
Chapitre 8 | Chapter 8

Readers and Writers Are Always Their Contexts

M. Alayne Sullivan and Jane Ledwell-Brown
Columbia University McGill University

In this paper, we demonstrate how one particular writer makes use of strategies taught to her in a writing class to reach out and «talk to» one of her colleagues in the professional context where both work. «Alice» shows us how we might begin to give our student writers the opportunity to make a writing assignment an authentic experience rather than an artificial duty for both reader and writer.

We say this with the views of Walter Ong and Susan Miller in mind. Ong, for example, claims that it is part of the literary tradition for writers to «make their readers up,» and that even in letter writing the writer «has to set up another relationship to the reader and has to set the reader in a relationship to the writer different from that of ... personal contact» (19). In wryly corroborating Ong's position, Miller says that «the composition student's reader is a more unstable fiction than the 'audience' that Walter Ong credited with guiding a writer's choices ...» (15). Student writing, says Miller, is a «staged performance,» a «dress rehearsal.» She submits that «no matter how diligently we work to reduce the artificiality of the classroom situation ... the student's 'reader' is always a fiction, purely if not simply no reader at all, but a teacher» (22). Ong titled his statement «The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction,» where Miller's title was «The Student's Reader is Always a Fiction.» In choosing our title we address both their positions and answer Miller's concluding question: «How can composition instruction, particularly in view of its location in essentially public institutions, mediate between the individual and public discourse worlds?» (27).

What we suggest is that even though the writer must «construct» her reader to a certain extent, she (the writer) need not be engaged in producing artificial texts exclusively for readers who are «always fictions»—teachers. We are saying so with James Porter's comments about intertextuality and «discourse communities» in mind: «A post-structuralist rhetoric examines how audience (in the form of community expectations and standards) influences textual production and in so doing, guides the development of the writer» (40). Porter says that «intertextuality suggests that our goal should be to help students learn to write for the discourse communities they choose to join» (43). We are saying that given the opportunity to write for audiences and purposes of their choosing (and recognizing the vastness of that statement), our students can be released from the purgatory of writing primarily for academic audiences (Bizzell) within «invented universities» (Bartholomae). Although their audiences may have to be «constructed» to a certain extent, their *readers* need not be «fictions» to the extent that Miller (understandably) claims they are. If we give, or at least encourage, our student writers to take the opportunity to write as members of their own discourse communities—«as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we say» (Harris 12)—we allow the readers' and the writers' own contexts to play lead roles in our classrooms.

In this paper we describe one situation in which the classroom setting is the stage for working with students' own contexts. We demonstrate how a writer uses a range of writing strategies in completing a written document that is intended for a reader within her own professional context. We present samples of the rhetorical strategies that Alice uses as she works on drafts of this piece of writing. We also present excerpts from a tape-recorded composing-aloud protocol that Alice records as she works on the letter that is eventually sent to the intended reader. By presenting both the writing strategies and composing-aloud description of Alice's writing process, we hope to demonstrate how she struggles within the restrictions of a particular writing situation, thus enacting contextual literacy skills and constructing her audience.

Alice was enrolled in a course called Effective Written Communication (EWC), a writing course at McGill University that has been offered, for over ten years, to a broad range of students; the course is a

required one for degree and certificate programmes in Management, Engineering, Education, Social Work and Continuing Education. Alice is one of hundreds of Continuing Education students who work full-time and complete certificate programmes at night on a part-time basis.

EWC is a thirteen-week course during which students apply a variety of writing strategies within the constraints of four different rhetorical contexts. The course derives from the work of such theorists as James Moffett, James Britton, and Linda Flower, as well as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and Donald Graves. Students design and develop each of their four «assignments» for a specific audience and purpose of their choosing; the classroom context is structured to include a diverse range of peer-group activities as a means through which these assignments are gradually developed and refined. Students also keep a personal journal that is a «freewritten» record of their thoughts, feelings and experiences; instructors read and respond to such content in a conversational manner, avoiding comments and responses that might emphasize concern for grammar, language use, style, or organization. In addition to the four assignments and the journal, the students also keep a «log»—a record of the strategies they use, and a detailed account of the writing process they follow in completing their assignments.¹ At the heart of the EWC philosophy is the hope that each of the students will learn and/or refine a range of strategies that work for them, and that as they become comfortable about expressing themselves in writing and aware of their own writing processes, they will be confirmed as writers. As a result of taking EWC, we hope that writers will refine the process by which they enact their contextual literacies.

As we understand it, contextual literacy refers to the skills by which individuals can effectively interact through reading and writing with the people and events that comprise their worlds. In releasing our composition students from «our world» and our «fictive readings» to their own contexts and circumstances, we needn't think that we're asking them to move completely out of harm's way. In talking about the *real* peer review panel that reviews scientific research proposals, for example, Greg Myers cites an anecdotal description likening the panel to «a jury of axe murderers from the same gang» (220). Though, of course, many of our students are not yet scientists, and not yet professionally established within their fields, they *are* members of discourse communities

which provide them with readers who will be stern and realistic «reviewers» of their written documents. In structuring classroom contexts that help writers communicate with the «axe murderers» of their own «gangs,» we are helping these writers participate in the social process of «non-fiction» communication.

In fact, in presenting Alice's writing strategies and (excerpts of) her composing-aloud protocol, we intend to demonstrate how she is intertwining two particular contexts: she is applying the strategies of the classroom to a piece of writing with which she hopes to influence a co-worker at the hospital where she works. In this paper, we see what strategies she applies, and we get an inside look at the mind of the writer as she applies the strategies and refines her contextual knowledge. Because Alice developed her document with the intention of using it in a «real-world» context, we think that that such assignments confirm the EWC classroom as a place where students can genuinely and meaningfully refine contextual literacy as it applies to writing. In this case, Alice used the writing strategies and context of the EWC classroom to achieve a purpose in her larger «real-world» context.

For this specific writing assignment the students were asked to write to a particular reader about a conflict—a disagreement or difference of opinion that they had with someone in the workplace, the family or neighborhood. The writer's task was to analyse the reader's position, and present a written viewpoint both acknowledging and respecting that position while putting forth a different viewpoint without antagonizing the reader.² Alice decided to write to a co-worker at a hospital where they are both nurses in supervisory positions; though they have similar levels of authority within their wards, the nature of their interaction often causes difficulties. As mentioned, Alice documented the process she followed in completing this assignment via a tape-recorded «log.» As we present actual excerpts from her composing-aloud «log» (in italic script), followed by some samples of the writing strategies she uses, readers will gradually see how the classroom and «real-world» contexts «compensate» to use Louise Rosenblatt's term.

The first excerpt occurs near the beginning of Alice's composing-aloud «log» and appears after both some initial freewriting (entered below in boldfaced print) and after her draft «Purpose Statement» with its underlined «code words» (explained below). After referring to this

«freewrite,» she begins to describe her writing strategies and comments on the extent to which they are effective for her. As readers follow her comments, along with some examples of the process work that she submitted with this assignment, they will easily understand her use of classroom terminology (such as *code words*) and her writing strategies. All of these strategies were introduced and applied to the writers' first assignment within the classroom context; and, in fact, she uses the terms knowledgeably. Alice's work is presented in this paper as it evolved during the process of writing it.

Initial freewrite: I am in conflict with NT about her behavior at work. When she is unhappy about the way things are being handled at work or about particular decisions that have been made by our work group she lets everyone know she is angry by her non-verbal communications. She becomes monosyllabic, leaves the area of discussion and often cries because she is so angry. I want her to discuss things and express her feelings openly and possibly to come to an agreement with the group in a calm way. I don't approve of her method of handling conflicts. I think it is unproductive.

Purpose statement: My purpose is to give *feedback* to NT about *how I am affected* by her *behavior* when she is *displeased* by *events at work* and to give her suggestions about how we can work together more effectively.

Log: I have made a *purpose statement*—first a rough one and then ah—wrote a little bit—I made another one which was a bit more defined. My purpose is to give feedback to NT about how I am affected by her behavior when she's displeased by events at work. Then I was working to—on the *code words* that I found inside that phrase. When I look at the general way in which I write I think that this is um ... ah—pretty productive ah—way to go about it—that you start with the—sort of ah—vague purpose in mind—that you know this is going to be something—that you're trying to convince somebody of something and go ahead and write which is sort of equivalent to *brainstorming*—gives you

—frees up your ideas and allows you to get a few things on paper—and then to go back and make a more um...exact purpose statement and then from the purpose statement um ... take out the code words and then use the code words um—expand the code words and then that will give you the ideas or—I hope that will give me the ideas to go back to the rough draft and identify the ah—the related—the ideas that are in the rough draft that relate to those code words. Ah ... and then start to organize the whole thing around those code words.

We have highlighted some of the terms Alice refers to in her log. Her use of the term «purpose statement» is probably straightforward; it is the writer's written expression of what she wants to accomplish through her written document. Alice also refers to *code words*. Flower (**Problem Solving Strategies**) describes code words as terms «that carry a great deal of meaning for the writer that they would not carry for the average reader» (112), and says that code words evoke «a large, complex network of ideas» (112). According to Flower, code words «can be jargon, special terms, ... or simply complex concepts ... that some readers wouldn't understand. Such words may sound like nothing more than vague generalizations or hot air» (112). It was within the context of Flower's use of this term that «code words» were explained to the EWC students.

Having clearly identified the «code words» in her purpose statement, Alice then begins to, as she puts it in her log, «expand the code words.» She makes brief sketches around each of her «code words» using a strategy called «mapping,» a form of non-linear brainstorming described by Donald Murray as a way of «circling the subject and making unexpected leaps» (25). It creates a visual design to help writers see patterns and connections among ideas. Alice constructed several such «maps» by situating each of the underlined terms in her purpose statement in the center of a page of paper and then freely associating or brainstorming by quickly jotting concepts associated with each term. For the sake of brevity, we have not included these «code word maps» here.

In the next excerpt, we get a fascinating glimpse of her thinking about how she might convey her thoughts to her reader (NT). This is the first time in her writing process that Alice concentrates more heavily on

her own knowledge and working experiences with NT than on the strategies introduced within the classroom context. Perhaps having now generated her ideas and organized them to a certain extent, Alice is ready to consider how, in fact, what she writes will affect her reader. Though *she* might not express it this way, what she says next suggests that she has reached a point in her writing process where the classroom context and working context begin to merge.

Log: Right now I'm having um ... I'm struggling to try to work with my um ... my purpose statement and code words that I've drawn out of there to ah ... to start to organize my ideas and ... I have ... isolated from the ... rough draft—or from the second purpose statement the terminology, «feedback.» Now ... «feedback» is sort of ah ...—this is not going to come out in my um... in her points or in my points maybe. It could maybe, I'm not sure about that but it will at least help to orient me to how I'm going to—what tone of voice I'm going to take here because «feedback» should be a reflection of her behavior that's objective and not subjective, should be as accurate as possible, should be termed in a way that's acceptable to the person you're giving the «feedback» to and it's seeking to be helpful and ah ... one thing that I can't validate here in this format is that «feedback» should be given when a person is ready to accept it. I don't really know if she's ready to accept this or not.

...
I withdraw emotionally [at work] because normally we're friendly and when she's angry at me I withdraw my friendliness and in the long run it causes me to be afraid to tell her about things I think could make her angry, so it sort of reduces me to become dishonest in a way and I think I'm gonna try and arrange these things into ah main points ... um and ah ... try and kind of draw—draw them together into—some of them will become parts of subtopics and some of them will become main topics.

In attempting to work within the general confines of the assignment (demonstrate an understanding of the reader's position) and achieve her purpose of offering feedback, Alice attempts to weave her own feelings

into the profile she has created of her reader. In alternating between the threads of both the reader's and writer's positions, she struggles with the validity of her purpose.

Striving for a goal that is possible, Alice ties her purpose directly to the reader. She plans to offer the reader constructive comments, not confrontational directions.

Log: My purpose seems a little wishy washy but there's no way I can change this person's character. I think the only thing I can do is give her feedback about how I feel ... because I think of the way it's being framed ah ... can be seen as being a very positive and friendly gesture to try and help—you know you're helping them to put everything into context by just pointing out how they affect other people—in a way it's showing that I care for her and «how I'm affected» maybe that will give her—not kind of tell her what to do—what my original purpose statement was to try and get her to talk things out rather than um ... to act them out but then I decided that was too ambitious and I thought that it would be pretty good if all I could do would be to give her clear feedback and show her how other people are affected by this behavior....

Maps and trees help Alice to organize a new draft in a way that reflects her purpose.

OK so I have the purpose statement ... I found my code words. I'm making a code word map relating things together. Then I'm going to go to my um ... here I should do an idea tree and I was gonna try and get my idea tree out of my draft. I'm not sure about that— get it out of my draft or ... get it out of my purpose statement and then go back to my draft and see if what I've got—if the two chime together and—then rewrite the draft. That's what I think I'm gonna do. Then OK the idea tree ... then I should write another draft then I should look back at my idea tree and relate my draft and my idea tree and then revise it to make it more whatever so I should be getting my point across if that's a question of structure or language or whatever and then

the last step, edit once I'm happy that my idea tree and my draft are ... going in the same direction.

Alice reflects on the power and flexibility of these classroom strategies as she works toward solving a communication problem in her workplace.

I could always go back and change my idea tree if I don't think that my ideas—if I got something new out of writing my draft or if my idea tree um doesn't on second thought—does not look like what I want it to. My next step is to go through my draft in relation to my code words—maybe I'll redraw my code word map so that everything looks the way it should look. I'm the kind of person—I can't think without writing—it's like if I'm studying something if I just read it it doesn't do any good.

Using the broad framework constructed from her maps and trees, Alice focuses on the specific details of her plan for writing. Her first concern is to address the reader's perspective.

So I'm going to talk about first of all, I'm gonna say the reader's point of view and that is that she is displeased by events at work. That's gonna be my main point. And I'm gonna go down to the middle of the paper—it's gonna be the purpose and that's going to be «feedback»—purpose is to give feedback. And then I'm gonna go to my ... to ... ah ... «how I am affected by her behavior» ... and ...

Further thinking about her purpose leads Alice to reexamine the nature of the workplace conflict.

then I'm gonna make a question mark about alternate ways to deal with well—because well sometimes I don't feel that I'm in conflict with her but I sure as hell am in conflict about the way she's handling disagreements. I think that as equals we all are entitled to our own opinion. We don't all have to lie down and say, «yes, yes, yes» when we don't think that the other person is right but on the other hand I think we have a duty to talk together as adults.

Alice concludes her protocol with a few more remarks about her reader and their shared context. She also cautions herself to beware of premature editing:

Now I'm finding I have to ah watch myself 'cause I'm already starting to edit my um sentences for construction and grammar so I've gotta keep going—stay loose but following the plan and try and bite my tongue and not edit my draft.

Alice is obviously comfortable manipulating these strategies and applying them within the context of this assignment. In fact, though students obviously have varying degrees of familiarity and ease in operating within the constraints of this assignment, those who have tried this «Rogerian» approach do so with enthusiasm and flourish. So far, a scant few have found it difficult to identify an issue about which to write. Alice clearly does display a fair degree of facility in integrating the various elements of the classroom and professional contexts. And that is precisely the point. All of the intricate strategy manoueuvering of the classroom reaches beyond the windowless brown bricks of the classroom walls and helps the writer to interact with the makeup of her professional world. Of all of the many assignments that students embrace as helpful, this one has been most favorably regarded.

In order to comment on why these strategies help the writer to generate and structure a written document for a reader within her professional discourse community, we digress briefly. Many have read Michael Polanyi's description of a person studiously manipulating a long pool cue in an effort to retrieve a ball that has rolled far under a bed out of reach. «Focal» attention is aimed at poking the ball with the tip of the cue. Without being conscious of it, that person must also attend to gripping, aiming and manipulating the cue and thus maintain a series of intricate visual-motor activities so that the focal objective is acheived.

We submit that just as the pool aficionado's goal will be achieved because her focal attention directs the activities to which she tacitly attends, so is Alice's (much more complex) focal goal of communicating with her reader directing the strategies she more tacitly completes in an effort to achieve her purpose. Our analogy is obviously not perfect; Alice is, no doubt, more than tacitly aware of what she does

in order to reach her goal (if she weren't we wouldn't have her commentary). The point, though, is that the primary—or focal—goal of making meaning within a real-world context can be forwarded by the subsidiary set of activities in the classroom context. It is perhaps more the case than it need be that what often happens in our classrooms is part of no larger picture, that the classroom is subsidiary to no immediate authentic need to affect audiences according to purposes of our students' choosing. Perhaps we can make students' readers less a «fiction» than Miller rightly claims they often are. As noisy as we know some classrooms to be, perhaps that noise need not so often be the sound of one hand clapping.

NOTES

1. For the assignment featured in this paper Alice recorded her log via tape recorder.
2. This «Rogerian» approach is discussed by Linda Flower (**Problem Solving Strategies**), who presents it in reference to Carl Rogers' work.