Proposal Writing and Leadership: Taking a Hermeneutic Approach Toward Professional Communication as Social Action

Linda M. LaDuc
University of Massachusetts

DEFINING LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE as a subset of communication, this essay positions technical and business communication as potential sites for leadership. Pointing to ways philosophical hermeneutic theory is useful for exploring ethical dimensions of proposals and proposal teaching, and assuming expanded roles for professional communicators in the future, the essay analyzes student-instructor interaction over proposal projects. In the process, it lays the foundation for more reflective theory and practice that may encompass not only professional communication expertise, but also more active citizen leadership on the part of professional communicators.

Theory and practice in our discipline of professional communication (and in its sub-specialties of technical and business communication) do not yet fully reflect a world view in which the role of the professional communicator is that of a proactive, reflective practitioner, or citizen-agent of change. Consider, for example, the opportunities for leadership implicated in some business proposal writing, in which writers, as business leaders or as technical experts, but also as citizens, may respond to management, social, and technical problems as they try to improve conditions for business in a downtown shopping area, propose changes in public school financing, or evaluate risks associated with environmental clean-up projects. Despite such increasingly complex social contexts for proposal writing, the prevailing tendency is still to see proposals as rather limited responses to requests for quotes for products and services [RFPs], and to view writers as mere technicians. In the latter instance, the professional communicator need only employ technical expertise and/or persuasion, and is seldom expected to look at ethical implications or social results generated by the success or failure of individual technical documents. As well, proposal writing is often perfunctorily presented in technical and business communication texts, encouraging little reflection on the part of students or teachers about the complex relationships that may be implicated in some proposal research and writing processes.

Now, whether or not one agrees that professional communicators ought to fend off the excesses of a too rationalistic science by re-inserting the importance of social needs, values, emotions, and processes, new exigencies for communication force us to examine a host of tacit processes and routines in which we participate, and in particular to examine pedagogical practices if we are charged with teaching professional communication. As Kenneth Burke (1969) has claimed, we specialists may all suffer from "a trained incapacity" to change, and certainly change entails extensive effort. While we write in journals about social perspectives, too often we act in classrooms as if social and ethical involvement, and any relation between communication and leadership on our part and that of our students, were marginal concerns to be addressed only if time allows. Hoping to resolve that contradiction, in this essay I've made our need to develop practices richly informed by theory the focus of discussion. In addition, I suggest a particular application of theory for guiding the teaching of proposal writing as social action: as leadership communication.

Rationale and Overview

I direct a business writing program, and admit to a desire to bring both my students, and the instructors who assist me in teaching the students, more than technical mastery; I want us to be able to reflect critically on how our practices shape our professions. Similarly, I would like students to consider the social consequences of business communication practices, and instructors to consider the social implications for students and the public,of the teaching of business communication. Viewing all of these aims as forms of leadership, as a result of these concerns, I've developed a framework for pinpointing additional sites of potential leadership action and have drawn on relevant theory to support and explain how professional communicators may demonstrate social action leadership in the process of proposal writing.

After first defining my terms and offering a brief justification for a view of technical communicators as leaders, I'll briefly review work in technical communication that takes a social action perspective. Then, offering two cases of student proposal writing as examples, I'll demonstrate how Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, as a theory of interpretation, can be a useful foundation and method for a social action perspective toward proposal writing, and as well, for a theoretical approach that allows us to envision the ethical implications of proposal writing processes—one that stimulates more

complex thinking about the relationship between student products and teaching practices.

Defining the Relationship Between Leadership and Professional Communication

To begin, I define leadership as the moving of people, through words, toward change—a definition influenced by Burke (1969) and Kotter (1990). My definition presumes that the individual is a proactive agent in the world who may employ a variety of actions, including persuasive communication, to achieve his or her goals. Though my definition may seem to be the result of an incommensurable coalition of the thinking of a rhetorician-literary critic and a management expert, Burke offers rhetoric as a useful method for studying organizations (his dramatistic five-part scheme or Pentad), and he implies that rhetoric (or discourse) is also a useful focus of analysis—in particular for uncovering how those in power induce others to act. (More than one organizational communication researcher has made use of Burke's insights, for example, Thompkins and Cheney, [1985]).

Secondly, I define communication as interdependent symbolic activity, a definition informed by intercultural communication theory (Carbaugh, 1994). Accordingly, communication is constituted by speech events and activities in which people engage, in context, in order to express and create both meaning and structure. This definition , while not attending to non-verbal or even to visual aspects of communication per se, emphasizes both meaning, and performance or process, as text. Suitable for technical communication purposes, this definition of communication also encompasses the following description of leadership: leaders, whether as designated or proactive agents, use words as primary means of symbolic action in order to coordinate and motivate others with whom they are engaging intersubjectively. Thus leadership is in part constituted by discourse, and is enacted through discourse processes, including both mundane and extraordinary business and technical writing.

Professional communicators are also organizational rhetors when working in a variety of contexts. Harrison (1987) examines frameworks for technical writing in organizations, analyzing how organizations function as rhetorical contexts. Taking a social-construction perspective, Doheny-Farina (1986) points out that rhetorical purposes of organizational documents, such as business plans, are shaped by specific organizational contexts and contingencies, as these documents serve to shape reality for the actors who write them. Both

Harrison and Doheny-Farina view organizational actors as rhetors, a notion Farrell (1976) has also put forth in discussing social communities and organizational activities from a rhetorical perspective. These scholars' ideas suggest to me that we need to examine rhetors as leaders. From such a stance, the rhetorical activity of business leaders, for example, *creates* organizations as actors use symbol systems (Brummett, 1976; Brown, 1983), and it is from this viewpoint as well, that professional communicators become leaders—by engaging in writing activities that move people, through words, toward change. Therefore, a productive working definition of "professional" communication is communication taking place in specific communities of professionals who are writing or speaking in order to achieve specific goals, a definition allowing considerable leeway for thinking of communication as social action, and of leadership as communicative action.

Professional Communication and Social Action

A social action approach to thinking about technical communication is not new in our field, of course. Carolyn Miller, among others, set the stage by making explicit the relationship between positivism and the prevalent notion that good technical writing was clear, impartial, and concerned only with the facts (Miller, C., 1979). Other critics of objectivity include Dobrin, who has pointed to the potential for hegemony lurking in the universalized "everyman" voice projected in much technical writing, a voice that acts as a monolithic "logic of domination" under which technical communicators may become unreflective subjects (1983). Sullivan decries what he perceives to be a denial that technical communication encompasses social and political responsibility (1990). In this his voice is joined by Zappen, who has suggested that rhetorical theory might be applied to both writing in organizational contexts and to social problems induced by scientific enterprise (1989). Feminist technical communication scholars have also argued for extending the concerns of professional communication to public life and social projects. Among others, Lay (1989) has surveyed the value of gender studies for professional communication, and LaDuc and Goldrick-Jones (1994) have articulated how feminist contributions can foreground ethical concerns and help teachers and practitioners understand the ways power is implicated in technical communication practice.

The notion that writing is an activity grounded in social contexts has also become well established in technical and professional composition theory. Cooper and Holzman (1989) argue that writing is a social activity, meaning

that writing is not usually conducted alone in a garret, but rather is characterized by complexities of social structure and dynamics that can be ignored only by oversimplifying the process. They also point out that writing is even more importantly a way of interacting with others, that the social takes primacy over the technological, and that writing is a form of social action that incorporates systems of ideas as well as systems of purposes. Systems of purposes allow writers to coordinate action, as in the case of much technical and business writing. An example of how this occurs in technical communication is offered by Susan Mallon Ross (1994). Ross proposes a theory and praxis for technical communicators who take intercultural and cross-cultural social contexts into account in the writing of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Remedial Action Plans [RAPs]. By arguing that technical communicators in these kinds of situations ought to intentionally promote inclusiveness and collaboration among the parties involved in order to produce a more effective communication product, Ross implicitly calls for leadership as a means to an end: for technical communication practice that is socially conscious but also socially proactive. Such practice fully enacts professional expertise and thus, from a pragmatic standpoint, produces the most effective communication product for the particular situation. As in the case of RAPs, proposal writing is also a form of social action which calls for leadership.

A Classroom Example of Business Proposals as Social Action

To see how proposals can bring about social action (for good or for ill), I ground this discussion in two actual business proposals written by two different groups of management students in two business writing classes at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. These proposals had more than one aim: the students needed to complete a class assignment by addressing business problems, but they could also address personal agendas if the latter were congruent with the former. (This latter aim simply makes the proposal more meaningful for students on the whole.) The two groups in question worked with two different instructors. I became involved because I met with the student groups as a writing advisor and editor, and so had a unique opportunity to listen to their concerns and read their preliminary drafts.

The assignment the students were working from asked them to pinpoint a problem that annoyed them, and to address the problem by writing a proposal to the party or parties who had the authority to make some change. The first group of students decided to write a proposal to overturn a local keg law regulating the size of beer containers—a law that was affecting fraternities

and local beer distributors, and a law that the student proposal group perceived to be unfairly targeted at students. A second group decided merely to amend the same law, but they perceived it as affecting a different population. The proposals were mailed and students wrote follow-up progress reports on any actions taken, or not, by the influential parties.

The Group One students were initially interested in getting the law overturned because, as they told me in a conference, it was "forcing students to buy large quantities of six-packs and cases at an extravagant price" and creating an accompanying massive litter problem, added as an interesting aside. In the meantime, based on a survey and interviews the students conducted, the group reported that large beer distributors in the area were suffering from a loss of sales, ostensibly as a result of the complexity and legalities introduced by the keg law and a subsequent drop in the number of student customers. In the process of meeting with the intended recipient of the proposal, a police chief, this proposal group discovered the reasons why the law was put into place, and found themselves suddenly in sympathy with the chief's depiction of dead students being peeled off village streets by local officers. Consequently, the students' original concern for the problems of beer distributors lessened, and they decided that their solution would not be trying to overturn the law, but rather trying to cooperate with the village to offer incoming first year students an alcohol education program. In their final draft they argued for older students to take social responsibility for younger students on a regular basis, and for the keg law to remain in place as a reasonable interim safeguard while a longer term and fairer solution to the drinking and littering problem was developed.

Group Two initially wanted the keg law amended because it inadvertently made homebrewers newly culpable, since many were continuing to brew quantities of beer in what had formerly been acceptable, Government approved sized containers prior to the passing of the local keg law (one of the students in this group was an avid homebrewer). This group interviewed the same police chief, but instead of intensively questioning him, the students reported that they mostly informed him that he might have to arrest homebrewers in addition to students if he followed the letter of the law. Though a survey of home brewers conducted by this group to convince the police chief of this potential misapplication of the law also uncovered a potential problem with one part of the solution (possible subversion of the intent of the law), anticipating the police chief's objection, this group did not present the problem to him, nor change the focus of their efforts during the proposal process. In their final

proposal draft they avoided exploring the likelihood that students could take advantage of the keg law to engage in homebrewing on a large scale if the amendment were passed. Instead, the group stuck closely to a spare presentation of the legal facts.

In neither case have the proposed solutions been implemented, though the second group may enjoy a greater potential for achieving success than the former, in part because the students in that group inadvertently alerted homebrew suppliers and, as locally affected businesses, the suppliers have organized to try to get the proposed amendment enacted. What I wish to focus on is not the relative success or failure of the proposals *per se*, but rather the social processes involved in preparing and writing the proposals, the opportunities that exist for student business writers interacting with instructors to demonstrate leadership as well as subvert the public good, and for the almost inseparable linking of business and public interests and concerns that these problem situations demonstrate.

Why and How Social Action is Implicated in Structuring Unsolicited or Freeform Proposals

Although many sales proposals may employ boilerplate and detailed formatting conventions, and proposals written in response to government RFPs may be identically formatted, proposals for changes in legislation or to address problems for which there were no previously determined formatting guidelines, mayeach be organized quite differently. To aid students to understand how to structure them, I suggest that unsolicited or freeform proposals should have three sections consisting of (i) problem-related arguments, (ii) the proposal statement or summary, and (iii) solution-supporting arguments. (Identically formatted proposals contain information relevant to these three categories as well, but the information may be dispersed across the proposal document according to readers' pre-defined needs.)

Problem-related arguments develop and explain a problem, offering proof of its existence and information about how, and to what degree, parties are affected. In addition, these preliminary arguments usually include causal analysis of the roots of the problem, and generally inform the intended audience of the possible negative consequences of letting the problem continue unaddressed. The proposal statement summarizes the description of the problem and points the reader to a summary of the solution. Solution-supporting arguments, on the other hand, defend the solution, explaining and presenting

technical feasibility information, anticipating and refuting objections, and offering good reasons for implementing the recommended solution. As a call to action, supporting arguments regularly include pathos-based appeals or emotion-invoking scenarios. Though appeals may be carefully worded or even concealed in some highly technical proposals, proposals are nevertheless selling tools, so persuasion is integral to them. Perhaps for this reason, all too often persuasive strategies are the main focus of instruction regarding proposal writing, as a perusal of technical and business communication texts will readily show (though see Flower and Ackerman [1994] for a recent departure from that trend).

The over-attention to persuasion is problematic because at each stage in the development of proposal arguments there exists the possibility for disclosure and inclusion, or for concealment and exclusion, of alternative purposes—and a too-strong emphasis on persuasion may lead to the latter. For instance, designing and conducting a survey (steps related to preliminary argument development) are phases of information-collecting that can be shaped in a variety of ways according to the prejudices of the designers, and causal analysis may be thorough, or truncated, or even elided. For example, the first group of students originally surveyed only students about the keg law. When they decided to expand the population and survey local townspeople, they gained a different view of the causes of the problem, and analysis of the additional data led them to change their focus. The second group only looked at the keg law as it impacted on homebrewers and suppliers, and retained their original focus. In part, these differences in process were the result of instructor direction; the first group participated in a class that was more concerned with processes of proposal writing, while the second group was in a class more directed at producing an impeccable product. Yet, because the second group never analyzed why the law was put in place, their anticipated outcome may have a negative social effect: students may use the amendment to acquire beer in large, cheap quantities, subverting the original intent of the law, which was to save lives. In their supporting arguments the second group did not raise this problem as a potential objection, deciding instead simply to state their case and hope the reader would not find out about this possible side effect. What is critical to observe here is that both teacher decisions about focus, and student decisions about strategies, played a part in shaping this situation in the form of a rhetorical, dialogic interaction, as Faigley would assert (1992).

Thus, while these two proposals are exemplary of rhetoric in action, as persuasion, unfortunately much teaching about proposals may stop here, without

discussion of these very different consequences. To end at such a juncture could leave the student writer with a notion of the proposal writing process as almost devoid of ethics, because the proposal they produced is an acceptable product, yet the teacher did not introduce discussion of the potential consequences of that product on people, and thus on long-term relationships between the parties. To leave the latter outside the realm of technical communication is potentially negligent: without intervention techniques, such as discussion, students might never perceive how differences in process may result in differences in outcomes. If we say in this situation that it is not the place of the instructor to moralize, not our place to lead students, that there is not enough time for theory or for ethical considerations, how are we to guide the business or technical writer in the field who faces the same problems over and over again? Yet we find ourselves in a quandary. Given these cases, what theory would guide us in our efforts to help students understand that they are making an ethical decision with consequences that are personal, business-related, and social as they negotiate these proposal processes?

Hermeneutic Theory as it applies to Proposal Writing

At such a juncture philosophical hermeneutics can serve as a counterbalance to traditional rhetorical approaches to the teaching of proposal writing, in which persuasion as a primary strategy is historically, deeply embedded. Elsewhere I've argued for a hermeneutic approach to teaching proposal writing because hermeneutic theory offers a broader perspective on the conceptual relationship between ends and means than even the "new rhetorics" (LaDuc, 1991). At the time, H.W. Simons, Ohmann, Burke, Fogarty, and Weaver were my sources. Even now, the newest, "new rhetorics" (expressive, cognitive, poststructuralist, social-epistemic) as presented in the recent collection of articles edited by Enos and Brown (1993) still do not exemplify the expanded perspective I sought, though they are now beginning to incorporate hermeneutic thought. For my teaching of proposal writing, I chose Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics as a counterbalance to traditional rhetorical because the former is directed in a wide sense toward a theory of interpretation as the process of coming to mutual understanding over a text, in which, as Gadamer says, the parties involved come to a "fusion of horizons" (1984, 395-396). Tim Crusius has also explored hermeneutics for teaching, offering a useful distinction between a hermeneutics of suspicion as informed by Nietzsche, Derrida and Marx, and a hermeneutics of tradition exemplified mainly in the work of Hans-George Gadamer, arguing that one of our prime

concerns as teachers is to understand interpretation itself, which is the aim of philosophical hermeneutics (Crusius, 1991). The power of hermeneutical consciousness is, according to Gadamer, "to see what is questionable" (1976, 13) and not to invoke any transcendent standard nor any preconceived solution. The latter reason, of course, is why hermeneutic theory may be applied by instructors to urge students to examine their aims and products. For example, awareness of hermeneutic theory could have helped the instructor of the second group of student writers devise ways that would encourage students to think more critically about how their preconceived solution interfered with establishing a true fusion of mutual needs.

While originally intended to be applied primarily to philosophical and theological texts, hermeneutic method is especially useful when applied to proposals as texts. It encourages us to explore patterns of argument and notions of textual transparency, as well as prejudices and overly aggressive urges to persuade the readers at the expense of long-term relationship-building. Hermeneutic method encourages a view of proposal writing processes as attempts by the parties to come to mutual agreement, preparatory to separate or contractual action. As well, a hermeneutic approach offers a method for reflection about kinds of writing: a method that stands against methods of closure in which any document, once written, is fixed. Hermeneutic method offers these benefits, however, not because it is some ideologically pure theory to which we must become "camp followers," but rather because it offers a view of texts, including mundane business and technical documents, as ongoing interpretations. In hermeneutics the process is never complete: interpretation continues to the degree that writer and reader understand the needs and capabilities of the other, create a bond or relationship with another, and think with the other (Gadamer, 1984, 145). This process is exemplified by the first group's discovery of shared concerns in the interview they conducted with the police chief, a man they had first approached as an adversary. In hermeneutic method, the intention to *not* persuade is admitted as a legitimate response to the readers' needs, once again as part of the long-term relationship-building that is implied in interpretative processes. The expectation in this approach that there will be an ongoing attempt to achieve stable mutual interests also foregrounds ethical dimensions that business people often refer to as good faith or goodwill. In the case of proposals, good faith means that the writer adopts the belief that the well-informed reader can, and will, make decisions leading to outcomes favorable to all parties over the long-term, and in the same way, the reader holds the belief that the writer will take the client reader's

best interests into account. By adopting such a perspective on long-term business outcomes as constituted by relationships, communication, and interpretations thereof, writers and readers alike tacitly accept that as processes of interpretation are involved in the shaping of proposal text, the written text shapes the reality in which it serves as an example of, and inducement to, action.

At stake in this process are *synesis* (understanding) and *phronesis* (ethical know-how)—brought together in social action as embodied in a text, but which, as Gadamer stresses, goes beyond the text. By urging a view of each proposal, and of each sub-argument within a proposal, as a "phase in the event of understanding" (Gadamer, 1984, 389) rather than as a plank in an argumentative structure, hermeneutic theory affords instructors and students insight into the processes of surveying, interviewing, analyzing data, structuring pleas, arguing for action, and following up on action. Such theory allows a view of these processes as part of a larger one—of reaching agreement in a relationship--requiring mutual engagement for long-term enactment of satisfactory solutions: as in the case of the Group One students who responded to the interview process by accommodating more closely the aims and concerns of their police chief audience, because they took those concerns to heart. By focusing on processes of discovery and insight, and by remaining open to dialogue, the hermeneutic perspective pushes out the borders of traditional rhetoric, and counters overly rationalistic thinking, refocusing writers from what can become a too narrow emphasis on persuasion and instrumentalism (as the second group's proposal process most directly exemplifies), toward viewing the situation in a larger, more encompassing context in which means and ends are equally important.

Hermeneutics is not placed here in opposition to rhetoric—that would be counter-productive. Rather it extends rhetorical approaches to teaching professional communication, offering another doorway into the realm of ethics, and another way to explore more fully the political, social, ideological, and relational dimensions of writing situations. James Berlin situated rhetoric within ideology, as necessarily political, and called for a pedagogy of the transformative teacher/intellectual that examines the consequences of theory for social and political practices in the classroom (Berlin, 1988; 1983). Such theory as Berlin proposes, however, must be capable of standing alongside of, as well as against, traditional structures. Philosophical hermeneutics, as method, does just that. Indeed, the relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics can be compared with the two-sided vase illusion: you see either the vase or the facial profiles, but

not both simultaneously, because vision moves from one perspective to the other. In processes of teaching proposal writing, we may wish to call attention to the two faces looking away—to explore how to bring the parties involved to a frame whereby they can reach agreement; or we may point to the vase, and stress the product, its perfection of form, of style, of execution. Unfortunately, as technical communicators, too often we act as if only the latter were important. Hermeneutics, by stressing dialogue, method, human agency as situated in social contexts, the limits of social training and context, probability rather than truth, and interpretion rather than dogma, is both congruent with and complementary to traditional rhetorical aims and approaches. Yet it also, because of its focus on inquiry at every stage of experience, counterbalances a sense which underlies many rhetorical formulations, of purpose as pre-conceived. In so doing, it opens the inquiry process to more invention and exploration of alternative solutions, to bringing about wise changes in direction, and thus to taking leadership: leadership requires a wider perspective as a foundation for informed action.

Thus hermeneutic method is highly applicable to proposal writing, in which writers often need to explore more than one solution before selecting arguments for any one solution or action. In this way, a hermeneutical approach is more radically process-oriented—pursuing continually the unsettled question rather than the settled interpretation. The two student proposal groups demonstrate this: the first explored the unsettling questions raised by the police chief, paying more attention as well, to thoroughness in completing the research process; the second group refused to examine the unsettling consequences if their proposal were successful, shortcutting the proposal process by curtailing their analysis. A more hermeneutically informed teaching approach might have brought this conflict to the foreground, and not by moralizing, but simply by asking both groups to reflect on the different qualities of leadership they were demonstrating not only by their solutions, but by the pursuit of excellence in their performance of the task. As Habermas points out: "The act of interpreting is the counterpart of the art of convincing and persuading in situations where practical questions are brought to decision" (1989, 294). Proposal writing is one such practical question/situation wherein questions of leadership and ethics are especially important.

Conclusion

If the cultivation of *phronesis* or practical wisdom for professional communicators is the ability to bring the practical questions to action by rec-

ognizing the best case among many competing cases or options for action, then dialectic or critical inquiry—the exploring of unsettled questions—must be encouraged, in the classroom and in the field. In this larger sense also, hermeneutic theory contributes to a view of technical communicators as leaders: leadership is imbricated in proposal writing processes as a matter of mutual agreement appearing as a product of rhetorical activity in which individuals must push the envelope of inquiry. Because hermeneutic theory privileges interpretation itself, rather than a particular mode of interpretation, individuals must signal the move from interpretation to persuasion, else the result could be never-ending inquiry and little instrumental action. Leaders must motivate and coordinate others in the intersubjective process, and leadership decision-making is required by individuals participating in writing processes, as well as in guiding the thinking about the consequences of such processes.

Applied to professional communicators in the field, taking up the challenge of leadership means that we cannot simply transfer information or instructions unreflectively, nor explore options forever, since action is imperative. Further, we can't simply appeal to shared norms and values, or impose them on others arbitrarily; rather, one must argue for those values we invoke, as well as for our particular applications of them in addressing practical questions. The necessity for advocacy means that we must become informed about competing norms and values, account for them respectfully, and address them in a way that creates a larger frame for understanding, if not immediate agreement.

As forms of public persuasion, proposals too narrowly conceived without the aid of interpretive theory may result in too narrowly conceived solutions. Isn't this narrowness precisely the basis for hegemony? Since leadership communication is the route to and away from hegemony, I propose that we provide theory for teaching professional communication practices that leads toward greater reflection, and toward civic action rather than toward hegemony. By applying philosophical hermeneutic method to rhetorical methods already emphasized in the teaching and practice of professional communication, we need not moralize to invoke ethics; rather we need only envision ourselves as citizens *and* experts, and call more careful attention to the wider social contexts and consequences of our writing and teaching.

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