Chapter 11

Setting the Stage for Professionalism: Disrupting the Student Identity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the problem of professional writing students transitioning from an academic environment to a work environment. Even the best students struggle in their upper-level courses as instructors expect a higher level of professionalism from their more advanced students. The authors argue that the conflict between the “student” identity and the “professional” identity should be made explicit in the writing classroom. Students can learn to develop and perform new professional roles by employing a theatrical approach, a disruptive innovation that adopts Constantin Stanislavsky’s system to the professional writing classroom. Although the approach begins as role-playing, the emphasis is on becoming the professional self. Specific assignments, projects, and student survey responses are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Despite all of their efforts, training and good intentions, some of our most capable students struggle in our upper-level professional writing courses. They often struggle to meet our expectations because they approach their work as students when we prefer that they take a professional stance.

Our undergraduates’ tendency to identify themselves as “students” is understandable but limiting. The traditional educational experience binds students to chairs, focuses their gaze on the chalkboard and teacher and requires them to complete assignments and tests in order to demonstrate knowledge. The experience requires reading, listening, watching, taking notes from texts and experts and repeating information from
the endless data dumps that constitute traditional teaching methods. In short, through rote practicing and passively receiving “knowledge deposits” from teachers, only one major role is rehearsed and embodied for 12 or more years — the role of the student (Freire, 2005).

When teaching professional writing courses, however, we expect students to imagine a context beyond the classroom where they are motivated as professionals to take more responsibility for their work. For students to become effective professional communicators, we believe they must practice writing in the role of the “professional” and that teachers must create assignments that give students the opportunity to perform this new role and develop a professional identity. In this way we attempt to compress the space between the classroom and the workplace, thus disrupting the traditional educational model and the comfort its familiarity brings.

Learning to write in a professional context is comparable in some ways to the acquisition of literacy that Freire discusses in his work. He writes, “Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables ... but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s own context” (1996, p. 48). Students in our courses are often uncomfortable with the realization that professional communication requires them to create a professional character and embody it believably.

This chapter explains how the field of professional writing addresses the student-workplace transition problem, how the problem manifests itself in our classrooms and how explicit instruction in character development and performance — a “disruptive innovation” in which we apply theatrical principles to writing studies — can create both discomfort and confidence for transitioning writers.

**BACKGROUND**

For decades, professional writing researchers have struggled with the problem of student transition, knowing that students must be taught much more than the “basics” of writing in order to be successful in the workplace (Anson & Forsberg, 1990). As Paré (2002) has noted, “Some of the most common writing-course exhortations could be disastrous if followed in the workplace: avoid the passive voice, write clearly ... This advice ... might well cause serious problems for the worker operating as a member of the community” (p. 64), especially one in which workplace politics require carefully studied communications. There is little argument over the fact that professional writing must adhere to a standard of “correctness,” but what to teach in the classroom in order to best prepare students for their work as effective members of the workplace community is still a matter of debate.

In traditional educational models, college students in upper-level, discipline-specific courses learn the critical knowledge of the field and adopt the modes of thinking of its members. To become a true member of the disciplinary community, however, students must learn more than the “domain content” of a discipline (Geisler, 1994). They must learn the “rhetorical processes” of that discipline, or how that content is communicated. In other words, when the rhetorical processes are not explicated to students, the knowledge of a discipline and the actual doing of a discipline remain separate. As a result, many students become frustrated when their writing (which may be a perfectly fine student performance) is deemed unacceptable in their more advanced courses (Geisler, 1994).

In a professional writing program, the domain content might include the particulars of rhetorical theory, knowledge of genres, familiarity with copyediting skills and an understanding of the relationship between text and graphics and audi-
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