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Exploring Voice in Business Writing

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Abstract

Many upper division business courses focus on applying the concepts and techniques studied throughout the undergraduate curriculum. The case method, which is often used to teach upper division business courses, exposes students to complex situations, aids in developing their analytical skills, and provides students with an opportunity to offer integrative solutions. An assortment of writing assignments for these case courses can enhance learning. Writing business memos and reports from a variety of organizational perspectives and to a number of organizational audiences enables students to explore the realities of crafting business documents meant to communicate and convince. The use of various perspectives and audiences challenges students to recognize the impact of organizational position in creating and maintaining a voice when writing.

Assignments that Permit an Exploration of Voice

By design, many of Plymouth State College's upper division business courses are integrative. As an example, to enroll in Administrative Policy students need to have completed courses in

finance, accounting, and operations. These prerequisites provide the necessary conceptual background for a more comprehensive investigation of the complex business situations presented in a policy course.

To facilitate understanding and permit students some practical experience, a policy course uses a case approach. A business case presents realistic information from a particular organization and emphasizes analytical discussions of this situation. A case requires students to sift through factual information, to evaluate a variety of issues, and to develop a range of possible solutions (Christensen, 1987).

Students use various methods for case analysis. Open class discussions, small group reviews, and group or individual presentations provide different approaches to case evaluation. One of the more frequently used review techniques is the written case analysis (Penrose, Rasberry & Myers, 1989). Although there are no “ironclad procedures” for a written case analysis, the papers are usually segmented into three sections: issues, analysis, and recommendations (Thompson & Strickland, 1987, p. 273). Generally, students write rather dry formula evaluations. However, creative writing assignments that mimic organizational situations offer students an opportunity for realistic decision making.

Students can be required to assume the role of a particular character in the case and to write business memos and reports that reflect their understanding of that character’s position and organizational situation. Composing documents from a variety of different perspectives to a number of potential audiences allows students to experience the organizational realities surrounding communication. Thus, assignments can challenge students to recognize the impact of organizational position in creating and maintaining a voice when writing.

Form

PSC's General Education program requires students to take first year Composition and a designated writing course in their major field. For students majoring in business this writing course is Organizational Communications (OC), which exposes students to various forms of business writing. OC assignments stress the highly stylized business approach to writing. Students learn to design documents for impact by using a direct language, choosing simple words to fully convey ideas and concepts, and arranging information in an easily followed professional format.

Although not a prerequisite, most business students take OC before registering for Administrative Policy. Doing writing assignments designed to capture the realism inherent in the Administrative Policy course's case approach, students create the stylized mainstays of business communications, memos and reports, which reflect their analysis and recommendations of the case material. Therefore, students build upon writing techniques learned in OC and practice writing through their curriculum.

Content

A writer's audience is his or her reader (Hacker,1992). Choice of an audience often influences the tone, approach, and language of a document (Crews & Schor, 1989). Because business people often write to particular persons, they generally know a great deal about the values, desires, and special interests of their audiences, and compose accordingly.

As stated earlier, a business case provides general conditions, background material, and particular facts concerning an organizational situation. Each person or group mentioned in a case

represents a potential audience. Writing assignments that require students to communicate their case evaluations to various people or groups from the case forces students to recognize the values, desires and interests of these different audiences, and use a communication style or voice which connects with the particular audience.

For instance, students could be assigned to assume the role of an outside consultant and write a report to the organization's chief executive. Students would then have to structure their report to reflect the realities surrounding the situation. This requires an analysis of the case and an assessment of the audience. A primary consideration would be the values and attitudes of an executive receiving the report. The report must incorporate these values.

A slight shift in the assignment exposes students to a different communication style or voice. Instead of the outside consultant, the student's role can be that of a subordinate communicating with the chief executive as his or her superior. This situation requires students to be aware of the significant status and power differences that exist between a subordinate and his or her boss. The facts are identical. The executive receiving the report is identical. However, the tone, approach, and language must reflect the nuances of the subordinate's voice. The consultant can be blunt, direct, and formal using his or her expertise as justification for his or her voice. The subordinate needs a different voice, a voice which recognizes the on-going relationship of authority and responsibility inherent in the superior and subordinate dyad, and balances duty with respect.

A third role-play allows students to explore yet another voice. Students can be required to write to a subordinate. This forces an awareness of what it is like to be the boss. Students experience the

contradictions surrounding management, leadership, and authority. Should the writer inform, cajole, plead, or demand? The voice will communicate the writer's understanding of this position and situation.

Example

Consider the following scenario. Gerry Plotnik, the division superintendent at Sharon Steel's Posner Works in Farrell, Pennsylvania, has just received a letter from Kaiser Refractories, stating that Kaiser is shutting down its brickworks in Warren, Ohio, and therefore, will no longer supply the refractories Sharon Steel uses to line its furnaces and soaking pits. Plotnik knows that he can buy a lower grade but more expensive refractory from Harbison-Walker in Buffalo. Plotnik has multiple concerns. One is that, because the Harbison-Walker refractory linings are of lesser quality than Kaiser, they need to be constantly monitored for wear and replaced more often. A second concern is that his production supervisors are currently paid bonuses based upon output, and the down time associated with monitoring and relining furnaces takes away from these bonuses. A third concern is that his boss, Henry Tevans, the Executive Vice-President of Operations, has instituted a quality assurance program that focuses on producing the highest grades of defect-free steel, which can only be maintained when furnaces are kept well insulated. Finally, Plotnik's own goals for Posner Works are to be Sharon Steel's lowest cost steel producer.

Realistic writing assignments would have students role-playing Plotnik and composing memos or reports to the production supervisors and Tevans concerning the impact of Kaiser's closing. Students must consider Plotnik's plight: how to convince the production supervisors to engage in practices that may lower their bonuses and to inform Tevans that production costs are definitely going up, while quality may decline? These two distinctly different audiences require distinctly different voices.

Summary

The realism of the case approach can be converted into the practice of creating a writer's voice. The above discussion has focused on the Business Department's Administrative Policy course. However, any course that uses cases has the potential for allowing students the opportunity to experiment with a variety of voices. The only requirement is that of multiple audiences. Students can then be assigned a variety of roles and learn to write with a variety of voices.

References

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WAC Reflection — 'Unsticking the Voice'

Thompson, A., Jr., & Strickland III, A. (1984). Strategic management: Concepts and cases. (3rd ed.). Plano, Texas: Business Publications Inc.

After reading my article and chatting with Roy Andrews, I realized something about the writer's voice. Voice differs as situations differ, but only when the writer recognizes these differences. The gist of my article was to explain how I structured an

exercise that attempted to make students aware of and to allow them to practice with various voices. I mention this because I had some trouble getting students to follow the assignments describe in my article. A number of students would not follow the letter of the assignment. They simply could not change their voice. They would continue to write to me, ignoring the requirement that they role-play and draft letters, memos, and reports to various important stockholders in the assigned cases. It was just impossible for them to convert to another voice. They were students writing to an instructor; nothing could change that fact. Their voices were stuck. Therefore, my response to revisiting this article is this: How to unstick the voices of the non-complying students?

Even before this reflection, I had been working on this problem of unsticking voices. I started requiring students to do more than one of these role-play assignments. This allowed them to receive feedback and gave them the possibility of adjusting their voices. I also permitted students to resubmit assignments, hoping that the second time around the concept would take hold. For many students these strategies worked. They were able to shake loose from the idea that they were merely responding to an instructor, immerse themselves in the case material, and write accordingly. Still there were a few students that just refused to let go of the fact that they were students writing to an instructor. They could not change their voice. It was just too ingrained.

The insight gained from this reflection is maybe students shouldn't write to me. I mean, I should not be the one who reads these assignments. I could extend the role-play, and have students write to other students. This would unstick students from their student to instructor voice. Of course, new dilemmas arise. New voice options exist for sticking: student to student, friend to friend, and that persistent problem of evaluation. I need to talk and write about this with Roy, Michelle, Robert, and the other WAC members.