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# STUDENTS' INTERPRETATIONS OF WRITING TASKS: A CASE STUDY

When students interpret writing tasks, they often ask their teachers: "What do you want in this paper?" While on the surface this question seems to be only a request for information, on a deeper level it can signal a shift of textual authority from student to teacher. If teachers answer by presenting a list of requirements for the assignment, they will reinforce many students' beliefs that writing tasks can be solved by following a "right" formula. Teachers become stage directors, while students become performers, rehearsing parts of scripts instead of producing plays themselves. The answer to the often-asked question "What do you want in this paper?" then, influences how students interpret writing tasks, and determines the sense of authority they have over their texts.

The issue of task representation is relevant to all students—in fact, to all writers—but it is particularly pertinent to basic writers. I use the term "basic writers" here to mean beginning college writers who may be able to write error-free, grammatically correct sentences, but whose writing lacks development and fluency. Such writers often do not have the confidence and authority to interpret writing tasks broadly, in ways that are meaningful to them. Instead, they tend to be eager to please their teachers, a factor that limits

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their authority over their texts. (Brian Monahan, for example, found that basic writers spent more time revising for a teacher audience than for any other audience.) Task representation is an issue crucial to basic writers, but since it applies to all other student writers, I use the term “students,” not “basic writers,” throughout this essay.

As composition scholars and literary critics, we are beginning to understand that interpretive acts are complex, and that knowledge can be understood only in the context in which it is generated, but we rarely apply this knowledge to one of the most essential, frequent, and immediate occasions for interpretation in the composing process: writers’ interpretations of writing tasks. Before writers can begin composing, they have to devise or formulate their own writing tasks. Student writers must interpret tasks given to them. While some students interpret writing tasks in ways which excite them and lead them to explore their topics, many students limit their exploration process. Interpretation of writing tasks demands writers’ authority, yet students’ sense of authority over their texts is often fragile. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, for example, have argued that teachers easily undermine students’ authority and appropriate students’ texts by making heavy corrections and rewriting papers. Carol Berkenkotter found that feedback from peers sometimes threatens students’ textual authority. David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell have explored how basic writers often struggle and fail with writing in an academic community because they do not know how to speak with authority in the discourse community they just entered.

In this article, I address the following questions: How can we, as teachers, answer the question “What do you want in this paper?” without undermining students’ authority over their texts? Better yet, how can we get students to understand that they are asking the “wrong question?” How can we help students to interpret writing tasks in ways that encourage them to take charge of their writing rather than cater to the imagined demands of a teacher?

Successful interpretation of writing tasks, I argue, demands writers’ authority, confidence, and knowledge of rhetorical choices. Without these assets, writers’ options are narrow, their resources limited. To illustrate the importance of task interpretation, I examine the case of one student writer whose understanding of writing tasks changed dramatically during the course of his freshman writing class. This student, Eugene, entered his freshman writing class thinking that interpreting writing tasks meant finding out “what the teacher wants,” but later learned to interpret writing tasks as occasions to explore his ideas and try new rhetorical strategies. In other words, Gene came to understand that the nature

of writing tasks and rhetorical situations is flexible, that each writing task demands a contextual interpretation.

Gene entered his second course of freshman writing—a class that introduces students to argumentative writing—in the winter of 1986 at a large public university in Southern California. In this class, students write four different kinds of arguments: they make proposals, justify evaluations, analyze causes of a trend in society, and interpret a piece of literature. As instructor of the course, I collected the following material: all the writing Gene completed during the quarter, including prewriting notes, numerous drafts, a final revision and a self-assessment for each assignment, and journal entries concerning class discussions and students' current writing. Furthermore, I held several conferences with Gene during which we discussed drafts, and I interviewed him several weeks after the end of the term, tape-recording our conversation.

In the discussion that follows, I highlight how Gene's interpretations of the various writing tasks changed over time. Only when Gene broadened his interpretation of writing tasks did he learn to expand his repertoire of writing strategies, his depth of analysis, and ultimately, his ways of knowing. While Gene's drastic change in interpreting writing tasks is not typical of most freshmen writers, it does suggest a potential for growth that lies dormant in many students until they master the skill of interpreting writing tasks and assume authority over their writing.

### **Gene's Initial Interpretation of Writing Tasks: "Searching For the Right Ingredients"**

In the beginning of the course, Gene interpreted writing tasks as rigid exercises that demand a number of specific "ingredients." After completing his second paper, Gene expressed his concern about the "correctness" of the assignment in his self-evaluation. He wrote: "My paper doesn't carry every 'necessary' ingredient, but for the subject matter, I feel it serves its purpose." In the interview, Gene reflected on his approach to the first two papers: "I was given a list of what the paper was supposed to contain, and I looked at it, and I said ok, and did it." What Gene expressed here, I think, represents how many students approach writing tasks: instead of analyzing the occasion for writing and the audience in order to make rhetorical choices, students' efforts rest with second-guessing the teacher.

Students have good reasons for interpreting writing tasks in narrow terms. Gene, for example, explained how he understood a rule he had been taught in high school:

To me, analytical and creative writing was a problem at first, because . . . in high school [I] had been taught that analytical [writing] should be totally separate from creative—I'm not sure if that's just me; we never really did any kind of combination. We did something pretty straightforward about certain types of writing . . . or else we did something totally on our own and thought about it a lot.

Gene's explanation reflects a distinction that traditionally has been made by literary scholars and English teachers: that there is creative writing, writing worthy to be studied, and transactional writing, writing that gets work done. Even though this distinction has been challenged in recent years, and scholars acknowledge that the borders between fiction and nonfiction often blur, this knowledge has not yet influenced the teaching in many English classes.

Gene had learned to think of "creative" and "analytical" writing as two dichotomous activities; writing could only take one or the other form. This understanding of writing caused Gene to experience conflicts when composing essays. In a journal during the first week, he wrote: "In the past, I have found that when I write I get the feeling that readers will accept the paper as interesting but not convincing enough to change [their] minds." And he went on to speculate about the reasons for this dilemma:

Perhaps there is a lack of feeling in my papers but then again that deals with emotion. I was taught good critical papers have an objective tone. There must be a delicate balance between the objectivity needed for a level-headed argument and the conviction or feeling needed for an earnest tone. I have yet to find this balance. Hopefully it is obtainable through practice.

In this journal entry, Gene displays an intuitive sense of what classical rhetoricians have proposed makes a convincing argument: an appeal to readers' *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. Yet Gene could not reconcile his intuition with the rule he had learned, that "good critical papers have an objective tone." Gene experienced this conflict because he understood rhetorical rules as absolute and inflexible, much the same way blocked writers often understand rules, as Mike Rose has reported in his study *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*. Rose observed that "high-blockers . . . simply did not express or imply many rules that embodied contextual flexibility" while "all low-blockers seemed to function with [flexible] rules. . . . That is, contextual options appear[ed] to be a dimension of the rules' operation" (71). Although Gene was not a

blocked writer, his rigid interpretation of writing tasks narrowed his rhetorical choices and caused him a great deal of frustration at the beginning of the term.

In his second paper, an evaluation of the tennis player Boris Becker, Gene tried to resolve the conflict of rules by including a personal anecdote. He explains in his self-evaluation: “I tried to bring myself into the picture from the onset, then focus on Becker with an analytical eye, and then swing it back around to me to emphasize that it is still my own personal judgement.” Here, Gene had used both “modes” of writing in his essay, but he had not yet understood that the two can be integrated without conflict.

As the quotes above illustrate, writing a self-evaluation after each completed assignment and reflecting in journals on his writing process helped Gene to articulate his current understanding of the assignments and the nature of writing. Those articulations, in turn, helped me as teacher to respond to Gene and to share a mutually understood language to talk about writing. Writing self-evaluations and journals, then, is one factor that contributed to Gene’s changed understanding of writing tasks.

### **Gene’s Changing Interpretation of Writing Tasks: Gaining Contextual Flexibility**

In the process of writing the third paper, a causal analysis, Gene achieved a breakthrough. Ironically, he began the assignment by interpreting the writing task even more narrowly than he had interpreted the first two. The assignment asked students to speculate about causes of social, historical, or political trends, trends that affect various parts of the population in some profound way (such as an increase in teenage suicides or cocaine abuse). Such trends often have a host of causes—ranging from psychological to economic and political ones—and therefore invite students’ conjecture and speculation. For this assignment, Gene picked a narrow trend; he proposed to write about “an increase in horsepower among currently released new automobiles.” Although this was quite possibly a trend, the topic did not invite speculation about complex political and social causes. In fact, Gene himself recognized the trends’ limitations, observing that the topic was “pretty much straightforward. It [had] one single cause, not a combination [of causes].” Despite this insight, Gene did not reconsider his topic choice, probably because he felt safe having selected what he considered a simple and manageable topic. By interpreting the writing task in such limited terms, Gene had few risks to take and few rhetorical choices to make. His strategy was to

“play it safe.” Writers like Gene, particularly writers in freshman composition classes, may find it most comfortable to have few writing options. By limiting their interpretations of writing tasks, they avoid confusion and map out a small, familiar territory in which to demonstrate their writing skills (often concentrating on surface features, such as grammar or format).

Gene’s strategy of playing it safe, however, did not work when he approached the causal analysis. He had mapped out a territory that was too small to even fulfill the assignment because the writing task invited students to speculate about *several* causes, not just a single one. The narrow topic choice, therefore, indirectly contributed to Gene’s breakthrough because our discussion during conference focused on the topic and its limitations. After reading his first draft of the trend paper, I asked Gene about other, similar trends. Gene observed that other products, such as computers and stereos, were also advertised as having increased power while coming in smaller sizes, and he started to speculate about psychological and economic factors influencing consumers. When I encouraged Gene to write about these causes in his essay, he expressed delight to be able to use his insights and common sense, but immediately began to worry about the “right ingredients” of the paper, about losing the “objective tone.” In his journal he wrote:

In the past couple of days I’ve been worrying about this trend paper. In conference we spoke about a lot of interesting things. We also talked about the sources I would be using. We both agreed that . . . the goal of the paper is not to throw out statistics or expert testimony; the goal is to let the paper be thought-provoking and somewhat far-fetched. Therefore, my own observations are the expert testimony.

This extract captures how Gene struggled to gain confidence and authority over his writing. While he still displayed concern about using the right ingredients, he asserted in the last sentence—for the first time in the quarter—authority over his writing. Consequently, Gene explored a number of different causes, and his original idea became only one example of the larger trend. In his final revision, Gene wrote the following paragraph:

One obvious cause [of the trend of increased power in smaller products] is the growing technology manufacturers now have. Time dictates that products will increase in efficiency because of technological development. People feel that . . . products should become more and more practical because of [this inevitable] progress. Therefore, there is a demand for

smaller products. . . . But this cause can be carried only so far. To say it is practical to own a radio the size of a credit card is ridiculous. Isn't it only that much easier to lose? Obviously, there is a point where practicality cancels out and another element comes forth.

In the rest of the essay, Gene goes on to conjecture about the psychology of advertisers and consumers and about the importance of status symbols in society. His essay is thoughtful and provocative, and his analysis of causes goes into more depth than the topic of the first draft would have ever allowed him to do.

Writing a speculative argument helped Gene to assume authority over his text and bridge the gap he thought existed between creative and analytical writing. Reflecting on the causal analysis after it was completed, Gene said:

I wanted desperately to be thought-provoking. Without that, it is just another paper. I tried to dig and cover all bases but since it was . . . speculative it was difficult. Even though this work was the most challenging [so far], I really enjoyed it because I had to do so much thinking. I really had to concentrate so that what I wrote made sense to the reader or even myself.

In conference, Gene and I had "agreed" on the goal for the paper, that it should be thought-provoking. This agreement constituted a "permission" Gene seems to have waited for in order to assume authority over his text. Admittedly, it was still an act of my teacherly authority to suggest that the paper should be thought-provoking, but unlike specifying the "ingredients" a paper should contain, this act of authority enabled Gene to use his insights and explore new ideas. As teachers, we can never escape the authority invested in our roles and reinforced by educational institutions, but the least we can do is openly acknowledge the existence of this authority and discuss its effects with students. Conferences can provide a forum for informal student-teacher dialogue where ideas can be explored before appearing (and being judged) in final revisions of assignments. Because I encouraged Gene to take risks with his writing, and because our discussions focused on the content of his essays rather than on mechanics, Gene was able to expand his understanding of writing tasks.

Gene's confidence and increased motivation carried over into the last assignment for the class, an analysis of a short story. In his first draft, Gene offers an interesting, but not fully developed, interpre-



tation of a short story by Nadine Gordimer. Gene's first paragraph describes the experience the main character goes through:

In "A Company of Laughing Faces," the main character, Kathy Hack, among people her own age for the first time, comes to the realization that youth is not something one experiences with a large group. It is a state of mind in which one can achieve individuality. . . . Kathy discovers excitement and new wonders in the time spent with her peers, but with careful consideration learns she is alone.

Since the rest of his draft was fairly short, I returned to this opening paragraph during conference, asking Gene to elaborate. Gene started to discuss Kathy's conflict between wanting to conform while still desiring to remain distinct from the crowd. Gene then compared that conflict to one of the books we had read in class, Erich Fromm's *To Have Or To Be*. "In those terms," Gene said, "you could compare the conflict Kathy experiences to the distinction Fromm makes between the two modes of viewing life described in his book. "But," Gene interrupted himself, "I can't really put that in my paper, can I?" Again, the question of right "ingredients" distressed Gene. After my encouragement to include his idea—what better way to explore the meaning of a story than by making connections between previously unconnected ideas—Gene elaborated on his first paragraph, appropriating Fromm's terms. For the final revision he wrote this opening paragraph:

Kathy Hack, a girl of seventeen, among people her own age for the first time, is exposed to the subtle contrast between being young and having youth. Although Kathy's peers are thought of as being young, they are nothing more than a nameless, faceless horde of [people]. They do nothing but follow one another blindly without truly expressing themselves. They do not understand that to be young means one is able to feel free of role-playing or peer pressure. Kathy learns the hard way the nuances of these two attitudes.

I do not intend to argue that this paragraph is stronger than the first one. But Gene's adaptation of Fromm's terms helped him to define and analyze the events in the story. Having terms for the development of the main character, Gene found a way into the story and connected previously unrelated ideas. He even began to explore the conflict several other characters in the story experience. Asked about the difference between his first and last two papers, Gene said in the interview: "It might have been my attitude . . . the last couple [of papers] were more what I wanted to do . . . so [they got] a little



more input on my part.” Gene’s interpretation of writing tasks had changed and with it, his motivation and authority as writer. Rules were now understood the way Rose observed fluent writers perceiving them, as “multioptional and flexible” (90).

This changed view of writing tasks enabled Gene to expand his last two essays, an ability of consequences. Composition specialists know that addition to texts is a revision strategy frequently used by experienced writers (Sommers 380–388), a strategy that enables writers to make meaning changes rather than surface changes (Matsuhashi and Gordon 235–242). Furthermore, studies show that teachers frequently rate longer papers as being of higher quality (Picazio). After completing the last assignment, Gene wrote: “It seemed like I could continuously add more and more [to the paper]. It’s a rare feeling.” And a rare feeling this will remain for many freshmen writers as long as they interpret writing tasks as mysterious riddles which have to be solved by “always keeping an objective tone,” or by finding the right, yet hidden, “ingredients.”

## **Discussion**

At least three elements seem to have contributed to Gene’s changed interpretation of writing tasks. First, writing journals and self-evaluations frequently allowed Gene to articulate his understanding of assignments and his own composing process. Second, in conferences, Gene and I could discuss his work in progress and set goals for his writing. Through our dialogue, we established a shared language to talk about writing assignments and composing processes. Such shared language or “meta-language” is important for successful communication between students and teachers. It took me, for example, several weeks to understand what Gene meant by “analytical” and by “creative” writing and why he perceived them to be such dichotomous activities. Third, the very limited topic Gene chose for the causal analysis also contributed to his breakthrough because it focused our discussion on ways of reconceiving and broadening the topic.

Little research has been done on students’ interpretations of writing tasks and the process whereby they learn to do so. As researchers, composition scholars are left with a number of challenging questions: To what extent does the interpretation of writing tasks influence writing performance? How and when do writers learn to interpret writing tasks? How can a teacher recognize writers whose interpretations of writing tasks limit their authority over writing? What teaching methods promote flexible interpreta-

tions of writing tasks, ones that will leave writers motivated and with authority over their texts?

In order to help more students advance the way Gene did, we as teachers, have to learn to recognize moments in conference, in journals, and in encounters in the hallway, when students attempt to tackle new ideas, to reinterpret writing tasks, and to overcome what they perceive as conflicting rhetorical rules. For Gene, journals, self-evaluations, and conferences provided forums for reflection on his writing process. As teacher, I had to resist giving “pat” answers to the question “What do you want in this paper?” Instead, I had to turn the question back to Gene, asking for his writing goals and encouraging him to explore new and “far-fetched” ideas. At the end of the quarter, Gene wrote: “In the past, I felt I could write either analytically or creatively, no in-between. The past two papers have really opened up something that I’ve never been able to do before.” And exactly that—enabling students to do something they have never been able to do before—should be our goal as teachers.

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