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Classroom Research Project Helps Students "Know" Their Readers

by Barbara Cooper

Abstract

The goal of this research project was to help student writers learn about interests of readers. Student writers participated in a reader-interest survey by helping with survey development, administering the survey, and analyzing data. This project created student writer awareness about the need to understand reader interests. The survey data have afforded more depth and meaning to classroom discussions on story ideas. The student editorial staff of Agri-Naturalist, the Ohio State University College of Agriculture student magazine, uses the survey data to critique story selections and to make all editorial decisions.

"Know your reader!" That phrase has been recited by writing teachers and editors so often that it deserves an honored place in the "Writing Hall of Fame." It is appropriate advice for all who work with words; however, actually putting that advice to work is difficult. Who are our readers? What do they want? What are their interests? In the classroom where I teach a magazine writing and production course, student writers and editors are, generally, more interested in how to get an "A" than in understanding the needs and interests of their readers!

I launched a research project in which the student writers directly participated in an effort to determine the interests of their readers. My goal was to involve student writers in a systematic analysis of their readers' interests. One reason which Redding (1982) lists for doing a readership survey is "to keep open feedback channels, so that a publication . . . may remain sensitive to its audience." My objective was to help student writers understand that reader service, and not only meeting the teacher's needs, should be among their top priorities.

Survey Development

In 1985, Gail Caplinger, then the student editor of the *Agri-Naturalist*, the Ohio State University College of Agriculture

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student magazine, began a reader-interest survey for an honors project under my supervision. She said, "I realized that most article topic selections were not being made on the basis of reader interest . . . [The staff] simply assumed that topics traditionally covered by the magazine were of interest to the audience." Thus, with the goal of improving magazine readership, was collected on a target audience. Objectives were to: (1) find article topics most appealing to readers, and (2) make recommendations to future *Agri-Naturalist* staffs, based on the findings.

Caplinger selected "title rating" as her survey method, modeling after one used by *The Ohio Farmer* magazine. A written survey was developed, comprised of 25 article summaries on potential topics, consisting of a headline and a short article description. For example, one summary read: "Researchers Breed Weeds for Future Food." The survey included topics ranging from horticulture and animal science to student internships and faculty awards.

As a survey group, Caplinger selected the students enrolled in *Communication of Agricultural Concepts*, a class taught each quarter with a size ranging between 60 to 100 students. It was determined that the demographics of this class, generally, were similar to that of the college's undergraduates. The survey asked students to indicate interest in each of the 25 articles described, using a scale of 1 to 4. (A scale value of 1 indicated no interest, 2 slight interest, 3 interest, and 4 extreme interest.) The mean score of each article summary was calculated and then ranked against others. Caplinger reported findings and made recommendations concerning future article selection to the *Agri-Naturalist* staff.

This research promoted such significant classroom discussion among the student staff about their readers that I decided to continue the project. In 1986, the reader-interest survey was made an integral part of *Writing for the Agricultural Media*, the course in which students write, edit, and publish the *Agri-Naturalist* magazine. To begin, the original survey was revised, rewriting some of the article summaries. The purpose: to include a greater variety of topics, including stories about student activities, faculty, research, and important agricultural issues, but also desired was an effort to keep the survey as short as possible in order to avoid reader fatigue in completing it.

For valid comparisons, I wanted the students surveyed to rank the last article summaries as carefully as the first. Colleagues who reviewed the survey suggested that all article summaries should be, approximately, the same word length to avoid a possible bias against longer or shorter summaries. Thus, all article summaries were revised so that each was limited to between nine and 15 words and the total number of article summaries

were shortened from 25 to 15. For example, one revised summary read: "Natural Resources Professor Honored by University—A fisheries and wildlife specialist is recognized as a distinguished teacher. Her students explain why." Questions on the background and reading habits of the respondents also were revised to improve the analysis of results.

Responsibility for the project was divided to give every member of the magazine staff a role in conducting the survey. Staff members administered the survey and entered the survey data into the computer. Other staff members interviewed the editors of the *The Ohio Farmer* and *Buckeye Farm News* about readership surveys which those magazines had conducted. Other staff members presented reports on readership literature found in the library. All student staff members summarized the data and discussed the findings in class.

Results and Classroom Discussion

The 1985 study created awareness among the *Agri-Naturalist* staff of the need to understand the interests of their readers. Staff members discussed the results (see tables 1 and 2) in light of stories published in a recent issue. The results showed that students surveyed had, relatively, low interest in articles about new faculty members and faculty teaching awards. However, the editors recently had devoted two pages of the 16-page publication to stories on faculty award recipients. Student editors decided that they should consider more carefully a decision to give that much space to reporting faculty awards. The survey respondents gave one of the highest marks to the humorous article, "Real farmers don't eat yogurt." Student editors concluded that their readers wanted to see humor in the magazine, and the editors felt they had been on target with their readers' interests with a recently published humorous photo story entitled, "The Ag Nerd."

Another highly rated article summary concerned student internships. The editors surmised that student readers interested in reading about internships might also be likely to read other stories with career information. Through their examination of the survey results, the student editors were able to critique their story selections as never before, for now they had some actual data on their readers' interests. Moreover, they began making some observations on the types of stories their readers would be most likely to read in future issues.

The *Agri-Naturalist* staff now discusses readers' interests as editorial decisions are made because staff members feel they know more about what their readers would be likely to read.

The two highest rated article summaries in the 1986 survey (see tables 3 and 4) were both about careers in agriculture: "Where are the jobs in agriculture?" and "Internships shorten job search." Because career topics were rated so highly, the student writers spent time looking for ideas and angles to cover on careers. They decided to write a story about the many references and classes with career information available to students in the College of Agriculture. As in the first survey, an article summary about a professor who recently had won an award was the item rated lowest by student respondents. In light of this information, student writers and editors remained hesitant to include a similar story in upcoming issues.

Overall, I have observed a willingness on the part of student writers and editors to participate in collecting information about their readers' interests. They are enthusiastic about this hands-on approach to research in the classroom. Also, the survey data have given much more depth and meaning to our classroom discussions on story ideas and have made editorial decisions easier for the student editors. The phrase, "know your reader" has become a guiding motto for these editors and writers.

For Future Classroom Study

More statistical data are necessary to give a distinct picture of readers' interests. Up to this point, we have only examined the mean scores for each article summary. While we have gathered demographic data on the students, we have not yet analyzed this information. We want to know whether differences in sex, class rank, grade point average, home background or academic major affects the interests of our readers. This information will become the source of future editorial discussions.

Table 1: 1985 Survey, Top Five Article Summaries

Article	Mean (Four-point Scale, N=62)
"Internships shorten job search"	3.01
"Real farmers don't eat yogurt"	2.87
"Condominiums in the corn fields"	2.87
"Biotechnology brings changes to agriculture"	2.74
"Prof's green thumb leads to blue rose"	2.68

Note: Caplinger did not calculate the standard deviation.

Table 2: 1985 Survey, Bottom Three Article Summaries

Article	Mean (Four-point Scale, N = 62)
"Farm management specialist named distinguished teacher"	2.00
"Hobby horses become college cash"	1.98
"Student meets challenge of handicap"	1.77

Table 3: 1986 Survey, Top Five Article Summaries

Article summary	Mean (Four-point Scale, N = 85)	Standard deviation
"Where are the jobs in agriculture?"	3.53	.078
"Internships shorten job search"	3.08	.895
"Real farmers don't eat yogurt"	3.02	.845
"Biotechnology brings changes to agriculture"	2.78	.846
"Ohio looks toward the 21st century with Ohio 21"	2.67	.088

Table 4: 1986 Survey, Bottom Three Article Summaries

Article summary	Mean (Four-point Scale, N = 85)	Standard deviation
"Hobby horses become college cash"	2.24	.103
"Poultry science: Is it really for the birds?"	2.00	.756
"Natural resources professor honored by university"	1.95	.759

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