blame our failure on student inadequacies. Nor would we want our experience to deter others wishing to embark in the same direction. We believe that significantly to improve student expression, students' orientation to the writing process must change. This means broadening the audience of students' expressive work, and encouraging faculty members to relinquish some measure of authority. We believe we failed, not because we allowed our students freedom, but because that "freedom" was not linked to their experience and therefore not experienced as freedom.

Several problems should be solved if classroom social relations are to be restructured to enable student voice. These include: (1) establishing student ownership of writing projects; (2) including formative as well as summative evaluation of student writing; and (3) understanding student experiences in any particular class in the context of students' educational histories and of the university environment. In each, our analyses calls for more, rather than less student freedom.

As we discovered, enabling students to choose what to write about does not insure they will feel a sense of ownership of their work. Many of our students were not pleased to collaborate with others in a large writing project about the foundations of education. Since the project itself was viewed as an arbitrary imposition by authorities, it is not surprising that we so often encountered the "safe" writing we have reported. We now believe it is necessary to do much more groundwork with students at the beginning of a course to enlist their trust and commitment. This involves giving students some say in the curriculum of the course so that when work begins they see it as theirs. Given the constraints of material to be covered and standards to be recognized, there is room for students to discuss and choose the kinds of writing projects they believe will be of most use to them. Readers who believe this an unrealistic approach are referred to Boomer (1982) for numerous examples of its successful use in elementary and secondary schools.

Secondly, we may have erred in having peer groups provide feedback at a point when written work was considered finished. In examining the students' critiques as a group, we found they produced insightful and useful comments and criticisms of each others' work. We believe that students having access to these critiques during writing would produce significantly better final works and benefit more from the course. The ideal forum for this feedback would be in face-to-face discussions in which readers have the chance to expand and to explain in detail their criticisms, and writers have the opportunity to ask questions, clarify meanings, and generally engage in dialogue with their critics. Our experience with this and other classes convinces us that students are capable of implementing critical standards for each others' writing when the structure of the class permits them enough time and freedom to do so.

Finally, there is the issue of context. Those of us who attempt to renegotiate the terms of taken-for-granted classroom social relations are often faced with students' skepticism and/or disbelief about our intentions. In most or all of students' previous classes at the elementary, secondary and college levels, the authority of the teacher has been immutable and non-negotiable. As a result, students enter the classroom prepared to defer to authority rather than to negotiate its distribution. This helps to account for some students' perception that we were merely interested in concealing (rather than sharing) power in the classroom, and some others' view that our unexpected approach reflected nothing more than incompetence. We have come to realize that many of our students will not trust us until well into the course, if at all, and that this warranted suspicion must be anticipated and accounted for. Many of our students must have viewed our efforts as an obstacle in the way of identifying what we "really" wanted from them. The artificial and constricted quality of their writing shows their understanding of the situation in which we put them. "Emancipatory" answers to their direct questions and concerns about what precisely we want of them will be taken as mere obfuscation until students believe that the course structure is not another sham and unless and until it is not.

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