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Business Communication

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The results of recent surveys of professional writing that have been published in *College English* and *College Composition and Communication* report significant information for all of us who teach writing, especially for those of us who teach Business Communications. One survey states that real world writing requires "awareness of the specific differences in writing for varied audiences and purposes."(1) Another survey shows "a strongly positive relationship between . . . collaboration and . . . writing at work. . . "(2) This same survey reports that "adult writers voluntarily establish collegial editorial groups when they are writing something important."(3) The survey by Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller eports that "college trained people .. . often talk about writing in terms of . . .the image of themselves which they wish to project through their writing."(4)

The general implications for teaching are quite clear, but the more difficult question is: specifically, how can we create for our students in Business Communications the real world situations which will enable them to write for a variety of audiences and purposes?

One unit of the Business Communications course I teach suggests an answer to this question. This unit, which I call the "In-Class Corporation" provides a rhetorical situation which shapes the collaborative learning process and enables students to project a professional self-image, to write in a variety of modes and for a variety of audiences and purposes, and to work in an adult collaborative learning group.

Two assumptions underlie this unit of instruction. The first has to do with collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is more than a method of instruction. In this unit of the course, it is both the process and the substance of learning: how something is learned is as important as what is learned. Hence, in this process, according to a rationale provided by Kenneth Bruffee, (5) groups of knowledgeable peers establish relations and roles among themselves, collaboratively create the explanations that constitute knowledge, and confront and solve the problems that maintain knowledge.

The second assumption underlying this instruction corresponds closely to the first, and bears out the reports of professional writing mentioned earlier. Studies by Linda Flower and John Hayes (6) reveal that writers think about how they want to affect the reader, about the self image they wish to project, about how they can create a text of meaning, and about the conventions of writing and the generic features of the text they are creating. In short, writers concern themselves with the rhetorical situation.

The correspondences between collaborative learning, the rhetorical situation, and the "in-class" corporation are illustrated by the following diagram:

Correspondences Between Collaborative Learning, Rhetorical Situation, and In-Class Corporation

Collaborative Learning   *Rhetorical Situation*   *In-Class Corporation*
1. Knowledgeable peers --> 1. Writers affect readers --> 1. Knowledgeable peers form in-class corpor-
come together   ations; they will be both writers & readers

2. Relations and roles ---> 2. Writers often need to ---> 2. Students assume the role of management-
are established among   project a self-image in   level personnel in the company and relate
knowledgeable peers   order to write   to each other as corporate managers

3. Knowledgeable peers --> 3.Writers create a text ---> 3. Students collaboratively make decisions and
create and maintain   of meaning and concern   solve problems in order to write a
knowledge   themselves with the   proposal and report
                             conventions of the text
                             that they are creating

The instructor plays a special role and has a special responsibility in this unit of instruction. First, the instructor acts as a facilitator of the collaborative learning process: she guides, directs, listens, questions, illustrates, and encourages. She manifests respect for her students and confidence in their abilities to complete their tasks. Second, she, too, projects particular self-images or personae. As CEO of each group's company, she is both a knowledgeable peer and a significant reader; as Chairperson of the Board of Directors, she is a significant and deeply interested over-seer of each group's proposal and report.

The following assignments (7) constitute the rhetorical situation that structures the collaborative learning process during these six to eight weeks. These assignments correspond to chapters being read in the textbook used for the course (we use Sigband's third edition of *Communication for Business and Management).* And they also provide students with the agenda they must follow in order to complete their tasks.

      In-Class Corporation Assignments

1. Form an in-class organization with members of your group. Give your organization a title, a product or service.

2. Draw an organizational chart for your in-class organization. Write a specific job description of your role (in terms of vertical and horizontal communication) and responsibilities within the organization.

3. Prepare and deliver a 3-minute introductory speech to members of your organization. Explain your department's function and your role in the department.

4. Your organization is experiencing a communication problem. With the members of your organization, identify this problem. Your group will then write a joint *proposal* which will identify the problem, its causes, the group's suggested solutions, the research method, design, and resources needed to research and solve it. This proposal will be formally presented to the class.

5. Write a preliminary abstract of your part in the group proposal you will help to present. Include a description of your role in the project. Include the "solution-area" you will be researching, your research design and method, and your anticipated findings.

6. Write a positive message (letter/memo) to someone in your organization regarding their work on the project (cc: other members of your organization).

7. Write a negative message to someone in your organization regarding their work on the project (cc: other members of your organization).

8. In memo form, write an agenda for one of your organization's group meetings (cc: other members of your organization).

9. In memo form, write up the minutes of the same meeting for which you wrote the agenda (cc: other members of your organization).

10. Research your "solution-area" of your organization's group proposal and write a 6-10 page report of your research. Include a cover and title page, letters of authorization, acceptance, and transmittal, a table of contents, an abstract, bibliography, and a graphic illustration with your completed report.

11. Deliver a 5-minute presentation of your report to the class. Include a graph or chart illustration with this presentation.

Assignments one, two, and three enable students, or groups of knowledgeable peers, to form their own fictional company. In a class of twenty students, four such companies can be formed. Students are given time to research a local company in order to help them invent facts and develop a description of their corporation.

Each group decides on a name for the company and the product or service it provides. At this point, group members realize that they will be both the readers and writers of the texts produced within their company. Assignments one, two, and three also enable students to project professional self-images and to begin to address a variety of audiences.

Assignments four, five, six, seven, eight, and nine enable students to continue to establish relationships and roles among themselves, to act as both professional writers and readers within the company, to form collegial editorial groups, and—as they conduct meetings and set agenda—to identify problems, propose solutions, and make decisions.

To gather and develop the facts of their company's communication problem, and to enable them to gain a clear understanding of the communication problem, situation, and circumstances, we review cases from the textbook. Students then invent their own situation for their particular company.

Once the group has determined the company's communication problem, each member of the group must decide upon his or her own solution to the problem. So, for example, in a group of five members there may be five solutions. Each solution is decided upon from the perspective of the group member's role and responsibility within the corporation, and each solution must be approved by the whole group.

Each member must write an abstract of his solution. That is, the group members must write a statement explaining how their proposed solution will resolve the problem. Before they can write this statement, they must conduct a search of at least three library sources to support their solution. Their abstract includes a review of this research.

Members report back to their groups after having conducted a brief search of the company's communication problem and its projected solutions. They discuss and share this information, make decisions, read each other's abstracts, collaborate on what information to use and how to use it, and together, they "group write''; that is, together they draft and redraft, read and reread the proposal until it is finished.

Group proposals are then presented to the other in-class corporations who will accept or reject the proposal presented.

In addition, each student in the group is responsible for writing the agenda and minutes for one of the group's meetings. Each student must also write one positive and one negative message to different members of the group. These messages must pertain to work being completed on the project. Here again, students share information, read and edit each other's work, and collaborate on the decisions that need to be made in order to produce their pieces of writing.

Finally, each student must complete a research report. Although each report will address a different topic (or solution to the problem), there are parts of it that repeat information from the group proposal. The title page, abstract, table of contents, body of the report, and graphics will be different for each group member. The letters of authorization, acceptance, and transmittal will be similar for all group members. In addition, drafts for each report will have been read and responded to by each group member. Reports are then presented orally to the other in-class corporations who again provide evaluation and commentary before the final drafts of reports and proposals are submitted to The Chairperson of the Board of Directors.

Throughout this unit of instruction, students have come together as a group of knowledgeable peers; they have projected professional self-images, and have written to and for a variety of audiences and purposes. Also together, as a group—by making decisions, solving problems, conducting research, and by talking, listening, reading, and writing—these students have created a text of meaning. Within the rhetorical situation of an in-class corporation, students have collaboratively created knowledge.

NOTES

1. Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller. "What We Learn from Writing on The Job," *College English*, Vol. 44, No. 6, October 1982, p. 562.

2. John T. Harwood, "Freshman English Ten Years After: Writing in the World," *College Composition and Communication,* Vol. 33, No. 3, October 1982, p. 282.

3. *Ibid.,* p. 282.

4. Faigley and Miller, p. 562.

5. Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Where I've Been, Where I'm At, And Why Collaborative Learning," a memo sent to participants in the Hartford CCTB Symposium on Collaborative Learning and Peer Tutoring, Saturday, March 27, 1982.

6. Linda Flower and John Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining A Rhetorical Problem," *College Composition and Communication,* Vol. 31, No. 1, February 1980, p. 21-33.

7. Thanks are due to my colleague, Barbara Benjamini, for her initial development of these assignments.