THE FICTION OF THE "REAL" READER: A COMPARISON OF AUDIENCE PERCEPTION EXPERIENCED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND BUSINESS PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the problems faced by college students writing to dichotomous audiences in business communications courses with findings from a case study of three business writers. The study found that a complex relationship involving authority level, personality, experience, and awareness of organizational, social and situational norms influenced the business writers' adaptations to audience. Writers with greater authority were found to be more confident in creating a specific audience role (audience invoked). Suggestions are made for more closely approximating the business setting within the classroom.

In his 1985 article on "What Survey Research Tells Us About Writing," Paul Anderson concluded that

> It remains unanswered whether on-the-job experience is so important because of deficiencies in college writing courses or because the writing at work simply cannot be taught adequately in the classroom. (p. 68)

This essential question for anyone teaching post-secondary courses in business and technical writing may yield no simple answers. Yet an examination of audience perception--an essential element in composing--may reveal some ways to bridge the gap between workplace writing and college writing.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Two current research strands touch on issues relevant to preparing students for workplace communication. In one, investigators (Anderson 1985, Odell 1985, Coe 1986, Freed and Glenn 1987, Harris 1989) are examining the significance of discourse community in writing, a term Lee Odell (1985) defines as a combination of organizational context and shared values, experience, and knowledge. In the business world this concept is often referred to as "corporate culture." Odell and others advocate preparing students carefully for the communities they are about to enter by making them aware of what Freed and Broadhead term "sacred texts and institutional norms" (p. 154, 1987). Another group, represented by Berlin (1988) and Freire (1985), takes a socio-political stance, arguing that we should educate students so they feed confident to evaluate and possibly repudiate the tenets of their discourse community.[1] Both schools of thought acknowledge the challenge we face in helping students prepare for, or at least understand, a discourse community they have not yet officially entered.

The second research direction, initiated by Ong's seminal article "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" (1975) and refined by Ede and Lunsford (1984), asks the question, "to what degree does a writer consider the audience addressed (or real reader) versus the audience invoked?" To interpret the latter term, we can refer to Ong's description of a fictionalized role for the reader created by the writer's use of various cues. Ede and Lunsford postulate that during composing, writers may move back and forth between these two audience perceptions. In comparison, Thralls et al. (1988) found that writers who focused on a particular subgenre tended to create an overemphasis on a generic reader, leading to ineffective rhetorical strategies.

What seems most compelling is whether these two research strands are linked: could one's role and experience in a discourse community possibly influence the amount and type of attention given to both audience addressed and audience invoked? Further, could this relationship

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[1]One of my business colleagues commented wryly that this could prove to be a "career limiting" confidence.

explain some of the difficulties faced by our students?

WHO ARE THE STUDENT'S "REAL READERS"?

Most college and university instructors wrestle with how best to prepare students for writing on the job. From my recent experience teaching at college level after several years of consulting to business and industry, I must commend instructors on their innovative approaches. Some provide detailed case histories to establish a more complex social, organizational and situational context for writing. To empower students, instructors often encourage them to write a report for a real organization and reader. And to further replicate collaborative career writing, other instructors assign team reports with the final grade being shared amongst the team members. All these approaches have admirable, student-centered learning goals.

At the same time, as instructors we are faced with the inevitable demand for evaluation. So that, while we tell students they are empowered to write a report which considers the variables of outside readership, organizational norms, and situational context, and to assume they can create change, in the end, they know <u>we</u> hold the real power of the grade. When faced with that reality, students often go through strange contortions to accommodate both perceived audiences. Student comments reveal they are aware of this clash, not only of audience needs, but also of discourse communities. These are some representative comments from my students:

> This whole introductory part is for you. Everyone at the firm already knew all this and it's really redundant for them.
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> I found it so hard to put in the information you needed on equine subfertility without boring the outside reader [a horse breeder]. So I ended up writing two reports--one for you and one for her. Hers is about fifty percent shorter and doesn't have all the diagrams because she knows all about the horse's anatomy.

> I ended up really writing this report for you because I know I'm not honestly in a position to make these recommendations to this company.

Instructors, too, run into problems because of this dichotomy. One of my students handed in a brief rather than the required objective formal report. Apparently he had modified his purpose and audience during his research, but had not discussed these changes with me. My dilemma was, should I give him a lesson on the importance of maintaining communication with one's supervisor, as would be necessary on the job, or should I grade the document according to its effective approach and accurate choice of genre for the amended audience and purpose?

THE STUDY

To discover whether or not there was any way to integrate classroom writing more closely with on-the-job writing, I decided to examine documents produced by three professionals. While this study focused on audience perception, I kept in mind Ede and Lundford's caution that

> ...any discussion of audience which isolates it from the rest of the rhetorical situation or which radically overemphasizes or underemphasizes its function in relation to other rhetorical constraints is likely to oversimplify. (p. 169)

The research method chosen follows closely that described by Odell in *Writing in Nonacademic Settings* (1988). Three professionals were selected, two in their 40's and 50's and one in her mid-20's. I was interested in discovering what differences, if any, existed in audience perception between people with considerable experience and seniority and a less experienced professional in a new job setting. Each participant is part of a different discourse community: Alice is dean of an educational institute and had previously taught English courses for many years; Fred, an engineer by training, is a successful businessman who has recently held a high profile position in the community; Jane, the youngest participant, had been a litigation lawyer for two years, and has recently joined the legal department of a small gas pipeline company.

Each gave me a folder of recent letters, memos and reports from which to select a representative sampling. In each document I highlighted sections which appeared to be elaborations and words or phrases that denoted tone. I then met with each participant for a taped discussion. Following Odell's protocol, I asked them if they felt the highlighted sections could have been eliminated, making clear this was not a judgement call on my part, but simply an interest in understanding the thinking behind the words on the page. The strategy was quite successful in eliciting rationales related to audience assessment and sensitivity to organizational norms.

In particular, I was interested in discovering:

1. To what degree does career experience influence audience perception?

2. What effect does degree of authority have on audience perception, rhetorical strategies, and role-playing? How are these factors related?

3. How does discourse community influence audience perception?

ROLE PLAYING INTEGRATED WITH EXPERIENCE

Each participant in the study wrote to discrete types of readers, even though the writers often shared similar purposes. Fred's and Alice's varied rhetorical strategies appear rooted in their authority and experience. In contrast, Jane's writing over her year with a new company showed a definite shift in formality, tone, amount of detail and overall approach. Jane primarily writes in-house documents for her supervisor and the company executives, usually providing legal analyses requested by these readers. When discussing a memo written during her first month on the job, she indicated she was conscious of the changes:

> I went into a lot more detail than I would now. Now I know the people better, know their backgrounds.... Also, I wouldn't qualify my opinions as much.

What her folder of writing revealed was someone gaining confidence as she learned about a new corporate culture.

While Alice and Fred both have a wider range of audiences than Jane, Fred tends to write to strangers more frequently than Alice, preferring oral communications with colleagues and employees. When dealing with an unknown audience, he relies on his experience to project an "other self." He often chooses a particular role to play, one which reflects his personality and philosophy of life.

As Alice's position often requires writing to individuals to sort out personnel problems and enunciate policy, she more frequently has a specific reader in mind. Not surprisingly, considering her background as an English teacher, she also demonstrated the widest array of rhetorical strategies in adapting to audience.

Career experience and understanding of the organization's expectations and norms were constant themes during discussions with these writers. For example, in writing to a stranger asking for an evaluation of a third company's technology, Fred notes:

> Because I get so many of these myself, it occurred to me that this might sound like a sales letter rather than [a request for] an honest evaluation. I thought since he didn't know us, this [last paragraph] would help him treat this more as a serious request rather than a sales pitch.

The paragraph in question reassured the reader that the writer's intent was to obtain a "serious technical evaluation." When asked about placement of the information, Fred pointed out that if it had been placed first, his own reaction would have been a cynical "Oh yeah?"

Alice also frequently alluded to experience as a guide for choosing content and rhetorical strategies. In a memo to a committee made up of union and management representatives, in which she acted as a ghost writer for the chairman, she noted:

> I was quite concerned that the chairman use words very carefully because I've been on a grievance [case] recently and realize how carefully you have to use words... [she went on to list "forbidden" phrases].

In addition to her current administrative position, Alice also draws on her earlier position as an instructor to project likely responses from her faculty members.

These example are typical of how not only experience but also the writer's chosen role influence both rhetorical strategies and the attention given to audience addressed and audience invoked. At times the role was governed by personal identity, but elsewhere it was assumed in response to a specific purpose and context. For instance, in discussing a memo to a senior instructor, Alice noted she had already discussed the problem with the reader by phone and discovered he was having difficulty with an instructor who reported to him. When describing the context for the memo, Alice explained:

> We talked it over first....What I'm doing here is being the bad guy so [the reader] can come back to [the instructor] and say "Whoops, we're in trouble"....We decided I would play the heavy.

In this situation, Alice recognizes the needs of the real reader in her approach, and at the same time creates a fictionalized role for him to play so he can deal more easily with the errant instructor. It also demonstrates confidence in her authority that she can play a distasteful role to ensure personnel relationships work smoothly below her. Her implied interpretation of organizational context is that it would not have been right or effective to force the senior instructor to play a heavy-handed role.

Fred also used role playing to interact with readers, although his roles did not appear to vary as much as Alice's. (This perception may be influenced by the type of documents he chose to share with me.) During his taped discussions, he often used sports analogies to discuss his writing and implied he saw himself in a coaching role. This stance was closely linked to his identity as a positive, dynamic leader who holds firm beliefs about how to motivate people. The coaching role became most explicit when we examined his refusal letter to a young man seeking employment with his firm. His initial comments indicated that general experience let him empathize with the applicant and project his state of mind: "This is obviously someone who is unemployed or unsatisfactorily employed – and that's a most stressful position to be in." In the last paragraph of the letter, after the refusal, Fred suggested some alternatives the reader could try. He explained:

> I wanted to put my hand on the shoulder of this person...I'm reminding him...why doesn't he take his strength and exploit it? It's a little bit bold to tell a stranger what to do--I'm not his father, I'm not his priest--but in effect I had an element of both of those.

This paternal approach recognizes the information needs of the reader, yet creates roles for both writer and reader which, despite the refusal, are intended to leave both feeling good about the transaction. The strategies used are those associated with a particular subgenre, but Fred seemed guided more by his self-image and empathy for the reader than by use of a conventional approach.

Like Alice's role-playing, Jane's was closely allied to her function within the organization, but modified by her newness to this position and to this industry. At times she was very conscious of her role as lawyer, explaining one text elaboration in this way:

> These types of things have been mentioned to [the readers] orally, but it's part of a lawyer's paranoia to try to slip it in in writing to make sure no one comes back later and says "Why didn't you point this out?"

In another memo she referred to inclusion of "typical legal hedging" to qualify her opinion. Her earliest memo, written during her first month with the firm, included various elaborations and explanations of assumptions because, as she explained, she was "a neophyte in the industry." Such rationales seem to illustrate Jane's need to balance two roles: on one hand, she must recognize her inexperience in the industry, but, on the other, she must assure her readers of her legal expertise. In taking such a position, she appears to focus more on audience invoked rather than audience addressed as she projects a general reader who is both critic and client.

In trying to play both roles simultaneously, Jane occasionally uses strategies which at first appear inappropriate for the reader. In discussing one memo to her supervisor, she commented that a statement could have been written as a question as she was not clear about the law involved and was trying to clarify an assumption made by a third party. She defended her original wording by saying, "I guess I thought my boss would certainly understand what I was saying." And she might be right. Within this context, her supervisor may have understood her reluctance to forthrightly express uncertainty and would have been sensitive to her intent. As I conducted this short study, I realized the need in future research to involve readers to ascertain whether writers' assumptions about discourse community were accurate or not.

Significantly, Jane has found her legal language slipping into other circumstances. She noted with chagrin her friends have commented that her personal letters are now much more formal and "long-winded". This echoes what we see our students doing as they assume the most obvious (and often the worst) attributes of business writing in the process of learning that discourse community. It is a reminder that, as Harris suggests, "one does not step cleanly and wholly from one community to another, but is caught instead in an always changing mix of dominant, residual, and emerging discourse" (p. 17, 1989).

AUDIENCE PERCEPTION REFLECTED IN RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

A final observation about the writing of these professionals is the relationship between audience perception and rhetorical strategies. This section will focus on Alice's writing as she demonstrated the most sophisticated techniques.

In a memo to senior management about an annoying but minor issue, Alice noted she had used a pun in the subject line "deliberately to address tone--to deal with a frustrating issue but keep a humorous and conversational context." Later, in the suggestions section, she included an inside joke, explaining she felt she had to make a strong point but in "a palatable way." In using conditional words in her last suggestion, she again was clearly conscious of relationship to audience: "It's stronger without them, but I used those [conditional] words in deference to the readers – I was also conscious of the need for openness or option."

Brown and Levinson (1978) theorize that such linguistic choices are made as part of a politeness strategy governed by the writer's knowledge of the social distance and power relationship between writer and reader, and the relative imposition of the message within a specific culture. Having taken redressive action to minimize possible threat to the reader's "face," Alice elsewhere in the memo uses less deference, twice making points by using one of the reader's viewpoints to her own advantage. She explained, "This is a bit of a dig...I'm saying put your money where your mouth is." The memo's rhetorical strategies therefore recognize the status of the audience addressed but also show the writer in control, or at least willing to take risks by making pointed remarks once a friendly, conversational tone had been established. These strategies suggest that the social and power relationships are not perceived to be exceptionally distant or daunting.

At times Alice breaks the generic rules we teach for effective business writing. In a letter to the minister of education, she indicated she used a jargon term purposely to force the reader to refer to an earlier proposal sent to the former minister. Here we see use of the audience invoked as she projects a reader who will have sufficient interest to want to understand the terminology. A similar strategy is used in a memo to a senior instructor who had not followed guidelines in writing an instructor evaluation. In her response, Alice intentionally does not spell out the guidelines in detail, so the instructor must look them up to understand which ones have been ignored or misconstrued. In contrast, Jane conscientiously made every effort to include any necessary backup that would help her readers. Level of authority and personality traits appeared to play equal roles in these rhetorical choices.

Many times Alice's strategies evolve from previous telephone calls or meetings with the reader. In a letter to an assistant director of an off-campus education program at a federal facility, she used a variety of sophisticated approaches to accommodate the needs of a two-level audience and to achieve multiple purposes. The letter dealt with what, to an outsider, would seem like a trivial issue (confidentiality prevents disclosure of the actual topic). Alice's comments illustrated she recognized this absurdity, but also that she had to tread carefully because of overlapping jurisdictions and economic and political factors. Unlike the memo to other executives in her own organization, this letter recognizes a greater social distance between writer and reader, acknowledges the reader's power, and implies the relative imposition of the request on an outside organization with which her institute must maintain a goodwill relationship.

She explained her concern was really directed to the primary reader's supervisor, but protocol dictated that it be sent to the reader. Her overall strategy was that if she received a refusal, she would use that letter to obtain funding from another source to overcome the problem. What was most interesting was her awareness of trying to send two messages to two readers within one letter. Here's Alice:

> The whole thing is a little tongue-in-cheek. I'm aware of a sense of irony--the formal treatment of a trivial topic is incongruent. It's so...typical of what you can get into in this environment. I'm aware the reader will also be aware of this [irony], partly from our earlier conversation. What I'm trying to get at is, who is this [secondary reader] anyway, and what is he trying to achieve?

The reference to environment confirms that Alice is conscious of the rules and constraints associated with an organizational context separate from her own. The fact that she and the primary reader share a different discourse community, an educational one, lets her write a double message.

Throughout this letter Alice takes the risk of invoking an audience role likely at variance with the secondary reader's actual attitudes and concerns. Within the letter she takes the position that the reader has good reasons for his decision and, like her organization, is willing to find a compromise. In reality, she assumes an intransigent reader, but casts him in a sympathetic role to make the refusal more difficult. This strategy is similar to that noted by Gragson and Selzer (1990) in their analysis of two scholarly articles in biology. They conclude that even writers of "utilitarian non-fiction" enhance persuasion by providing cues "that direct implied readers into specific roles." (A significant footnote to these strategies: the subsequent letter Alice received from the primary audience suggested he had appreciated the double message as the response was written with tongue-in-cheek humour.)

Fred also uses strategies which recognize multiple audiences. In a letter to a European trade organization, discussing an upcoming speech he planned to give to this group, Fred invokes a readership wider than the audience addressed. He refers in the letter to the organizing committee of an international event which will be sponsored by their country. He explained:

> I was trying to justify that business should be a stronger partner than government [in this international event]. This is a little bit of salesmanship – this is my point of view and I wanted to emphasize that it may be different from [that of] the organizing committee and the government [of this country]. This is really the subject of my speech, not what I'd written below.

Knowing that the members of this trade committee will be talking with their government and the organizing committee, Fred is sending a message to these latter two groups in a circuitous manner – a message he feels will be more effective as it will come from influential people within the country. Also, in writing this letter he came to realize he wanted to change the focus of his speech, and did so.

CONCLUSIONS

These examples only touch upon the rich data obtained from these three business writers. They are described in some detail to illustrate the complex interactions which influence audience perception. The evidence from these interviews supports Johnstone's conviction that "To have a self is to be able to see our fundamental commitment vis-a-vis those of others" (Carleton, 1975, p. 83). The writers in this study seldom envisioned a stereotyped reader but, to quote Ede (1984), conceived of audience as "a vital and necessary force, the...writer's partner and co-creator in the constitution of meaning" (p. 153). Confidence in one's own role as writer appeared an important factor in creating this partnership. The more senior writers, with greater authority, were more willing to risk fictionalizing a role for their readers. But even the youngest participant, Jane, drew strength from her professional role to offset her inexperience in a new setting.

While all three writers indicated awareness of conventional strategies for certain subgenres of business writing, they seemed influenced more by the specifics of audience, situation, and purpose when selecting rhetorical strategies. When the audience addressed was unknown, experience helped to generate a sense of other--not just "how would I react in this situation," but "how do individuals in this particular organization or circumstance usually react?" What I observed was an integration of personal identity with social role filtered through a tacit understanding of discourse community.

How is that tacit understanding achieved? All three writers referred to phone calls, meetings, and other documents as important factors in helping them make decisions about approach. For Alice and Fred in particular, knowing organizational and situational background as well as the reader's ultimate use of their document, helped them decide how far they could go in invoking an audience role. Jane projected a generic, critical reader (not dissimilar from many college writers' projections) until she developed sufficient experience to adapt to the corporate culture and to specific readers. These observations support Bocchi's (1988) contention that we must "seek to describe how writers read their work culture" (p. 9).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

What is my answer to Paul Anderson's conjecture that writing at work perhaps cannot be taught in the classroom? Despite the difficulties, I have faith that college writing courses can be part of a continuum of learning how to operate in new discourse communities. We can approximate, but we cannot replicate.

To approximate more accurately, we can give students greater involvement in understanding the implicit tenets of discourse communities. A starting point would be to have them take an ethnographic position by analyzing their own discourse community in a particular classroom or in an outside group. Discussion of "inside" vocabulary and unspoken rules could be enlightening for both students and instructor!

To help students understand the hidden challenges of the formal report prepared for an outside organization, we must help them perceive the full impact of social, situational, and organizational factors. One approach is to introduce detailed case histories for real letters and reports gathered from industry and business. The occasional guest speaker describing such backgrounds can provide a powerful dose of credibility.

Out of such discussions students can come to realize how each document is tied up in what Faigley (1985) terms "chains of communication." The three people in my study commented frequently on the influence of communications which preceded or were likely to follow the document being written.

Once students are familiar with these variables, they could construct their own case histories for their formal reports. Ideally, this assignment would be based on interviews and a reading of selected company documents. Confidentiality will always be a concern for organizations. But instructors can do much to allay those fears by providing students with an introductory letter which explains the intent and limits of the assignment. Nor should we overlook the college or university as readily accessible sources of research topics. The library, student services, faculties, student organizations, and food services are all possible sources of topics and of readers. The added advantage is that the educational institute represents a discourse community already somewhat familiar to students.

The students' case histories should include a well-defined role for the writer, possibly as outside consultant, so the writer has a realistic footing from which to interact with the audience addressed. Most important, once this case history has been approved, the instructor should make every effort to read and evaluate the report within these boundaries.

This study also raised questions about program design. As noted earlier, the writers interviewed all found various oral communications supplied essential background to their writing. The importance of this process added to the fact that students must use oral and interpersonal skills to successfully research both the case history and the formal report, indicate that these elements should be incorporated into an effective business communications course. Instituting writing-across-the-curriculum projects would be one realistic way to find sufficient time to develop both written and oral abilities.

Finally, we should remind ourselves, as Jeremy Campbell does in *Grammatical Man*, that experience is much more than a simple accretion of individual experiences. Indeed, "[t]hinking always adds something to experience and creates a mental picture...which represents a broad range of experience" (p. 38). By more closely approximating the complexities behind writing on the job and discussing the hidden tenets of "discourse community," we allow students to make important generalizations from their college writing courses. Such mental constructs will make them better prepared to assume roles as both members and critics of new discourse communities.

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