Chapter L
Reconsidering the Lay–Expert Audience Divide

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides educators instructional methods for teaching audience analysis to students in professional writing courses. It argues that a rhetorical approach to the teaching of professional writing, focused on audience analysis, allows students to learn how to engage and become members of their audience's discourse community. This engagement allows the writer to better conceptualize the audience and their needs, facilitating improved communication practices. The author hopes that such an approach will prepare professional writers for their future careers, be it in a traditional or virtual workplace, by gaining a recognition of the different levels of expertise of audience members.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, corporations have increasingly integrated aspects of the virtual workplace into their daily routines (St. Amant, 2002). Alford (1999) describes how ARC International, a company that provides trainers and consultants to the business community, went virtual by eliminating their headquarters. While doing so required the adoption of new technology, it also required the employees to reconceptualize the way the company did business. Changing from a brick-and-mortar company to a virtual company forced the employees of ARC to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in doing business. The transition ARC underwent had as great an impact on the

cultural elements of their business as it had on the technological ones.

Aware of the way culture changes in a virtual environment, educators have adopted new methods of providing a virtual experience for their students. Carnegie (2003) used an assignment incorporating a virtual teaching environment in her traditional professional writing course. Students responded positively to the activity, but demonstrated stereotypical notions of the workplace before engaging in the online environment (Carnegie, 2003, p. 60). Students felt that face-to-face meetings provided the best practice of interaction for employees. After participating in online discussions, the students had a better sense of what working a virtual environment entails, including "greater individual

responsibility, motivation, and self-discipline" (Carnegie, 2003, p. 61).

Academia has also begun utilizing distance-education classes that take place in a completely virtual environment. Educators teaching in such environments have found that the culture of an online course evolves distinctly from that of a traditional course (Duin, 1998). The successful online course must make accommodations for the lack of face-to-face interaction by providing assignments that stimulate the creation of a sense of community amongst the participants (Klein, 2007).

In this chapter, I discuss the methods of taking a rhetorical approach to teaching audience to teachers and practitioners of professional writing. This approach introduces students to the norms and values of the discourse community for which they will be writing. Such an approach leads to better training for their students and colleagues in writing in virtual settings. This training promotes better job performance and allows for the creation of documentation suited to an evolving audience. I offer an example of how I teach audience in a professional writing class that takes into consideration the new technologies available and explores the ramifications this has on writers in the business community. I hope that this example will facilitate further conversations about training writers for their future careers in the workplace.

RHETORIC AND THE NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

The introduction of new media technologies into the workplace has occurred a number of times in recent decades. Halpern (1985) describes her surprise in learning that the "new" communication technologies of her time would lead her to focus her attention on something ancient, classical rhetoric. Halpern's (1985) essay, which deals with the requirements of students in learning to compose in the writing classroom, emphasizes the application of rhetorical theory to the teaching of writing:

My research showed the need for a rhetoric of electronic composing that emphasized planning (which I consider one aspect of rhetorical invention), arrangement, style, memory, and delivery…. Students who had not mastered these five arts in college would find it increasingly difficult to succeed in an electronic work environment, an environment dominated by written and oral communication. (p. 157)

Halpern (1985) rightly believes that while new technologies transform the workplace in which writers compose and edit, these technologies do not markedly change the *way* professional writers compose and edit. The technologies she describes—"audio mail, dictation systems, electronic mail, teleconferencing, and word processing"—seem rather mundane to us two decades later. However, they proved just as challenging to the previous generation of writers as the more recent "new communication technologies"— wikis, Weblogging, the World Wide Web, and wired networks of computers—challenged us (Bartell, 2002). We must step back and reflect upon the nature of writing and the teaching of writing with these new technologies in mind.

Just as Halpern (1985) looked toward classical rhetoric as a way to better teach and learn about writing for the workplace, I also turn to classical rhetoric to deal with the challenges—and untapped potential—of the changes taking place in the classroom and workplace. The need to focus writers and companies on the people they produce documentation for requires an adequate conveyance of information, especially complex and technical information, to a growing and diverse audience.

Such a notion reflects the findings in previous studies which noted that "at work, writers typically must address a variety of kinds of readers, not just one or two kinds" (Anderson, 1985, p. 56). To properly write to all of these audiences (the study continues), teachers of writing, especially nonacademic writing, must consider this variety of audiences when designing courses:

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