

Community of Writers (Sociolinguistics)

When we write, we must make many choices. We choose the subject matter and the discourse mode. Sometimes we choose the audience; at other times we shape discourse to fit a known audience. We choose language according to our sense of purpose and what we know about the audience. We employ what we believe we know about social conventions and appropriate usage.

But there is more to it than all of that. There is also the matter of context. Context includes some very pragmatic issues such as how much time do I have to complete the writing and how long is this kind of discourse. Journalists worry about the space available in the newspaper layout. Short story writers have certain length limitations as do writers of magazine articles.

But there is also the matter of social context which influences writing. This is a more elusive concept to pin down, but there is evidence to prove that this effect exists. Not long ago researchers set out to study the kinds of comments college freshmen made in peer response groups. They wanted to see if more effective writers responded differently in these groups. What they found instead was that the kind of response depended on the particular clique students were most interested in joining. The students who hoped to become varsity athletes responded the way that they thought athletes would respond. Similarly, those who had aspirations of becoming artists responded the way they believed artists would respond. Even though they often had other thoughts which they revealed in private interviews, they withheld these remarks because they considered them out-of-character, or at least incompatible with the character they hoped to become.

We know that spoken language use varies according to the social situation. What we say and how we say it depends to a great extent on the social circumstances surrounding the utterances. While there is less evidence to prove it, there are many clues which indicate that the social situation has a great deal to do with writing. This factor becomes even more important when peers act as the audience in a classroom. No doubt you have had the experience of students being quite willing to submit a paper to you but unwilling to share it with peers. At times this is a positive: The student has written something personal or something mature which he feels only an adult will understand. But sometimes this reluctance is a negative: The student knows that the work is not of good quality and not his best work and he does not want to embarrass himself among his friends. In this case the student would rather receive a low grade than face peer ridicule. Unfortunately, the message this student sends is that he doesn't really care what the teacher thinks of him, but he does care what peers think.

If you have been teaching for any length of time, you have probably heard about or personally experienced a class which contained students who wrote things for effect. Sometimes they attempt to offend you as the teacher, but more often they seem intent upon producing an effect upon their peers. Often this is done through writing about inappropriate topics or through the use of vivid details about violence. Real risk-takers often use obscenities, too. The result of all this is a constant state of uproar whenever writing is discussed and shared, especially since part of this quickly becomes a competition to see whose paper will create

the most disruption. While whole classes like this don't come along often, most classrooms contain one or two students who may try this approach. Most teachers treat these situations as discipline problems. The students are reprimanded or punished and the class moves on. What is interesting about this situation is that students who engage in this behavior understand that language use can be powerful and that language can be manipulated to produce certain effects on the audience. While we certainly do not want students to write only to produce horror, shock, revulsion, and embarrassment, we do want them to learn how to use language to produce predictable responses and to appreciate the power that comes with using language well.

What we really want is for students to see themselves in a positive light as writers/authors and to see their classmates similarly. While there are other ways to phrase this, one common way is to say that we want students to join the community of writers. Really what we are saying is that we want students to buy into the notion of joining the academic community. We want them to value reading and writing as worthwhile goals, but more than that we want them to see education as a valuable enterprise. When students care about themselves and others as learners and care about school as a whole, instruction has a much greater chance of being effective. Going back to that research study of college freshmen, the researchers found that the most effective response came from the group that wanted to join the academic community. They saw themselves as scholars who wanted to learn as much as possible during their college careers. And most of us have had the experience of working with some students who seemed committed to learning even though they may not have been our most competent students.

The implication of research in sociolinguistics, which is the study of the relationship between social factors and language, is that how students perceive themselves in relation to their social environment has a direct impact on their use of language. Developing a community of writers means establishing a social context in the classroom such that every student sees himself and herself as an author. It also means seeing everyone else in the class as an author. Even more than that it means committing oneself to the improvement of all through helping, sharing, teaching, and supporting. A community, after all, works together. Sounds like utopia, doesn't it. The question is, of course, how can such a classroom environment be created? The best answer is gradually and carefully. Attempting this approach is not simply a matter of designating a chair as the author's chair and requiring students to sit there when they read their papers to classmates. Creating a community in the classroom involves altering our teacher behaviors such that we become members of the community. It also means focusing a great deal of attention and energy on two factors—developing positive self-concepts and respecting students as people. Further, it demands reducing competition to a minimum while increasing cooperation to a maximum. Students must do more than just respect each other; they have to care about each other. In addition, the environment has to be safe if students are to take the kinds of academic risks which will produce learning. They need to be physically

comfortable, but more than that they have to feel emotionally protected, safe from humiliation, verbal abuse, sarcasm, and ostracism.

How students perceive themselves as writers does make a difference in how they write. How students perceive themselves in relation to their classmates influences how they write. And how students perceive the environment of the classroom affects how they write. In order for students to produce their best work, all of these perceptions need to be positive.

For additional information and specific details about creating this kind of classroom environment, you really should read some of the recommended source books.

Recommended Further Reading:

- Harste, J., & Short, C. with Burke, C. (1988). [Creating classrooms for authors: The reading-writing connection](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0435084658/writeenvirinc) <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0435084658/writeenvirinc>>. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- King, L., & Stovall, D. (1992). [Classroom publishing: A practical guide to enhancing student literacy](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0936085525/writeenvirinc) <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0936085525/writeenvirinc>>. Hillsboro, OR: Blue Heron Publishing.
- Lamme, L. (1989). Authorship: A key facet of whole language. *The Reading Teacher*, 42 (9)@ 704-710.
- Moxley, J. (1986). Five writers' perceptions of writing functions. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 5 (2), 249-266.
- Smith, F. (1988). [Joining the literacy club](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0435084569/writeenvirinc) <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0435084569/writeenvirinc>>. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Vygotsky, L. (1962). [Thought and language](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0262720108/writeenvirinc) <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0262720108/writeenvirinc>>. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Wiley. (originally published in Russian in 1934)
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). [Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674576292/writeenvirinc) <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674576292/writeenvirinc>>. edited by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, & Ellen Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.