

Audience Effects: A Bidirectional Artifact Analysis of Adolescents' Creative Writing

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Abstract: Much of the literature that developed rhetorical and cognitive viewpoints on audience suggests that when writers write with an audience in mind, imagined readers affect the writing. This paper investigates these audience effects by examining a creative writing workshop and asking how conversations with readers lead to revisions. Drawn from a case study of an 11th grade classroom, this bidirectional artifact analysis traces writing through students' drafts, revisions, and feedback. The resulting work shows how revision and writing development ties to interactions with readers—members of the students' audience.

Introduction and Research Questions

Much of the literature that developed rhetorical (e.g. Ong, 1975; Berkenkotter, 1981) and cognitive (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1981) viewpoints on audience includes an implicit assumption: Real and imagined readers affect writers' writing. Such studies have led to consequences in school writing curricula, including pre-writing (e.g. Pressley, 2005), writers' workshop (e.g. Atwell, 1998), and authentic pedagogies that connect students with real-world audiences (e.g. Duke, 2010). Similar to Learning Sciences work that aims to link classroom learning with authentic practices and contexts (e.g. Brown, 1992; Shaffer, 2006), these pedagogies posit that writing for readers reinforces literacy as communicative and helps writers plan, draft, and revise.

This paper, drawn from a case study of an 11th grade English classroom, analyzes students' experiences with one of these pedagogies: writers' workshop. I employ bidirectional artifact analysis (Halverson & Magnifico, under revision) to trace students' writings through individual drafts, revisions, and feedback from peers and teacher. This work shows how writing development (or lack thereof) was tied to interactions with readers—members of the students' audience. I take up two research questions: (1) In the context of a creative writing community, how do readers impact participants' development of their written pieces? (2) What changes and revisions do participants make when they write for and converse with their readers?

Theory

Ideas about audience have shifted as new literacies have pushed writers into a world where they can write and read, as Lunsford & Ede put it, “among the audience” (2009) (cf. Duke, 2010). Such studies suggest a role for the audience that is both cognitive—in that writing for an audience forces writers to consider readers—and social—in that sharing work opens up communication (Brandt, 1992; Magnifico, 2010). While cognitive-process traditions show that writers consider questions about readers as they work (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981), audience members play a literal distributed and dialogic role in collaborative writing (e.g. Bakhtin, 1976/1994). Conversation, social knowledge construction, and perspective negotiation may result from these interactions, (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997), helping students see writing as a communicative practice.

Methods

This bidirectional artifact analysis (Halverson & Magnifico, under revision) marries elements of narrative analysis (e.g. Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997), discourse analysis of feedback and conversation (e.g. Wood & Kroger, 2000), and artifact analysis of students' written texts. This combination is useful because it attends to narrative's key paradox: “Good” stories are acceptable to readers, so they must be *credible*. At the same time, they must be *reportable*; unusual enough to reach beyond known tales. When they responded to each other's pieces, the young writers in this study noted literary elements, and, as readers, explained the effects of these choices. While the reportability/credibility paradox was not invoked directly, student critics discussed whether their writings had achieved this balance. Was it a good story or poem? How did the piece achieve “goodness”?

Further, workshop writing relies on writers' and readers' critique: a comparison of drafts to discuss how revisions contribute to (or detract from) creative works. This analysis follows the logic of the critique process, examining the interplay of students' drafts and conversations in a *bidirectional* way. Instead of examining successive representations, bidirectional analysis reaches backwards and forwards in time, working to understand how new representations are built as revisions of prior iterations (Enyedy, 2005).

Participants, Data, and Setting

This case follows nine students (six female, three male) and their teacher, Mr. Caswell (all names are pseudonyms), through a creative writing workshop in their International Baccalaureate English classroom. Their school, a K-12 college preparatory school, is located near a medium-sized Midwestern city. Observations totaled

15 hours over ten weeks, and interactions were recorded and transcribed. Students worked through three “cycles” of creative writing, drafting alone and then critiquing their work in small groups. In Cycle #1 and #2, students wrote a prose piece and a small poetry collection, revising one of these works in Cycle #3. For all cycles, students also submitted analytical writing detailing how they used literary techniques in their writing. My own role in this space shuttled between observation and participant observation. I observed and recorded field notes when the students were writing quietly, but consulted with students who needed advice as well.

Data Analysis

The data for this analysis are drawn from the students’ drafts and small-group workshop critiques. A timeline provides the central metaphor for this analysis, and thus, I created timeline representations for each piece of writing, chronologically arranging all of the collected artifacts: students’ drafts, written feedback, and transcripts of their workshop conversations. From these timelines, I worked backwards and forwards to code how the writings changed over time (Halverson & Magnifico, under revision; Enyedy, 2005): I marked revisions, traced each change (where possible) to a feedback suggestion, and examined uptake in future drafts.

The drafts and critiques pictured in Figure 1 represents Noah and Kira’s rich, complex critique over time. The goal of this messy representation was to trace how writers revised in response to feedback.

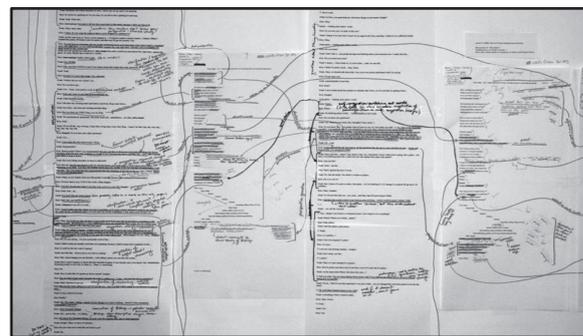


Figure 1. Photographic representation of bidirectional artifact analysis

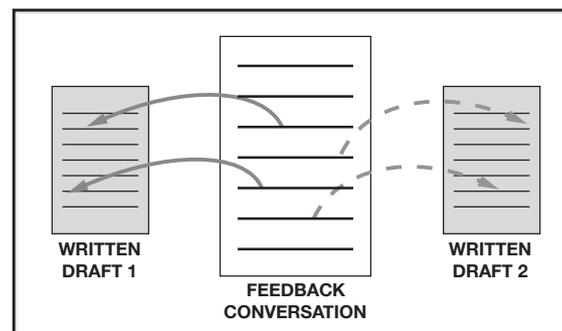


Figure 2. Graphical representation of bidirectional artifact analysis

The graphical representation (Figure 2) shows the logic of this method. Solid arrows represent critiques that refer *back* to the text of prior drafts (e.g. “Your word choice in the first line is confusing”), while dashed arrows represent suggestions that point *ahead* to potential revisions (e.g. “In the next draft, try using more description”). In an “effective” critique, both of these elements are present in the feedback.

Results

The results I present focus on the case of one student, Noah, who was chosen because his work with different partners provides representative examples of both predominant critique patterns in the classroom. Noah wrote five poems over the course of Cycles #2 and #3 and discussed two of these poems extensively in class. He focused on *Pitter Patter*, a poem that describes a rainstorm, through two conversations with Kira, and *After the Battle*, a poem that recasts gym class dodgeball as an epic battle, through two conversations with Nasha.

Noah and Nasha: Abstract Critique

Most of the students had little experience with creative writing workshops, and often commented on each other’s work in a general, abstract way. Noah paired up with Nasha during two class periods to discuss *After the Battle*. These meetings featured vague criticisms, arguments about words and style, and few direct references to the text. When Nasha challenged his word choice, for example, Noah often argued to justify his ideas:

Nasha: I noticed that you... um. You use big words that don't really fit in the context.
Noah: Godddd. I like this one. There's a continuity to this one.
Nasha: Your rhyming stinks.
Noah: I don't try to.
Nasha: If you're going to make this a lyrical poem, and I'm assuming that's what it is, is that what is this?
Noah: It doesn't have to be, it doesn't have to rhyme...
Nasha: Exactly, so don't make it rhyme. Disregard rhyming entirely, because it's so awful.
 (Classroom transcript 4/24/2009.)

Nasha's trouble—Noah's use of "big words"—surfaces in many critique conversations about Noah's poetry and invokes poetic genre; for instance, this criticism cites the potential of "mak[ing] this a lyrical poem," which Nasha "assumes" is *After the Battle's* genre. The critique challenges Noah to conform more closely to traditional poetic language, but Nasha remains abstract, providing neither context nor textual references. She never explains which "big words... don't really fit in the context," or which rhymes are "awful." Noah argues, again at the level of genre, that the words have "continuity" and that lyric poems "[don't] have to rhyme." Lacking clear referents in the text, the critique becomes defensive. These characteristics represented much of Noah and Nasha's conversation over two class meetings, as demonstrated by the descriptive statistics in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Noah and Nasha's Critique Conversations

Category	Measure
Total time available	1.00.33 (two 30-min conversations)
Written suggestions	2
Oral suggestions with clear textual antecedents	6
Oral suggestions that refer generally to the poem	4
Total revisions with clear antecedents in suggestions	3

Over the course of two meetings (1:00:33 total time), Nasha makes two written suggestions—word substitutions. She provides six oral suggestions with clear referents in *After the Battle*, and four criticisms that generally refer to the poem. As a result, Noah makes three revisions, two of which are Nasha's suggested word substitutions. Given the high-level comments and arguments about genre that characterized much of their conversation, it is possible (although not clear from the data) that Nasha led Noah to consider poetic language more carefully. What is clear is that these abstract discussions led to little textual change over time: Despite Nasha's concerns, Noah revises little.

Noah and Kira: Concrete Critique

Some small-group partnerships offered specific context and suggestions for revision. For the duration of Cycle #2, Noah and Kira worked together twice, closely reading each other's work. While they did challenge each other's interpretations, they often resolved these arguments with textual analysis. Preceding this segment, Kira wrote comments on Noah's poem, showing she did not understand the setting: driving during a downpour:

Kira: I wrote a lot of stuff, did you have any questions?
Noah: Yeah. Um... Yeah... I guess. I'm in a car.
Kira: Yeah... like, I get that, I found out that you were in a car...
Noah: Down here.
Kira: Here. I was like, oh! Wait! You're IN the car, okay. So maybe like up here, to like create that perspective right from the top, say like 'of my rubber tires,' or like, do something to say that you ARE part of this, you're in this car, not just... because when I read this, I just imagined this, like, a street and a car, like a car going by on a street, like I didn't imagine you were in the car... .
Noah: That works too... .
Kira: [Then] the car came back, and I got it! ...Um, so yeah, so I wrote that here, perspective, create your perspective from the beginning and that makes the poem easier to sorta picture.
 (Classroom transcript, 4/1/2009).

Kira notes the poem's unclear setting and premise, and in response, suggests "creating [the] perspective" "from the beginning." She points to clear consequences, invoking herself as a reader who had to "[find] out that you

were in [the] car,” and who thus misunderstood the context. Kira pinpoints her lack of clarity, noting that *Pitter Patter* does not mention the speaker until late in the poem. It shows the downpour to readers, but not the speaker’s perspective on the scene. To remedy this lack of clarity, Kira suggests revising the first stanza “to like create that perspective right from the top... do something to say that you ARE part of this.” She notes that because she didn’t understand this perspective, she failed to understand the poem’s scope—Noah’s experience, not an external description of a scene. While most of Kira’s suggestions change few words, they add sensory details, precise language, and Noah’s personal perspective to *Pitter Patter*. In contrast to his collaboration with Nasha (Table 1), his critique conversations with Kira (Table 2) contain explicit suggestions and justifications for revision. As demonstrated in the quotation above, Kira aligns her critiques with Noah’s text, pointing out textual elements and the consequences of his choices.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics: Noah and Kira’s Critique Conversations

Category	Measure
Total time available	1.18.42 (two 38-min conversations)
Written suggestions	6
Oral suggestions with clear textual antecedents	9
Oral suggestions that refer generally to the poem	0
Total revisions with clear antecedents in suggestions	12

Over the course of their two critique conversations (1:18:42 total time), Kira makes six explicit written suggestions that include word substitutions, image clarifications, and perspective suggestions; nine oral suggestions that have clear antecedents in *Pitter Patter*, and no general criticisms. As a result of these exchanges, Noah makes 12 revisions, including new or expanded stanzas, several clarified images, and a strengthened first-person perspective.

In contrast to his collaboration with Nasha, Noah’s conversations with Kira led to many more revisions. Tracing Noah’s work shows that while most students made relevant comments (ones that were potentially useful to learning about concepts like genre), not all of these suggestions led to real revision in future drafts. Rather, Noah’s responses to critiques present a clear pattern. He revises when a reader shows that his language does not convey his ideas—for example, Kira’s notes about *Pitter Patter’s* perspective—and suggests useful changes. In this way, audience response seems critical to Noah’s creative and representational processes.

Limitations

Any analysis is necessarily limited by available data. Because bidirectional artifact analysis uses artifacts and transcripts as data sources, it cannot capture the full range of Noah’s revisions (some of which are not rooted in the feedback), or individual cognitions. While I cannot claim that these critiques fully account for the development of Noah’s poems, tracing the artifacts of and conversations around this work point to a link between feedback structures and revision patterns, as well as pedagogical strategies for creative writing.

Discussion and Significance

Much early cognitive and rhetorical work on audience claims that attention to audience is one hallmark of expert writers (e.g. Berkenkotter, 1981), who ask hypothetical questions about their audience as a planning strategy (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981). Extending this claim to literacy *learning* suggests that learning to write for an audience contributes to writing skill. This paper examines the effects of writing for and interacting with readers and represents an attempt to learn more about *how* audience carries this weight. In this classroom, a workshop design allows for social and dialogic audience feedback (Bakhtin, 1976/1994), and makes the contributions of students’ readers more clearly evident. This bidirectional analysis draws concrete links between students’ feedback and revisions, and thus, broadly maps the affordances of a workshop design in a classroom space: Discussions with real readers proxy for the reactions of outside readers (Lunsford & Ede, 2009) and help learners to see their writing as communicative and meaningful. Classroom writing can become a design experiment that teaches authentic practice (Brown, 1992).

Broadly, Mr. Caswell’s classroom shows that a collaborative workshop, even one housed entirely within a school space apart from the “real world,” can create a “real” audience. The most successful groups came to understand that writing is a tool to share meanings, images and ideas. Before Kira pointed out Noah’s failure to clarify his perspective, he was likely thinking of his poem as an assignment, not a representation of his experience to share with readers. This analysis shows that Noah was more likely to revise around these perspectival critiques, perhaps because they changed his understanding of the poem itself. These insights about

the communicative nature of writing are important and rare in schools, where most traces of “writer” and “reader” have been subsumed in “right” and “wrong” answers to teachers’ questions (Nystrand, et. al., 1997).

At the same time, the open workshop format became a constraint for many students who did not ask questions, negotiate meanings, or justify reasonable paths for revision self-sufficiently. Examining these conversations in a bidirectional way highlights productive critique moves and shows that some students (Kira) constructed these on their own—and consequently inspired significant revision. Despite similar classroom resources, Nasha’s feedback was never as concrete or generative as Kira’s. This analysis thus suggest that (1) mentors should model revision techniques, and (2) mentors should model critique techniques for students to use (e.g. mirroring outside readers). Examining how critique stretches between and across drafts and students suggests how pedagogy can encourage a productive, revision-focused writing environment.

Audience as a Social and Cognitive Tool

These data show that these young, learning writers’ individual cognitions only took them so far. Whereas cognitive process theorists (Flower & Hayes, 1981) found that the abstract sense of audience—“to whom am I writing?”—helped experts to begin their work, social contact with real readers aided these students. There is little evidence that these young writers thought about audience before they began to write, but many used the designed practice of getting feedback from readers to identify problem areas, refine ideas, and revise. In short, workshop writing teaches young writers that writing is more than what a writer *thinks* that she is saying, but what other readers and listeners *perceive* as well. Developing this understanding motivates an orientation of questioning meaning, revising to feedback, and refining ideas through conversation. Real-world, disciplinary knowledge is built in this way as well—but these techniques are unavailable in schools when communicative, social paradigms for learning are absent.

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