

# CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON SUMMARY THROUGH TEACHER- RESEARCH

---

ELLEN BARTON AND RUTH RAY

Teacher-researchers ask questions about theory and pedagogy, interpreting the wealth of information arising out of their classes and discovering the assumptions underlying their practice (Berthoff). From this perspective, teacher-research in composition consists of discovery that results in thinking about students, their writing, and our teaching in a constantly shifting perspective. For the past two years, our teacher-research has concentrated upon one kind of writing that is taught and practiced in the university—summary writing. Our method has been to read and re-read our students' summaries, examining the conflicting assumptions underlying our pedagogy and exploring the contrasting ways we respond as readers to students' writing. Our perspective on summary has changed radically as a result of our teacher-research: when we began, we assumed that something called an objective summary existed and that students should know how to do it; now we believe that summary is an interpretive act and that students should know many ways of summarizing.

Since a great deal of academic writing incorporates summary in some way, we believed that a course emphasizing summary would be appropriate for student writers at the university, especially basic writers who had not had much experience with the kind

of text-based writing required for many college assignments. We organized two basic writing courses around reading and summarizing, following the typical description of summary found in composition texts: a summary is a brief, accurate, condensed account of another text, written as if the audience has not read that text (Langan, Berke, Spatt, Bazerman).

In our courses, we concentrated upon what we called objective summary, believing that basic writers need practice stating the meaning of texts apart from their opinions of or responses to texts. In beginning with the objective summary, we were following the progression underlying much composition pedagogy, which treats summary and evaluation as two separate entities: objective summary is a demonstration of reading comprehension, and subjective evaluation is a critical response to what one has comprehended. In this pedagogy, the student reads, identifies key points, and omits extraneous detail, reducing the text to its essential meaning and preserving the balance and proportion of the ideas in the original work (Langan, Berke, Bazerman). Nowhere in this task is the student writer to be present; he/she must assume the role of a distanced, objective persona who merely seeks out meaning in a text and restates it in a summary. The distinction we were making between objective and evaluative writing is often made explicit in the progression of assignments in textbooks: first students write objective summaries demonstrating reading comprehension and an ability to paraphrase and condense; then they evaluate what they have read. Justifying such a division, Brenda Spatt, in the popular text *Writing from Sources*, tells students, "once you are able to explain to your reader what the source is all about, then you can begin to plan a rebuttal, interpretation, or analysis of the author's ideas. . . . The simplest approach to writing about someone else's ideas is complete separation: the structure of your essay breaks into two parts, with the source's views presented first and your own reactions given equal or greater space immediately afterwards" (169). The assumption here—one we accepted implicitly in the design of our basic writing courses—is that student writers can and should separate the acts of reading, comprehending, and summarizing from the acts of evaluating and interpreting.

One goal of our courses was to foster this separation in students—to teach them to read and comprehend the meaning in various types of texts and to restate that meaning accurately

and objectively in a summary. Our description of objectivity, we thought, was straightforward: an objective summary presents only the ideas in the text and does not include additional information, personal reaction, or evaluation. Our descriptions of successful and unsuccessful summaries, we also thought, were straightforward: successful summaries represent accurate reading comprehension and condensed presentation of the meaning of a text; unsuccessful summaries somehow or another deviate from this norm, by inaccurately stating the meaning of a text; by failing to condense the text appropriately, perhaps including extraneous detail or omitting major points; or by including evaluation or personal reaction. Throughout the semester we found that many of our students had trouble producing summaries that we considered successful. Students often reacted, evaluated, personalized, and added information. Some were openly resistant to the task, stating that they disliked writing objective summaries and preferred to write essays in which they could draw on their own experience and express their own opinions. At the time, we regarded this lack of objectivity as a problem stemming from the students' inexperience with text-based writing. We responded by continuing to teach reading skills and writing skills based on the summary as we had defined it, hypothesizing that as students became more familiar with college writing, they would see the value of separating themselves from texts and would write more objectively.

At the end of the semester, we felt we had provided our basic writers with valuable writing experience appropriate for their work in the university. At the same time, we were disturbed by the large number of students (50%) who failed to write a successful summary for their final exam. As the final exam at the end of the semester, we had asked our thirty-six basic writers to write an objective summary of Edward T. Hall's "The Anthropology of Manners." We decided to analyze the successful and unsuccessful summaries of our students, seeking to discover more concrete ways of describing and teaching objective summary in our future basic writing courses. To provide a set of summaries for comparison, at the beginning of the next semester, we asked twenty-three graduate students enrolled in English courses to summarize the same text. Both the basic writers and the graduate student writers received approximately two and one-half hours for the task, and both groups received the same instructions asking

for a summary with an objective statement of the main idea and presentation of the major supporting points of the original text. We expected all the graduate students to write objective summaries according to these instructions; much to our surprise, we found that many of them did not. While we expected that some of the basic writers would produce unsuccessful summaries, we did not expect that any of the graduate student writers would do the same, and this contrast between expectations and reality created the dissonance and uncertainty that Britton and Odell describe as the genesis of teacher-research. In Berthoff's terms, this conflict forced us to read and re-read the summaries of basic writers and graduate student writers, asking questions about our concept of summary, and thinking about the assumptions underlying our courses.

The majority of summaries by both basic and graduate student writers are not objective miniaturizations of the original text, but selective and interpretive recreations. Basic writers present Hall's ideas in terms that would be significant to a reader like themselves, as the examples in (1) indicate:

- (1a) Hall states one should not need an anthropologist to keep them from saying insulting things to foreigners. He gives an example of a foreigner keeping an ambassador waiting. You should know the time system of any country you are in.
- (1b) If you travel and go abroad from another country, do not panic because your manners are not correct, wherever you go.
- (1c) Westerners and Easterners misinterpret each other. Hall states that what you may feel is good manners may not be to someone else.
- (1d) Hall states that the reason manners are complex is because the foreign countries [do] not understand the U.S.A. way of behaving.

Examples (1a) and (1b) give advice to a reader who has not travelled abroad and is not familiar with the customs of other cultures; examples (1c) and (1d) explain, from the perspective of Western culture, the misinterpretations that occur across cultures. Basic writers often react to the text, as in the example of (2):

- (2) After reading this essay, I have found a lot of this to be true.

These responses usually state the student's opinion of the text.

Graduate student writers present Hall's ideas in terms that are significant to the community of academics, as the statements in (3) illustrate:

- (3a) Society is perpetually searching for 'signs' that can reveal details about the attitudes and psychological processes of both individuals and other societies—whether they are 'subcultures' or totally foreign societies altogether. A result of this search is the emergence of fields of study—such as semiotics and anthropology—that center around the gathering of desired information via the reading of cultural and individual signs. In his article 'The Anthropology of Manners,' Edward T. Hall focuses upon how the study of social manners endemic to specific societies offers a vivid perspective on the differences between American and foreign societies, with a listing of notably categorical differences and pertinent implications.
- (3b) The implication of this [work] is that there is a different value of time and of events. Ultimately Hall makes a potentially significant social finding: manners are signs that give uniquely detailed information about behavior and societies.
- (3c) There is an awareness of the necessity for a frame of reference in dealing with the significant nuances of different manners and anthropological studies are progressing in this area.

Example (3a) relates Hall's text to the academic disciplines of anthropology and semiotics; example (3b) discusses the social implications of Hall's text; and example (3c) emphasizes the importance of ongoing research on the anthropology of manners. Like the basic writers, the graduate student writers often react to or evaluate the text they are summarizing, as in the examples of (4):

- (4a) The essay 'The Anthropology of Manners' by Edward T. Hall . . . tried to force me to believe that it was based on empirical anthropological facts and theories . . . Instead, what was posed in the essay could be taken by some as a general conversation or monologue

which one normally finds accompanied with a slide presentation to an undiscerning listener.

- (4b) This is an informative, non-scholarly article dealing with the fact that manners do indeed have an anthropology or anthropologies, and that ignorance of this anthropology can and does lead to misunderstandings.

These evaluations reflect standards important to the academic community; both writers make a distinction between academic research and material for the general public.

As a result of analyzing the summaries from basic and graduate student writers, we have come to see these examples in (3) and (4) as fundamentally similar to the examples in (1) and (2): both basic writers and graduate students write summaries that are interpretive rather than objective. That is, they take a certain perspective on the text, reflecting their own persona. The differences between the two sets are matters of degree, not kind: the basic writers contextualize their summaries in terms of readers like themselves; the graduate student writers contextualize their summaries in terms of an academic audience which they evoke for their reading and writing.

Basic writers create a general persona in their summaries, and they use language suggesting a relationship between writer and reader based on advice-giving: *me* telling *you* what might be learned from the text, as in the examples of (1) and (2). As Bartholomae points out, this language reflects the authority of teacher, parent, and text—the type of authority basic writers are most familiar with.

The graduate student writers, on the other hand, create the persona of an academic reader who writes from the perspective of him or herself within a community of academics who share their understanding and evaluation of the text, as in the examples of (5), which use first person plural pronouns:

- (5a) When we consider the many people who must be prepared for service overseas, the pertinence of this fact becomes evident.
- (5b) It is important to recognize that much of our behavior is unconscious and that we often rely on 'built in' patterns to indicate and understand intra-cultural values and meaning.

Because the evaluations here are framed within *our* perspective as like readers, the interpretation of the text seems a matter of common agreement, rather than a writer telling a reader what to think. The appropriative *we* of the graduate student writers suggests that self, text, author, and reader are all part of a single community.

The interpretive summaries from both our basic and graduate student writers provide specific evidence that meaning is socially constructed even within the supposedly objective genre of summary: both groups of writers summarize by telling how the text makes them feel and by relating it to what they already know. Basic writers depend on the context of their personal lives and their associations with the general public outside the university, while graduate student writers depend on the context provided by prior texts and their associations with others inside the academic community. Graduate student writers use the *same* interpretive strategies; it is just that what they feel and what they already know are more conventional ways of feeling and knowing in the academic community. Consider the different perspectives on Hall's text in the examples of (3) and (4): relating a text to different academic fields, discussing the implications of the research, and drawing distinctions between scholarly research and non-scholarly material are conventional academic responses to a text. We call these perspectives conventional because they occur with regularity across our graduate student writers' texts and because we, as academic readers ourselves, recognize them as occurring with regularity across many other academic texts. We valued the interpretive summaries written by our graduate student writers because we recognized them as examples of what other academics do. On the other hand, we recognized the basic writers' interpretations like the examples in (1) and (2) as aimed at a general, non-academic audience, and thus we did not value them highly.

Underlying these responses to the summaries are contrasting expectations about participants in the academic community, the most important realization arising from our teacher-research. We expected the basic writers to adhere rigidly to the convention of objectivity we prescribed because we saw the objective persona as appropriate for a new initiate in the academic community. We considered deviations from objectivity to be problems, evidence of inexperienced reading and writing. On the other hand, we

allowed the graduate student writers to deviate from the convention of objectivity because we expected them to have already established an academic persona as functioning members of the academic community. We valued an academic persona who does not rely on restatements of others' ideas but interprets those ideas in the formulation of his or her own. In focusing on objectivity in our responses to the basic writers, we were restricting them to a passive relationship with a text, while we were allowing graduate student writers an active and assertive relationship with a text.

Our comparison of the summaries of basic writers and graduate student writers illustrates two faulty assumptions underlying our original definition of summary: the first assumption is that determinate meaning exists in a text; the second is that a reader searches and finds this meaning and represents it "objectively" to a reader. Our current understanding of summary as an interpretive act is now more in line with recent research in literacy, literary criticism, and composition studies, which argues that determinate meaning is not *in* a text and argues that reading and writing are both social constructs, results of the conventional processes whereby they are learned and practiced (Cook-Gumperz, Heath, Fish, Tompkins, Suleiman and Crossman, Petersen, Bartholomae and Petrosky).

By arguing that summary is essentially interpretive, we do not claim that objective summary does not exist. Instead, we claim that even objective summary is the result of a decision to be objective and to write using conventions which are associated with objectivity. We offer one example of a decision to write within an objective persona which sums up our change in perspective about summary. As we mentioned above, about half our basic writers wrote conventional objective summaries; they restated the main idea of Hall's text, condensed representational examples, and preserved the balance of the original article. At first, we saw these summaries as ideal goals and these students as successful. Now, however, we see these students as making a pragmatic choice to write the exact type of summary we had asked for; they deliberately chose not to include their interpretations and reactions to the original text, adopting *our* goals for *their* reading and writing. The students who did not write objective summaries were those who could not or would not subordinate self to teacher or text.



The pedagogical implications of our teacher-research arise from our change in perspective about the place and purpose of summary in basic writing courses. We currently believe that our initial reason for teaching summary was sound: college students need practice writing about the texts they read. We would now, however, re-design our basic writing courses to use summary as a means rather than an end. Summary could provide a way to talk about students' varying responses to texts, the reasons underlying these responses, and the ways in which interaction between reader and text changes within social contexts. One way of introducing this discussion would be to compare basic writers' summaries with other writers' summaries of the same text, re-creating our experience of teacher-research with our students. In comparing the summaries, we could consider a reader's selectivity when reading and responding, the traditional distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity and whether these distinctions are valid, the values readers place on particular responses in particular contexts, and the ways of framing responses to appeal to different audiences. We will encourage students to see how summary is part of a larger discourse—a method of establishing one's credibility and authority over a subject, of reviewing others' ideas in order to refute or build upon them, and of evaluating and interpreting what one has read.

Ellen Barton is an Assistant Professor in Linguistics and Composition at Wayne State University in Detroit. Her research interests in composition are in discourse analysis and computers and writing.

Ruth Ray is an Assistant Professor in Composition at Wayne State University in Detroit. Her research interests are in teacher-research, writing in a second language, and computers and writing.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bartholomae, D. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write*. Ed. M. Rose. New York: Guilford Press, 1985. 134-165.
- Bartholomae, D. and A. Petrosky, eds. *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1986.
- Bazerman, C. *The Informed Writer*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
- Berke, J. *Twenty Questions for the Writer*. 3rd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
- Berthoff, A. "The Teacher as REsearcher." Goswami and Stillman 28-39.
- Britton, J. "A Quiet Form of Research." Goswami and Stillman 13-19.
- Cook-Gumperz, J., ed. *The Social Construction of Literacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

- Fish, S. *Is There a Text in this Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Goswami, D. and P. Stillman, eds. *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987.
- Heath, S. Brice. *Ways with Words*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Langan, J. *English Skills*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.
- Odell, L. "Planning Classroom Research." Goswami and Stillman 128-160.
- Petersen, B., ed. *Convergences: Transactions in Reading and Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.
- Spatt, B. *Writing from Sources*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983.
- Suleiman, S. and I. Crossman, eds. *Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Tompkins, J., ed. *Reader-Response Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.