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A case for mutual engagement: On the consequences of professor as terminal audience

Adam Nannini
Eastern Michigan University

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Abstract

As a student in the final throes of undergraduate work, I've begun to look back at my college career and consider the academic experiences that made me into the writer I am today. The element that most intrigues me is the role my professors have had in shaping my writing voice and approach, and as I move forward in academia, I can't help but wonder about the dynamic between the student writer and the professor reader. Academic writing, to me, has sometimes felt bound within the four walls of the institution, making the writing I have done for classes feel like it is meant for professors' eyes only. I wonder what effect this single audience has had in shaping me as an academic writer. Obviously there are times and classes where having a sole reader of work is both appropriate and freeing, and this is especially true in early composition classes where student writers are developing confidence. But, for me, this dynamic did not change much as I progressed through my undergraduate degree, and I have to imagine that this constant and familiar single audience played a part in molding who I am as an academic writer. So, I set out to discover the effects a professor has on student writing when acting as a terminal audience. Do students approach academic writing for a professor differently than they approach self-directed writing? How do students view their class assignments in terms of their validity for publication or even for sharing with loved ones? And what are the alternatives to having the professor act as a sole audience? These are the questions I intend to answer.

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A CASE FOR MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT: ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF PROFESSOR AS
TERMINAL AUDIENCE

By Adam Nannini

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Department Head (Print Name and have signed)

Honors Director (Print Name and have signed)

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1. What I Hoped to Learn

As a student in the final throes of undergraduate work, I've begun to look back at my college career and consider the academic experiences that made me into the writer I am today. The element that most intrigues me is the role my professors have had in shaping my writing voice and approach, and as I move forward in academia, I can't help but wonder about the dynamic between the student writer and the professor reader. Academic writing, to me, has sometimes felt bound within the four walls of the institution, making the writing I have done for classes feel like it is meant for professors' eyes only. I wonder what effect this single audience has had in shaping me as an academic writer. Obviously there are times and classes where having a sole reader of work is both appropriate and freeing, and this is especially true in early composition classes where student writers are developing confidence. But, for me, this dynamic did not change much as I progressed through my undergraduate degree, and I have to imagine that this constant and familiar single audience played a part in molding who I am as an academic writer. So, I set out to discover the effects a professor has on student writing when acting as a terminal audience. Do students approach academic writing for a professor differently than they approach self-directed writing? How do students view their class assignments in terms of their validity for publication or even for sharing with loved ones? And what are the alternatives to having the professor act as a sole audience? These are the questions I intend to answer.

I'm going about finding the answers to these questions a number of ways. First of all, I'm going to examine my own experience as an undergraduate. I am a Language, Literature, and Writing major in my last semester right now, so I am not at all removed from the pressures and expectations that professors have of student writing. I will describe how I

feel that writing for a sole professor audience has affected the approach I take to my academic writing, both in a positive and in a negative sense, and how valid I consider my class work for publication or sharing with others.

After I lay out my own experience, I am going to explore what scholars have to say on the subject. I will be examining journal articles from the top minds on composition pedagogy, and I will contrast and compare their findings. I'll be reading important names in composition like Peter Elbow, Philip Eubanks, John D. Schaeffer, and more. These scholars, as professors and practitioners in the field, will serve to balance out and give perspective to my experience.

Following this, I will examine the experiences of my student peers. I realize that my experience is limited and localized, so it may not be representative. One of the main intrigues of this project is to find out if my peers have had a similar experience to mine. This semester, I have the special opportunity to act as a teaching assistant for a senior seminar class. For this class, I have been able to help create assignments, shape the syllabus, and help define the audience for class writing assignments. In this section, I will be interviewing three students in that class, asking about their experiences when writing to a professor as terminal audience. I will find out how this has affected their approach and how they see their academic writing. Getting honest reactions from my peers will get a less academic take on the issue, and it will be intriguing to see where the students' perspectives speak to the observations of the scholar.

Finally, I will be interviewing the professor with whom I am serving this semester as a teaching assistant. The professor's take on this issue will prove enlightening, as I will be able to compare the intents and experience of this professor with those of the students.

From this interview, I hope to find out to what degree this professor considers the role and effect of audience for classroom work. This will be the final perspective I will research, so I will be able to examine my experience, the experiences of my peers, and the observations of the scholars in relation to the professor's viewpoint.

With all of these different perspectives, I hope that I will be able to bring light to the sometimes-troubled dynamic between students and their professor audience, and possibly help find some solutions.

2. What I Experienced as an Undergraduate

Considering the effects of having a professor act as terminal audience has been a compelling query, but the real impetus of this curiosity springs from my own experience writing papers in classes throughout my years as an undergraduate. I have tried to take a diverse course load, and this has allowed me to write papers for professors of all sorts who seek varied products. Initially, I was not sure how to present my experience as an undergraduate, but I realized that to best compare my experience with that of my student peers, I ought to ask myself the same interview questions I intended to ask them.

1.) *How does your approach to writing for a professor differ from other writing you do?*

I do all sorts of writing. I am a short story writer, I write for the school newspaper, I write blogs, I write marketing material for business websites, and so on. How I write for a professor differs from all of these. For most of my opinion-based writing, I take a similar approach George Orwell suggested in his book *Why I Write*, when he says he writes "because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing" (8). Typically, I don't think of audience in the same way I experience it in the classroom, because my works go into the ether that is the Internet, where audience is difficult to define. Most often, I try to keep my writing clear and concise, accessible to as many readers as possible, realizing that what I write on the Internet can be stumbled upon by an audience I would not have predicted. With that comes the concern of how searchable my work is, in terms of keywords, tags, and search engine optimization.

I suppose for my creative writing, I take a similar approach, yet I believe I am slightly more mindful of my audience. I did not used to write that way, but as I wrote more and more for writing groups, professors, and eventually, graduate programs, I realized that I needed to focus on the emotional appeal of a story as well as the intellectual argument. Still, I do often think of my stories as rhetoric. I think of them simply as anecdotes, one of the most common tools of argument, meant to shift the reader's worldview through a more subtle and applied situation. But though I do consider my audience for how I will move them, I am not very influenced when it comes to the topic of my piece or the voice in which I present it.

When I write for a professor, especially when I write for him for the first time, I am bound by some trepidation that is based on what I see as expectations. For most other new audiences I experience, it seems like it is less about expectations and more about an honest portrayal of who I am as a writer. In academia, though formats seem to offer some standardization, and the five-paragraph essay has been turned into a formula to the point of relevancy extinction, there is still a great amount of variance when it comes to the expectations of professors. This leads me to take a very conservative approach when I first submit a piece to a new professor. My writer voice becomes as "writerly," or "academic" as I can make it. For example, though it is laughably cliché, I find myself being tempted to try words like "utilize" instead of "use." While this word use is not especially offensive or unnecessarily pretentious, it does not accurately reflect my typical writing voice. As I think back on it, it isn't as though any professor along the line taught this sort of voice to me or presented it as an expectation, yet it became natural to write academic papers in this way. And in my experience, this sort of impulse is rather common among my student peers.

2.) *If not given explicit instruction on audience, who are arguments you present in class essays intended to convince?*

While some classes I've been in seem suited to writing to a specific audience, most of them involve writing papers that comment or make some sort of argument about a piece of literature. In these instances, as I thought about it, I assumed that the professor was who I was addressing or trying to convince by my argument, yet I don't think this is the case. As I write these papers, I do not wonder whether the professor will find the argument fully provable, but I try to make the argument compelling, or intriguing. It's like I am writing to an audience as proof of my professor's effectiveness as a teacher. It feels to me almost as if the professor were going to pass my piece on. It's like the professor is a gateway to a greater audience, whether to an academic audience or a public space, as though my argument need only be interesting, not effective. This, I'd imagine, is most certainly not the case in the minds of most professors, yet it is how I feel when I approach writing for them.

3.) *As compared to your non-classroom writing, how valid do you consider your assigned writing, in terms of sharing with a broader audience? Why?*

I almost never share my class assigned writing with a broader audience, unless I have been given free reign to pursue a topic of my choosing in an honest writing voice. These sorts of assignments are quite rare, in my experience. They're typically only found in creative writing classes, or in the classes of forward-thinking and innovative professors, whose focus may be on breaking form in a digital realm, or effective argument rather than formulaic structure.

Though I typically do well, grade-wise, on my class writing, the most glaring reason I do not share my work for a broader audience is that it does not sound like me. It may be because of the voice I put on for academia, or it may be that I am evolving as an academic writer but have not yet embraced the voice, or it may simply be because of the choice of topics I am given. Whatever the reason, I am rarely proud of my class work. At the end of a semester, I do not look back on the work I've compiled over the last fifteen weeks as though it were an open portfolio I would add to or revise later for publication. I think more of that writing as a necessary hurdle to get a grade. It's not unlike filling out a sheet of questions for a math class or taking a multiple-choice exam for a history class. By the end, I discard the paper copy and keep the digital copy on my hard drive. But I will most likely not come back to that piece and read it. If it were any bother or took up much space, it wouldn't be too difficult to delete the file.

In terms of publication, my class work feels entirely invalid. It doesn't feel like a genre that is meant to be published. I have not had a class where the stated end goal for an assignment was publication. I've not been pointed to publications that are appropriate for class work, nor have I ever found a publication that was suited for this task, except for publications whose only goal is to publish student writing. While I think these sorts of publications are wonderful and important for demonstrating the sorts of work that students produce for a particular institution, I'm not sure it validates my work in a way that an outside publication would.

4.) *How has publishing your assignments directly to the Internet before they are read by the professor affected the way you see your writing? Why?*

I have not had this experience as an undergraduate. I asked this question to the students that I interviewed, because I had the chance to install this into the syllabus of a class where I am acting as a teaching assistant. The professor has been very helpful. So, I'm hoping this will prove to be an excellent and informative experiment.

Still, I asked the question because I spent a number of years as a professional web designer before I came back to school. I had written blogs, stories, marketing materials, and articles for the web during that period, and I noticed that my approach to writing, even when the topic or content was similar, was very different than it had been when I wrote for school. I found that I was much more careful when I wrote for the web. While I was able to choose my topic and voice, I had to consider the wide range of people who might stumble across my writing, and I felt I had to be able to speak to them. No longer could I use an academic voice if I wanted to reach and affect a wider audience. Not only that, I had to prepare for my friends and loved ones finding my online pieces, and any note of pretension would be quickly pointed out and mocked.

In a way, it felt like I was applying the ideals that I hear in college writing classrooms: be concise, be clear, and say it as simply as you can. Whenever I think of my writing, I think of the saying, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." In the "real" world, I did not need to put on a sort of intelligentsia persona. I could be plain, honest, sharp and efficient, because otherwise, I'd lose my audience in the digital environments.

I asked this question to the students, because I wondered how it would change their writing. Since they would publish their writing to the Internet before the professor would read it, I wondered how much they would keep up a sort of persona, or if they would feel a

conflict in how they approached their works. I'm not sure they will have the same effect I

had outside of school, but I was very curious to see if and what differences would arise.

3. What I Learned from Scholars

Perhaps the weightiest aspect of this investigation has been what I have learned from various scholars. I tried to capture a broad base of scholars from different time periods and with different perspectives to collect a well-rounded take on the effects of having the professor act as terminal audience. These scholars dealt with different student issues, like that of the modern social Internet writer, yet the dialog between them feels seamless. This is true, I believe, because some issues that arise from the student / professor dynamic are not bounded in a specific time or culture.

The one theme that was common among all of the scholars I read was that audience, and more specifically, the professor as audience, has a profound effect on writing. As Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor point out in their essay "The Integrating Perspective: An Audience-Response Model for Writing," "The audience not only judges writing, it also motivates it" (250). All of the scholars felt that the dynamic of professor as terminal audience was relevant. Though some felt that the pressures and products that arose from this dynamic led to something positive, others felt that these roles led to unhealthy writing habits, dishonest writing, and a kind of academic incest.

One key issue that was raised along the way is the question as to whether or not the professor truly is an audience for class writing. Despite the fact that the professor may be the only one to read a piece, some scholars have wondered whether or not the student is writing to the professor. I wondered this myself when I talked about my own experience. Walter Ong suggests that the audience is a fiction, and that writers must fictionalize and create an audience. He says of it,

> If the writer succeeds in writing, it is generally because he can fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers, and so on back to the dawn of written narrative. (11)

In his argument, he brings up an anecdote about students writing for a teacher. In this example, a student needs to write a piece on *Tom Sawyer*, but is struggling with the voice. He illustrates how the student, to be effective, must not write to the professor, but to an audience he knows the professor values. He suggests that the student take the established audience of Mark Twain, who he knows the teacher already values. This is a key question in the role of professor as terminal audience. In most cases, a piece of argument or critique is capable of being directed toward the reader specifically when the audience is known. For example, if I am writing a letter to my congressman about a specific bill he is about to vote on, I can direct it to him, appealing to his literacy, shortcomings, and desires. In the case of the professor, if Ong is correct, perhaps the student is writing to an invented proxy audience. At which point, the student would be forced to understand the favored texts, and therefore, audiences of the professor. Peter Elbow, in his essay "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument For Ignoring Audience," questions who students write for as well when he says, "It is only the teacher who reads, and students seldom feel that in giving their writing to a teacher they are actually communicating something they really want to say to a real person" (66). Elbow does not describe the audience as fictionalized, but simply points out that students do not feel they are writing to a participatory audience. Although Elbow and Ong bring up this issue, and I also raised a concern about to whom I addressed my argument, this was not a common theme in the other scholars' texts.

The most central topic brought up by these scholars dealt with the final product. What does the professor as terminal audience produce? Most of the scholars felt that this

dynamic did not produce effective writing, though some saw a silver lining. Despite the fact

that Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer in their essay, "A Kind Word for Bullshit: The

Problem of Academic Writing," seemed to make harsh and even scathing criticisms of

academic writing, they were able to find a positive result. First of all, Eubanks and Schaeffer

try to define "bullshit" as a sort of misrepresentation of self, and this seems to be central to

academic writing as a whole. They try to capture the reaction of the average audience to

academic writing by saying, "For many non-academics, academic writing is not just bullshit

but bullshit of the worst kind" (381). They cite news articles that make light of titles from

student work, essentially poking fun at the highfalutin and verbose nature of academia. Of

course, Eubanks and Schaeffer do not believe that all academic writing is bullshit. They say

that academic writing "is meant to enhance the reputation, the ethos, of the writer"

(Eubanks and Schaeffer 383). It is the academic publications and the system that requires

this sort of reputation-enhancing.

> Frequently academic publication aims to create an ethos that will result in tangible
> rewards for the academic: tenure, promotion, grants, etc. The academic knows that
> such rewards are distributed on the basis of reputation. Such a reputation is gained
> by publishing books and articles that have been peer reviewed before publication
> and positively reviewed afterward. Hence professional rewards come from
> academic reputation, and academic reputation comes from publication. This system
> seems to make academic publication a particularly rich field for bullshit. At least to
> some degree, the reward system encourages the academic writer to misrepresent
> him- or herself .... (383)

The system requires it, and so "professors write prolix books and articles, students imitate

their professors' style, and professors reward them for it—because professors often think

that abstruse academic writing 'sounds just right; it sounds professional'" (382). So it all

creates a seemingly unbreakable cycle. This all feels terribly negative, yet they are able to

make sense of the whole situation and the need for student writers to mimic the styles of

their professors. Eubanks and Schaeffer point out that academic writing is seldom, if ever, intended for the average audience, but for an audience of specialists. They say that "much academic publication, especially by young scholars, aims to qualify the author for membership in a group of specialists" (382). They go on to explain that students must create a persona if they hope to inhabit it some day. Essentially, for these students to become true and effective academic writers, they must first learn to bullshit. Eubanks and Schaeffer, though, do warn of a particularly insidious danger to bullshitting. They talk about the cooperative bullshitter. This student creates bullshit that "subverts academic writing through competent but insincere cooperation" (386). This bullshit amounts to disengagement. So, in the minds of Eubanks and Schaeffer, the professor as audience creates mimics. The students are encouraged to mimic a form of academic bullshit, or misrepresentation, and though this will hopefully result in the student being able to work their way toward proper academic writing and inhabit the persona they create, it may also lead to a sort of disengagement in the classroom.

Others felt more strongly on the issue. Elbow describes the negative effect the professor has on students when he or she acts as a terminal audience. He says that students "often have an impoverished sense of writing as communication because they have only written in a school setting to teachers" (Elbow 51). The writing that is produced in these situations, Elbow argues, is often nothing more than what is required. It is a means to placate an authority figure. Describing the effects of professor as terminal audience, he points out that students are "happy to turn in to teachers something perfunctory and fake that they would be embarrassed to show their classmates" (66). This sort of fakeness is the product of defensiveness, or fear, Elbow argues. He says that the dynamic between student

and professor as terminal audience creates inhibited and broken work. He says that "when we have to write to someone we find intimidating (and of course students often perceive teachers as intimidating), we often start thinking wholly defensively" (51–52). He talks about students writing for audience in general and how that practice does not produce quality work, but instead, retards the thinking process of the student writer. He notes that "There is something too staged or planned or self-aware about such writing. We see this quality in much second-rate newspaper or magazine or business writing: 'good-student writing' in the awful sense of the term" (53–54). Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede warn that one of the dangers of focusing on audience when writing is that it "in its extreme form becomes pandering to a crowd, tends to undervalue the responsibility a writer has to a subject" (159). This warning seems especially dangerous when the audience is a single individual who holds power over the student's ability to pass a class. This potential conflict of interest seems like it can easily lead to pandering, and perhaps is the catalyst for Eubanks and Schaeffer's "disengagement". Along those lines, Elbow's most stinging indictment of the professor as terminal audience is that he believes this dynamic between student and professor breaks down the teaching of communication. He talks about it as though assignments given in this space do nothing more than to have students repeat back what they believe the professor wants them to say. By having the student focus on professor as audience, professors reinforce the students' sense "that writing means doing school exercises, producing for authorities what they already know" (65). If Elbow is right, then the classroom becomes not a laboratory of ideas, but a laboratory of indoctrination, intellectual submission, and mold making.

So what is to be done? Our scholars have some thoughts there as well. Eubanks and Schaeffer avoid offering simple solutions, but suggest that bullshit, and particularly academic bullshit, is not inherently a bad thing. They accept it as a reality, but warn that the real danger is disengagement. Other scholars have different answers. Kathleen Blake Yancey, in "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," offers a modern solution. She asserts that "writing is social," and wonders "shouldn't the system of circulation—the paths that the writing takes—extend beyond and around the single path from student to teacher?" (310). Yancey explains that the modern student writer is not the same as the nineteenth-century student writer. She believes that writing today is done socially on the Internet and proposes "that we move to a new model of composing where students are explicitly asked ... to develop as members of a writing public" (311). Her solution seems to be that student writing would be much improved if professors met them where they live already and recognized the nature of writing today.

Elbow has a very different take. His solution is that we teach students to ignore audience. He argues "that ignoring audience can lead to better writing—immediately" (53). He explains that students need to cease considering their professor audiences, and focus more on free-writing and individual thought. In a sense, Elbow argues the opposite of Yancey, in that he wants more unsocial writing. He suggests this sort of unsocial writing, the type of writing that goes on during the production of ideas and voice, goes untaught and untended. He notes that "we see plenty of students who lack this skill, who have nothing to say when asked to freewrite or to write in a journal. They can dutifully 'reply' to a question or to a topic, but they cannot seem to initiate or sustain a train of thought on their own" (57). The key, in Elbow's mind, is to nurture individual expression and the

process that leads to it. He believes that academia has let this important skill wither on the vine.

No matter what the solution, the scholars I read each question the role of professor as audience, listing different problems of different consequence. What I have learned from these scholars is that the role of professor as terminal audience needs to be questioned and justified. Perhaps Yancey is right, and we need to think of writing as more of a social act. Perhaps we need to move student writing into greater circulation to meet the students where they're already working: the Internet. Or, perhaps Elbow is right when he says that we need to teach students to ignore audience altogether, particularly in the case of the professor, and focus on teaching students to think independently. Or, lastly, perhaps we need to do as Eubanks and Schaeffer suggest, and accept the sort of bullshit product that comes from this dynamic, because the end result is effective academic writing. No matter what the solution, it seems to me that professors need to ask themselves what role they ought to play for students and what sort of audience is appropriate for their classroom.

4. What I Learned from Student Interviews

1.) *How does your approach to writing for a professor differ from other writing you do?*

Student 1: When I write for my professors, I am scrupulous about meeting their requirements. Often, their requirements are more related to content than style, and, in these cases, I pay less attention to the beauty of sentence making than to research, critical analysis, and logic. In my other writing, for example, when I write poetry I intend to publish, I tend not to expend as much effort on research, analysis, and logic as I do on imagery, sound, figures of speech, etc. This is probably due to the fact that I take the subjects of my poetry from my own life.

Student 2: When writing for a professor, or really any sort of scholastic writing, I tend to approach it with the voice of my inner scholar. It is strange to think about and describe, but it is like I have different writing voices that narrate my writing to me in my head. My scholastic voice is the voice I imagine hearing at a symposium, or in some cases it is the imitation of a teacher; the voice always sounds smarter than my own voice. As a result, my academic writing is usually written to sound intelligent, and this is a main difference from my other writings. It is the only work in which I actively make myself sound "smarter," or at least try to. Another notable difference might be the lack of personality. I always try to take the character out of my school writing. Thinking about it now, I'm not sure why I do this, but it always makes the paper very dry.

Student 3: For me, writing for a professor involves "sounding smart." I think there is a certain level of intimidation when it comes to writing for professors as opposed to writing a Facebook status, or a tweet to be posted. By that I mean that sometimes I find myself wanting to come up with something that the professor has never heard before, or perhaps present an argument in a way it hasn't been prior. I also find myself pre-writing in my head, or even on the page before I sit down to type out an assignment, just so I already have fleshed out ideas before I sit to write academically. In our blogs for example, I think as I type, and when the thoughts are

finished, I don't go back and edit or delete anything to make the post seem polished from the very beginning. Right now, I am working through an assignment for [another] Lit course, and all conventions of normal writing are being thrown out the window for me right now. The assignment does not require a single idea of my own to incorporate into the assigned essay we were to read. All I have to do is assess the argument in the article, and summarize the entire thing, then assess the strength or weakness of the article itself. I have not done this in college writing, well, ever. So the process has to be free of my own ideas, I can only express (through MLA of course) the ideas of this other person, and I'm having a hard time doing that! So much of my writing for professors centers on ideas I find in common with the text, but that I flesh out and use the text to support me. This assignment is the polar opposite, and I find that difficult, especially since the professor knows the articles so well, and there seems to be a clear essay she is looking for. My hope is that I can produce that essay for her.

What I find most interesting about the students' response to this question is that they exemplify some of the fears and observations of the scholars. For example, Student 3 talks about "intimidation." Elbow argues that students ought to be taught to ignore audience, particularly professors as audience, because professors are "intimidating" to students (52). Student 2 and Student 3 both voice the need to "sound smart." Certainly, Eubanks and Schaeffer speak to this sort of affect in their essay "A Kind Word for Bullshit," and I had made note of that pressure when I responded to this question. Are they describing, as Eubanks and Schaeffer put it, the need for students in academic writing to "enhance the reputation, the ethos, of the writer," or is this simply a product of academic pressure (383)? Perhaps the most intriguing line was written by Student 3, talking about an assignment where "the professor knows the articles so well, and there seems to be a clear essay she is looking for. My hope is that I can produce that essay for her." This sounds almost identical

to Elbow's observation that students, in writing to the single professor audience, are "producing for authorities what they already know" (65). Still, Student 1 seems to have a different experience altogether. For this student, academic writing is a place to encourage rigorous research writing, albeit at the expense of beautiful language, with a focus on content. This student did not seem to note the same fears and frustrations as Student 2 and Student 3. But though their experiences are not quite the same, each of the students point out that the writing they do for the professor is very different from the writing they do on their own.

2.) *If not given explicit instruction on audience, who are arguments you present in class essays intended to convince?*

> Student 1: My professor, me, my family, and my friends. It is likely that not many people aside from my professor and I will read my paper. Even so, I sometimes repeat the arguments I learned from writing it in my conversations with people. Additionally, they often serve as writing samples for internship, scholarship, and grad school applications.

> Student 2: This is a tough question for me, because often I find that my essays lack a clear argument if I'm not given explicit instruction. I have a difficult time picking sides in my papers and this usually makes my theses weak. In my defense, students are never given a choice that is black and white; there is no wrong or right. How am I supposed to write a whole paper proving or disproving something that I know to be subjective and relative to each situation and person. But, if I have to answer, I would say that I'm trying to convince someone like myself—an informed student, someone who knows what I'm talking about but only knows as much as I do and is not an expert.

Student 3: I think myself. Not that I need the convincing, but I usually ask myself a question that my paper or essay or whatever will serve to answer. I am a huge proponent for answering questions I have with my writing. Otherwise, I would have to say I would want to convince members of the field I am writing in that I know a little bit about what I'm talking about. I guess I have to make up an audience if I'm being totally honest.

The students' responses to this question are different than I expected. Each student notes that they write the essays to themselves, as well as other audiences. Student 1 seems apt to share his work, or at least the topics of his work, with his friends and loved ones, while Student 2 and Student 3 do not. Student 3 talks about having "to make up an audience." Ong says that "If the writer succeeds in writing, it is generally because he can fictionalize in his imagination an audience" (11). Student 2 seems to feel a great amount of pressure when a specific audience is not assigned to class writing. Elbow speaks to the difficulty of this student when he says that when students write only for professors, they "start thinking wholly defensively" (52). I expected that these students would have the same experience that I had with undefined audience, that an undefined audience meant writing to convince some audience of scholars the professor respects, as a sort of testament to the professor's ability to teach the subject effectively. These students all say that they write to convince themselves first, and hopefully that means they are able to, or are working towards, ignoring audience, as Elbow recommends.

3.) *As compared to your non-classroom writing, how valid do you consider your assigned writing, in terms of sharing with a broader audience? Why?*

Student 1: Compared to my poetry writing, I tend to value it higher, perhaps because of the amount of effort and research I am forced to put into it. That said, I am more comfortable sharing my poetry on a broader level because I usually have in mind to share it with a larger audience and so it has fewer stylistic issues. Also, I don't usually think of publishing literary criticism outside of literary magazines and journals, which feature authors well above my level of experience. In that sense, it feels daunting to attempt to publish essays, whereas there are smaller, more local literary magazines for growing poets to participate in.

Student 2: There are a few academic papers that I would consider sharing with a wider audience, but not many. One reason, my scholastic papers are done under time constraints and are not as fully developed, researched, or edited as I would like. But I believe a larger concern of mine is that, outside of my professors, there are few people who would be interested in my papers. As I stated earlier, the self-imposed dry, scholastic writing is very boring, especially if you have no interest in literary criticism. While I believe that some of my thoughts are unique and interesting, my papers have always seemed to me to be a way of grading, not a way of expressing my thoughts.

Student 3: I actually find it more valuable than non-classroom writing. Not because I am a huge nerd, or that I think leisure writing isn't viable, but rather because all of our casual writing stems in some way, at least for me, from our classroom assigned work. I can't say I would know what my writing on my blog would look like if there was absolutely no care given to conventions of classroom writing. I also think that the broader audience gauges writing based on the same prescriptive rules as the classroom does, so throwing out those conventions will serve absolutely no one.

Student 1 and Student 3 both say that they value their classroom writing above their non-classroom writing. Student 1 says he values his classroom writing more because "of

the amount of effort and research I am forced to put into it," yet right after that, this student

describes writing for a broader audience with his non-classroom writing, and therefore "it

has fewer stylistic issues." This seems like a disagreement to me. My reading of this is that

this student believes the writing he creates for a class should be more valuable, yet in

reality, Student 1 does not see much viability for a broader audience. Student 3, while

claiming to value his classroom writing over his non-classroom writing, essentially argues

that his casual writing follows the same prescriptive rules as classroom work. This

intrigues me, because in question one, Student 3 claims that his approach to writing for a

professor differed greatly from how he wrote otherwise. In the case of Student 2, classroom

writing seems to feel dry and uninteresting. This student talks about the lack of voice in

academic writing, and that "outside of my professors, there are few people who would be

interested in my papers." Still, Student 2 may be an excellent example of why student work

may not be ready for a broader circulation, as Yancey suggests it ought to be. Student 2 says

that "scholastic papers are done under time constraints and are not as fully developed,

researched, or edited as I would like." None of the students seem to believe that the writing

they do for classes is ready for publication or a broader audience.

4.) *How has publishing your assignments directly to the Internet before they are read by the professor affected the way you see your writing? Why?*

> Student 1: I think about what other people in the class and beyond might think
> about what I'm writing. I spend more time on issues of style. However, given that
> the blog format we are using is less formal than a term paper, I tend to not do as
> much research. I've become more used to just writing what I'm thinking instead of

doing heavy analysis or research. I think the blog format has helped me to see myself more as a writer because I have a published record of my writing. Also, I think it has helped me to look realistically at the things I do well and the things in which I need improve. I say this because 1) it has given me more data to judge by, 2) it has forced me write on the fly, which helped me to see what my comfort zones were, and 3) it provided me with a more personal medium allowing me to write in the style and on the subjects I preferred.

Student 2: Posting my assignments online as a blog has been a strange journey for me. Blogging is a completely different beast, compared to academic writing. So, to have blogging as an assignment kind of broke my brain. I could no longer use that inner voice that I had reserved for my scholastic writing. I was now writing for a whole new audience, and characterless is the last thing that you want to be on a blog. After all, a blog is meant to be personal, to follow one person through whatever journey it is they are on. Thus, I have been forced to discover and mold a new voice, my own voice. I am able to use my own voice to talk about literature in a written format, and this is a totally new and liberating experience for me. I feel free to be myself, to have opinions, and to be wrong, because it is a blog, intended for the whole world and not just my professor. It helps with the format of a blog, because everyone knows that it is not necessarily polished work, but food for work and raw thoughts. But, I have always found raw thoughts more interesting anyway.

Student 3: I am far more mindful of the fact that a lot of eyes could possibly read my writing. Because of that, I am often searching for words I might find "smarter" just to show that I belong to, and in the future will be in, the world of academia. In terms of making an argument and supporting it, I don't worry at all about that. There is no grading scale on my thoughts and feelings toward literature that I have read/am reading. Essentially my blog right now is a series of free writes that have my thoughts intertwined with ideas from Felski, or Akpan, or Rukeyser. I also can't say that I have ever written my blog for the sole audience of my professor. I actually

write the blog for the audience of the eyes that might just happen to find it on some random occasion.

All three of the students seem to find writing for a broader audience on the Internet to be a good experience. Each of the students differs in how they change their approach. Student 1 takes more time to get his style correct. Student 2 suddenly feels the need to develop a unique writing voice, and Student 3 feels the need, much like in his approach to writing to professors, to "sound smarter." Student 3 is intriguing, because in both cases, this student takes on an academic persona. Student 2 said something that made me pause and reread a few times to make sure I read it right. I was dumbfounded when this student said "I feel free to ... be wrong, because it is a blog, intended for the whole world and not just my professor." What a powerful statement. This student does not feel the need to produce polished work on her blog for the class, but can produce "food for thought" and "raw thoughts." Interesting that this student feels stymied when not given a defined audience. This seems to speak to Elbow's claim that students "have nothing to say when asked to freewrite or to write in a journal. They can dutifully 'reply' to a question or to a topic, but they cannot seem to initiate or sustain a train of thought on their own" (57). Essentially, Student 2 is able to collect thoughts and think through a subject rather than simply "reply." For all of the students, there were different pressures when writing directly to the Internet for class, and all of them found this practice to be useful and worthwhile.

5. What I Learned From an Interview with a Professor

1.) *Do you sense that students approach writing for you, as the professor, differently than they approach their other writing? If so, how?*

Professor: This semester, I asked students to write about their relationship to "writing" and the way they felt about the assignment they had just handed in—a reflective essay on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. I was absolutely surprised to find out that most of the students reported "loving to write," writing a great deal, mostly creatively (stories and poems), but feeling insecure about academic essays. Why was I surprised? Well, I tended to think that only the "good" writers, i.e., the students succeeding with academic essays, "loved" to write. I simply did not suspect that all the others had a strong connection to writing as well and that this is why they were in English. So, to summarize, my students took writing for themselves quite seriously and did it much more vigorously than I had expected. Writing for me, the instructor, by contrast, seemed to be less pleasure-filled and self-directed.

It seems that the Professor recognizes that students see a vast difference between the writing they do for classes and the writing they do for themselves. To this Professor, there is no correlation between the confidence a student has for their own writing and the confidence they have for academic writing. The Professor notes that the classroom writing that is handed back seems "less pleasure-filled and self-directed." This sort of product is described by Elbow, when he says that student writing, when too directed at an audience, is "too staged or planned or self-aware" (53). When the Professor talks about the disconnect between academic writing and the passion for writing, perhaps this is close to Eubanks and Schaeffer's dreaded idea of cooperative disengagement.

2.) *When you do not name an explicit audience for a class essay, who do you think the students intend to convince with their arguments?*

> Professor: Come think of it, I rarely name an audience when it comes to the academic writing assignments I give; I do have writing workshops and encourage students to think of their colleagues as their audience, but I rarely make that explicit. So, in the end, naturally, they write for me—one person, their instructor!

It seems to me that this Professor, in the past, has not placed much importance on the role an audience plays in the written product of a student. Writing workshops could potentially undo some of the effects of professor as sole audience. Again, I am not sure, as the Professor claims, that the Professor is who the students write to convince. It's possible it is an invented audience, as Ong claims, or it's possible that the Professor stands in as a gateway to academia.

3.) *How valid do you sense students consider their class writing, as compared to their non-class writing, in terms of sharing with a broader audience? How valid do you consider it? Why?*

> Professor: What do you mean by "valid," I wonder? Are they proud of it? Would they show it to other people? Or is it just a hoop to jump through? I think it depends. I have gotten great essays from students, for instance, an essay on Prufrock as a transgender character, that I nominated for the Undergraduate Symposium. It was obvious that the student loved writing the essay and developing the argument; but it was also obvious that she had a larger stake in the argument. At other times, students, particularly those interested in going on to graduate school, really want to learn writing the sort of essay that is typical for academic literary study, a critical

essay using literary or cultural theory. In these cases, students think of themselves as future members of the academic community and are eager to learn to write in a way that will be of interest to academics. So, I would say, students consider their writing valid if they have a stake in it—if it matters to them for personal, social, or professional reasons. That said, I am not sure how many of my students who said they loved to write would feel comfortable sharing it with an audience—but I imagine that blogging and other interactive media makes the idea of sharing one's non-class writing more viable.

For this question, the students mainly find value in academic writing, but that value has qualifications. For two of the students, there seems to be a perceived value because of rigor, or the belief that all non-classroom writing follows the same rules as classroom writing. The Professor believes that the value is found in a personal or professional sense. The case of the woman writing the essay in which she has a personal stake is an intriguing one. This example seems to violate the disconnect of academic writing and the love of writing that the Professor talks about in question one. This student obviously did not suffer from the sort of disengagement warned about by Eubanks and Schaeffer, and perhaps in this case, the love for the writing sprung from this particular Professor's perceived openness.

4.) *As compared to classes where you, as professor, have acted as the terminal audience, do you think student writing has been affected by having students publish their assignments directly to the Internet? If so, how and why?*

Professor: Honestly, I don't have enough experience with Internet writing yet—all I

know is that I read the writing differently, not as a teacher, but as a "reader." Not as someone who has to grade it, but as someone who is interested in finding out what a particular student thinks. That's big, in my mind, and I love it!

While the Professor has not had a lot of experience using technology in the classroom, the effect of feeling like a "reader" seems very important to me. This counters Elbow's notion that "It is only the teacher who reads, and students seldom feel that in giving their writing to a teacher they are actually communicating something they really want to say to a real person" (66). Perhaps by allowing the students to publish directly to their peers and the Internet, the Professor has an option to act as a sort of voyeur. The Professor in this case seems able to see how students want to write for an audience they value and recognize.

6. What I Learned from this Investigation

There were many aspects of this topic than were more complicated that I had originally anticipated. I did not find that the opinions and observations of the scholars created a unified perspective, and I found that the experiences of my student peers did not perfectly mirror my own. I also learned that professors do not always consider audience when handing out assignments.

The dynamic of professor as single reader can sometimes feel natural and obligatory, and it seems easy to fall into a routine. It seems to me that this, and the real effect professors have on budding student writers, is not questioned or challenged as often as it should be. Eubanks and Schaeffer talk about the disengaged student writer, but I wonder if many student do not feel that they are writing to a disengaged professor reader. The roles we play in academia, if they become stale, habit, routine, if the roles become nothing more than going through the motions, then what else can the product be of this relationship than "perfunctory and fake" (Elbow 66)? I don't think that the audience a professor chooses for students, whether it be to the public audience of the Internet, no one, or the professor individually, will necessarily solve this disconnect. The key, it seems, is for that audience to be chosen for a purpose, and the active choice of selecting an audience specifically for an assignment will help guide the student writers and give them the sense that they are writing to an engaged reader.

I did not find a single perfect solution to the problems presented when the professor acts as terminal audience, and I did not determine if the problems that exist in this dynamic outweigh the benefits. However, The problems that have arisen cannot be put solely at the feet of the professor, because the student acts as the other half in this relationship.

Students need to take ownership of their writing and the decisions that they make. It's easy to put the onus on the professor to dictate how a student should write, but the obvious end goal to all of this is to send off graduates who are capable of self-directed and confident writing. To blame the professor for one's writing shortcomings is lazy, because though the professor holds all of the cards as it concerns class success, the student can take it upon him or herself to challenge the status quo and bring about change. If a professor does not take into consideration the role that audience plays in the students' written product, then it is up to each individual student to take initiative and decide, in an active way, who the audience ought to be for that piece. Focusing on grades is short-sighted. The goal is to become better student-writers, and though the professor can guide to that end, it's entirely up to the student. And it takes an engaged student who is focused on bettering himself to glean the most from a class and to benefit from the knowledge and experience of their professor counterparts.

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