

Teaching Blind: A View from a Fiction Writing Classroom

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I tell my fiction writing students that all readers are deaf, blind and mobility impaired. I say this to make the point that the art of fiction always involves the ability to imagine a consciousness different from one's own, whether it is the consciousness of the character inside the fictional world, or the consciousness of the reader outside it, or both. I want my students to abandon the idea that fiction is simply thinly disguised autobiography, written primarily to satisfy the author. Rather, it is the author's job to reach beyond personal experience and to supply the sensory and physical details which will give readers full access to the fictional world and allow them to experience it in all its richness. The writer cannot take for granted that the reader has seen, heard or done everything the characters have. "What does she look like when she's dancing?" I ask. "How loud is that gun shot? What does it feel like when he runs through the snow?" When the words on the page answer these questions, the fiction begins to come alive.

My students have a lot of practice imagining a consciousness different from their own, because of the simple fact that I am blind. They learn from the first class that my blindness will affect everything we do. I cannot, for instance, recognize my students from their faces. I cannot make eye contact with them, or read anything in their facial expressions. I cannot tell if they are raising their hands unless they are waving them around overhead, like a second grader - a gesture undergraduate fiction writers deem hopelessly uncool.

But most significantly for my students, my blindness impairs my ability to read their work. I have Macular Degeneration. The central region of my retinas is defective, impairing my ability to perceive fine detail such as print on a page. Using various Low Vision devices to magnify the text, I can make it out. But I cannot read it with any fluency or ease. To smooth the process, I require my writing students to turn in taped readings of their work. This allows me to return their assignments in approximately the same amount of time a sighted teacher takes. But also, reading their work aloud adds an extra step to their editing and proofreading process. It slows down their pace, making them notice every single word, so they will catch typos, grammatical errors, and other flaws. I tell them to listen to their tapes, and notice places when they stumble or garble their own sentences. Nine times out of ten flubs in oral delivery mark a problem in phrasing. They hear other things as well. When the voice on the tape starts to sound bored, it may be a sign that a scene or description is droning on too long. They can hear when the pace is off, when the narrative moves too quickly or too slowly from one scene to the next.

They sense gaps in their stories, places where a paragraph of exposition will help.

The first time students hand in a tape, there is always a certain amount of good-natured grumbling. No one, it seems, likes the sound of his or her voice on tape. But they get used to it, and by the end of the term, many students tell me they find taping their work a useful practice, which they plan to continue. Taping takes time. My students cannot simply hit the Print command and be done with it. They must sit down with their own text and confront it with a greater degree of critical distance. They are obliged to read their work all the way through, word by word. This makes them more conscious of what they were trying to do, and better able to articulate what they hoped to accomplish.

When students cannot record their own work, I encourage them to have a friend or family member do it. I had a blind student once who had her husband tape her work. In class, she described how his intonation and phrasing bothered her at first, then prompted her to edit her prose to make it sound right. A student with a speech impediment directed several friends in group readings of his work. These were polished radio plays, complete with sound effects and mood music. I marveled at his ability to organize and direct these productions. His inability to make sounds himself did not impair his ability to imagine them.

Aural reading becomes a regular practice in my classroom. I have students read lines of dialogue aloud and ask, "Does that sound like something this character would say?" When students comment on their classmates' work, I insist they connect their remarks to specific places in the text. One student will read aloud a passage from another student's work, laying stress on words or phrases to make an audible point. Sometimes, another student will offer another interpretation, reading the same passage over, highlighting different features.

"Listen to this," the first student says. "Hear that?"

"No, you're reading it wrong," the second student says. "It goes like this." The author may not agree with either interpretation, but has a unique opportunity to hear his or her prose in different voices, and to pinpoint the places in the text which can provoke such debate.

When students worry that aural reading will distort my experience of their work, I tell them that I listen to their words without hearing their voices. I am an experienced aural reader. I have relied on live readers, books on tape and voice synthesizers for many years. And I use these methods to edit my own work. In a sense, the reader's voice is transparent to me. I am generally only about as conscious of it as a sighted reader is of the font the text is printed in. My brain adjusts to accommodate different accents, tonal qualities, and cadences. I listen to my students' tapes a couple of times, then use magnification equipment to make corrections and marginal comments on the printed text.

I do not have to do it this way. I could have a graduate assistant tape

everybody's work. Or I could ask students to send me their work by email, then read it using my computer's synthesized voice. These methods would certainly be more convenient for me. I would not have to carry around all those cassettes, or worry about the technical difficulties which plague my students' tape recorders. The same dog who ate their math homework is likely to chew up their tapes. But when students read their own work aloud the benefits far outweigh the inconveniences.

And I gain something valuable too. Sometimes students feel compelled to speak to me at the end of the tape. They find they have something to explain or disclaim. "I tried to do it another way first, but I think this works better," they say. "Reading it over I see the ending is kind of abrupt." I do not discount the possibility that these outpourings are staged pleas for me to go easy on them. But I also think there is something about reading aloud for an extended period of time, which makes them unguarded. I sense they are not so much speaking to me as thinking aloud. It always sounds like it's late at night when this happens. Their voices are soft, muted. Roommates and pets are all sleeping. Street noise is reduced to the infrequent shush of a passing car. I imagine them sitting alone, in the circle of light from a solitary reading lamp. I hear the tap-tap-tap of the computer's scroll command, as they scan through the text for the passages which still give them trouble. Outside the circle of light, in the general darkness, I hover, a receiving presence. And when they speak to me, I feel myself invited briefly into the mysterious space between the writer and the text. I hear their struggle, their doubts, their pride and disappointment. I hear what they need to know from me. And I use what I hear when I respond to their work.

There are so many advantages to students taping their work, we all tend to forget why it is necessary. In other words, my students learn to accept my disability and work around it, as I do. Something originally intended to accommodate my visual impairment ends up aiding everybody. In class, my students read me the slogans on their T-shirts. They describe what is going on outside the window. They render these services without patronizing me. They understand that my blindness does not impede my intelligence or sense of humor.

"I can't see this," I say, as we discuss a descriptive passage in a student's story. "And this is something I'd really like to see." There is a general murmur of agreement. My students know I cannot see them nodding.

"I can't see it either," one says, then adds, "and I actually could see it if I wanted to."

We all laugh. My blindness is nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about. It obliges me to read their work in a different way, and obliges them to present their work in a different format. But it does not impair my ability to respond to their work and offer advice they can use. And my blindness allows them to shift their

focus beyond the limits of their own experience, and imagine the world from different perspectives. This should improve their fiction, and may even enrich their lives as human beings living in a diverse society.

“You mean you can’t see it in these words,” the author says to both of us. “The words need to make you see it.”

In the brief silence which follows, I hear the scratch of several pens, writing this down.