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Defining professional writing as an area of scholarly activity

> Write as if you'd never talked to yourself
> And always kept yourself at arm's length…
>
> - Wislawa Szymborska (1999: 205)

Is writing in the public domain inevitably about impersonality and detachment? Is the writing subject to be (always) absent as well as (sometimes) invisible when writing in a professional capacity? And if 'you' aren't able to talk to yourself when writing as a professional, how do you manage to write/talk to others meaningfully? The above lines, spoken ironically in Szymborska's poem about writing a resume as a 'professional' (and about writing a 'professional' resume), demonstrate a common assumption about the conventions of professional writing. They also raise a series of broad questions concerning the writer's agency, the roles of the text and of the reader(s) of documents in the public domain. I hope to address those questions in the course of my discussion below.

This paper sets out to claim the discipline of professional writing as a legitimate and significant area of pedagogy, analysis and research, and not merely (as it is often crudely misperceived or, in the current climate, legitimised) as a market-driven, instrumental field, whose raison d'etre is simply to teach students rules, formulae and mnemonics for writing pithy documents that 'sell'. Professional discourse, now proliferating in the print and electronic media, regularly interweaves a complex of languages - those of specialist and public/general knowledges, of information and persuasion, of public and community relations, of law and regulation, of citizenship and morality. It seems to me to be crucial that we provide a space for students to develop as critical writers and readers of those cultural texts, which to such a great extent regulate and organise our environments of government, industry, institution, community and home.

After attempting to define briefly the parameters of professional writing (and considering the problems inherent in such definition), I argue that necessarily underpinning the suppleness of this area of academic endeavour are three key interrelated notions: ethics, imagination and rhetoric. While each of these is clearly important to many professional writing programs in Australia and in the United States, I want to highlight their necessary interdependence in relation to professional writing. The processes of teaching and learning in the field become dynamic when these concepts are both theorised and explored as contextualised and localised features integral to professional writing practice. In contrast to current preoccupations with texts and readers, which often result in the elision of writer agency and responsibility, I want to consider ethics, imagination and rhetoric as central to the processes involved in both the production and reception of professional writing; texts are written as well as read, motivated and intended as well as interpreted and responded to. There is no necessary or easy symmetry between the contexts of reading and writing, nor between the scope of intention and motivation on the one hand and that of interpretation and response on the other.

This paper does not examine pedagogical strategies or techniques for professional writing. Rather, it sets out to provide a conceptual base from which productive teaching and learning processes could be developed and from which focused research can evolve.

Background

First let me provide some background detail. This paper was motivated by a number of factors: first, by my thoughts about the meaning, the territory and the objectives of professional writing as a university teaching, learning and research area and as a cultural practice; secondly, by the revisioning of an undergraduate unit called Writing for Professional Purposes (WFPP), which I wrote and have been coordinating within the English undergraduate program at Murdoch University almost three years; and finally by the initiative to develop new professional writing units

within the School of Arts at Murdoch in the future. In this process of reflection, I have been particularly influenced by articles exploring the fields of professional and creative writing in the Australian university sector, (see, for example, Woods and Skrebels 1997; Woods 1999; Taylor 1999).

WFPP is a Part I unit within the English Bachelor of Arts degree program. The unit can be taken as part of a general English degree or selected from the available units in the specialist streams within the program: the Creative Arts stream (which focuses on students' engagement with texts, production and performance) or the Creative Writing stream (which focuses on the exploration of the theory and practice of writing literary texts). The unit can also be taken as an elective by students from other disciplines in the university.

WFPP was originally devised in response to the demand for a unit on effective academic and organisational/workplace writing. Endeavours to position the very notion of effective writing within a broader framework of rhetorical discourse, ideology, and the specific organisational contexts of writing and reading, have proved a challenge. Ever present - for the teachers and for the students - has been the danger of slipping into a concentration on skills and competencies and the mechanics of writing, in isolation from an investigation into the social and public contexts of its circulation, function, meaning and value for both writers *and* readers in various contexts. It must be said, however, that in formulating the unit, we were also trying to address students' real difficulties with the mechanics of written expression; time and again, students have expressed their own sense of uncertainty, their lack of confidence in writing 'correctly' as their primary reason for enrolling in the unit. As well, many students from other disciplines - law, business, psychology and the sciences - enrol in WFPP because they want to 'improve their writing skills'. And we should not underestimate that motive. For example, students are often seriously disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge about how written discourse 'works' in the academy: how it means, or how it fails to mean in a given situation (see Bean 1996, Nevile 1996, Lea & Street 1998). One of our endeavours in enabling students to develop their abilities as writers, that is, as far as the mechanics of language are concerned, is to encourage them to transform the notion of correctness into one of appropriateness, and thus to share ownership of the text with the reader(s). After all, mechanical issues (those of grammar, syntax, spelling and punctuation) are also ethical, imaginative and rhetorical issues (those of value, meanings and interpretive effects).

Professional writing: Marking the territory

 My struggles to articulate a framework for professional writing as a definable discipline are the result of a problem with naming and categorising, typical of our postmodern predicament, where 'the very idea of a discipline must be open to critique' (Blake 1997: 164), and with distinguishing, in particular, professional writing from creative writing. Quite obviously, although categorising in terms of genres (and in this case, of writing) is the product of convention, the resulting definitions for creative writing and for professional writing are often crudely reductionist: creative writing is allotted to the exclusive, abstract realms of art and culture, professional writing to that of business and the 'real' world. To compound the difficulties, the terms professional writing and creative writing suggest qualitative as well as disciplinary differences. The adjective 'professional' when used to describe writing implies competence, skill and efficiency, public recognition and social as well as economic currency: that is, professional as opposed to unprofessional or non-professional. (Such description is, of course, also linked to the legitimation of professional writing as a vocational discipline, an issue I consider, briefly, below.). The adjective 'creative' when allied with the word writing implies originality, imagination, inventiveness, resourcefulness (as opposed, presumably, to convention, predicability, to dullness or mundanity). Other issues are highlighted by the oppositional constructions of these different writing fields. For example, when is creative writing not work? When does professional writing not involve a process of fictionalising? Can creative writing not be professional? Is professional writing not creative?

Let me quickly point out that I am not attempting to conflate professional writing with the genre of creative writing or writing as art-text: each has a distinct focus and cultural function. However, there is clearly a danger in too emphatically distinguishing the two areas, and thus in producing them as necessarily oppositional. The development of students' awareness (as writers and readers) of texts as both formative and transformative are aims shared by both creative and professional writing courses. We need to maintain the connections between the two disciplines in order to endorse their respective value as vital components of cultural communication, and to resist, as Raymond Williams argues, 'set[ting] "art" on one side of a line and "work" on the other; we cannot submit to be divided into "Aesthetic Man" and "Economic Man"' [sic] (Williams 1965: 54).

Andrew Taylor suggests that, in contrast to creative writing, the discipline of professional writing is more secure within the tertiary sector, given the latter's assimilation into 'the job-oriented ethos of so much current university thinking about education' (Taylor 1999: 6). I suggest we need to be extremely wary about the apparent comforts afforded by such legitimacy, not by refusing professional writing as a field that *can* prepare students to communicate effectively in the workplace and in the public sphere, but by refusing the discourse of the market place as authoritative or unproblematic, unchallenged by the complexity or value of competing discourses. I believe an important and productive link can and perhaps should be made between the fields of professional writing and the liberal arts, rather than with vocationally or professionally oriented university faculties - business and marketing schools, for example, where professional writing is often positioned. Professor Theodore Zorn, Chair of the

Department of Management Communication at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, discusses the difficulties inherent in situating professional communication in professional schools, where the aggressive pressure 'to meet our "customers'" wants for career preparation' threatens to distract attention from 'critical thinking, theory and broader social issues' (Zorn 1998:40). The function of professional writing cannot be reduced to 'servicing' a particular discipline. By locating professional writing as a subject within the liberal arts/humanities, we can more readily signal our intention to focus on its cultural breadth and on the myriad purposes, functions and effects of the production and reception of public texts. And importantly, while recognising the reliance of professional writing on a range of disciplines - economics, marketing and law, for example - we can nevertheless resist or interrogate those powerful discourses as 'natural' or inevitable ways of communicating.

The above points notwithstanding, and in order to progress with this paper, I want to mark the provisional ground of professional writing as an academic discipline, conscious that part of this very process of definition entails problematising the act of delimitation.

The scope of professional writing embraces any written communication (other than that produced or circulated as art-text) disseminated or displayed in the public domain, and having as one of its functions the communication of a specific intention or objective in relation to specific or general reader(s). It comprises those texts designed to affect readers directly or indirectly: to elicit response, to encourage or circumscribe action, to instruct, to persuade, to modify or extend information, knowledge and perceptions, to affirm shared goals, and so on. Examples of professional writing would include but not be limited to academic writing; corporate, government and organisational writing (internal and external documents, such as letters, reports, emails, proposals, tenders, forms, manuals); representative texts, such as codes of ethics and service charters; corporate and government newsletters; public notices and leaflets. Professional writing can be communicated or exchanged between individuals or groups of individuals representing themselves or writing on behalf of public or private organisations; or between organisations and their individual clients or their general publics.

A primary focus on the communicative *objectives* of professional writing, however, threatens to return us to a one-way model of communication (sender-message-text-receiver) and to undermine professional writing's significance as a creative, critical and dialogic process, central to which is the imaginative negotiation of rhetorical and ethical issues and choices relating to language . Written communication is about negotiating meanings: it is about intersubjectivity (even when the subjects/readers being communicated with are unknown); it is therefore about imagining the social, cultural and economic place of the reading other(s), since it involves a considered evaluation of the range of potential readers' interpretations and/or responses to a given text. In other words, professional writing involves negotiating a socially valid correspondence between the writer's communicative objectives as represented by a text, and the readers' real scope for purposeful (re)action or response in their interpretation(s) of that text.

Professional writing as an academic discipline

A cynical, rather common, view regards professional writing as an area of study that has been legitimised in academe because it is vocationally oriented and profitable. There is no doubt about the growth of professional writing course awards available at universities in Australia in recent years. Courses have sprung up quickly and are burgeoning. Consequently we have not had much time to reflect; often we have made an immediate response to demand. We now need to rethink what we're doing and why (see Krauth & Brady 1999).

The importance of theorising 'professional writing', and of imagining it as process and practice rather than as product, competes with pressure (from university coffers, from employers, from students) to 'simply' teach writing skills or effective writing, that is, to 'just do it': to prepare students for employment, rather than to enable them to think about the complex processes involved in the practice of professional writing.

What is wrong with 'simply' teaching writing skills? Such an approach creates the misperception that writing skills are separable techniques that can be taught and then simply applied, in isolation from the various social contexts in which public texts circulate, are read and interpreted, and in which their effects have significance and often real results. In other words, we can teach students to write grammatical sentences, to use language to produce specific effects, to organise their writing through conventional frameworks: letters, essays, reports, emails, etc. If this is all that we do, however, we are not enabling them to write (nor to read) between the lines. In other words, we are not allowing them to develop an awareness of reading and writing as ideological, *social* practices that can have real consequences on others as well as on themselves.

We need to be integrating - truly integrating-the students' exploration of and familiarisation with conventions and practices of professional writing (through reading and writing) with a critique of those conventions and practices as features of workplace, inter-organisational and public communication, of power, status and authority, of professional writing as a dynamic element of a complex of communication modes.

Part of the process of learning to write professionally encourages students to learn how to position themselves (or to understand how they are positioned) as professional writers. What does that mean? What is the process involved in

the move from 'simply' writing to writing as a professional, or to producing professional writing? I would argue that the process involves students learning to imagine themselves as part of a nexus or communicative social network, one which incorporates a complex of writers and readers, each shifting their positions (as the inscribers and as the interpreters of meanings) according to their changing roles as writer and as reader in different writing/reading contexts. The writer of documents in an organisation or institution, for example, is also a speaker, a body, a personality with a history, however much certain professional writing practices seek to obscure that fact. S/he also has a range of relationships within and beyond her/his immediate working environment; s/he may in one writing role be a colleague, in another a manager, in another a subordinate, and in another a company or organisational representative. S/he is always, of course, a reader occupying various positions too. In relation to the experience of constantly having to shift positions as a writing subject, Gregory Clark explores the writing of ethical public discourse. He makes an interesting case for abandoning notions of professional writing as securing territory (securing readers) in favour of 'rhetorical interaction' or writing as travel, 'by locating the kinds of collectivities that are formed by interacting writers and readers in a concept of expansive space through which, in their interactions, they travel' (Clark 1998: 12). This approach, while seductive, does nevertheless need to be balanced by an awareness of the ways in which our 'journeys' as writing subjects are not always self-directed; we are also positioned and defined by specific social and cultural constraints. Benhabib makes the point more eloquently in her discussion of narrative as a means of constituting identity:

> We are born into webs of interlocution or into webs of narrative-from the familial and gender narratives to the linguistic one to the macronarrative of one's collective identity. We become who we are by learning to be a conversation partner in these narratives. Although we do not choose the webs in whose nets we are initially caught or select those with whom we wish to converse, our agency consists in our capacity to weave out of those narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us, as unique individual selves (Benhabib 1999: 344).

Imagination, rhetoric, ethics

I have mentioned that written professional communication is concerned with the activity of negotiating meanings. The verb negotiate, originally from the Latin, *negotiari*, to do business, to trade, is apposite here, since professional writing inevitably involves (directly or indirectly) some kind of business transaction: it involves issues of the economy, of power, of social interaction and of interpersonal and public relations. The term negotiate also, however, suggests some kind of reciprocal relation between, in this case, writer and reader(s), in its sense of *conferring* together or discussing a matter with others in order to reach (provisional) agreement. The agreement in this case is over the significance and implications of the written text and its actual and potential effects - pragmatic, personal, social - for readers, for writers. Of course, the 'conference' a writer of professional documents has with her/his readers is often imagined rather than real. To be effectively imagined, such an exchange must also be imaginative: that is to say, the writing process must (as far as it can) be a crafted, considered evaluation of the respective sites of writing and of reading, of the moral and practical impacts or effects of the communicated text, and of the (range of potential) readers' interpretations and responses. Such a process demands that the writer put herself/himself in the place of the reading other(s). In other words, to do professional writing is to be self-conscious about one's place of and purpose for writing; to be, as far as possible, deliberate about the rhetorical and ethical choices informing the communication practice; and to anticipate, again as far as possible, the ramifications of one's words, one's texts, on individual readers and their worlds. Thus, I would argue that the teaching of professional writing must foreground the activities of imagination, rhetoric and ethics to develop students' capabilities as individual citizens and as institutional representatives who read and write with care. (I use the term 'care' in Carol Gilligan's sense, to denote a sense of 'the connection between people [which] gives rise to a responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for response'. [Gilligan 1982:30]).

In light of these remarks, I turn now to consider how ethics, imagination and rhetoric each have a critical role to play in professional writing theory, pedagogy and practice; paradoxically, however, by considering each separately, their interdependence is emphasised.

Ethics

In general terms, ethics involves issues of responsibility, justice, care and equity. When I write of ethics in this paper, I distil the definition to refer to the moral contexts of responsibility that guide different individuals' or organisations' behaviour or activities in relation to particular writing and reading contexts; I refer also to the choices to be made in an individual's or organisation's forging, extending or modifying of relations with others through writing; and I refer particularly to the way in which individuals encode certain values or beliefs in the language choices that they (are able to) make (or are aware of making) when they write, and the extent to which different readers are free or constrained to interpret those codes of value or belief in their reading of texts. Indispensable to my understanding of ethics and written communication, as I use those terms here, is the idea of moral issues as they are situated in specific discursive practices, and the relationship between those discursive practices and the individuals and organisational

cultures they embrace. The notion of ethics brilliantly expounded by Margaret Urban Walker as *not* a formula underscores the point: 'the picture of morality as a *compact, impersonally action-guiding code within (or for) an agent* results from a powerfully restrictive set of assumptions about what morality is' (Walker 1998: 53). Walker proposes an 'expressive-collaborative' model for ethics, which 'looks at moral life as a continuing negotiation *among* people, a practice of mutually allotting, assuming or deflecting responsibilities of important kinds, and understanding the implications of doing so.'(Walker 60). Also, and importantly, the expressive-collaborative view presents 'the picture of morality as social negotiation in real time, where members of a community of roughly or largely shared moral belief try to refine understanding, extend consensus, and eliminate conflict among themselves' (64).

The 'social negotiation' that takes place between writers and readers is generally outside 'real time', of course, and is represented by the processes of writing and reading texts. In other words, written text in itself cannot *be* ethical or unethical; rather, the contexts of its conceptualisation, production and dissemination are contexts within which ethical judgments and choices are made and then communicated by writers; by extension, the contexts of a written text's reception, interpretation and use are contexts within which ethical judgements and choices are interpreted and validated or reinterpreted, reworked and used by readers.

Imagination

I consider as imperative the self-conscious refusal to separate professional writing from the ideas and processes of imagination, here conceived of as the writer's thoughtful reviewing, renewing and patterning of business, social and cultural relations mediated through the written text. Clearly, in this conception, imagination has significance as a practical and political tool; it is not the autonomous sensibility of the Romantic imagination. To use one's imagination when one writes in a professional capacity is to make present (in the planning and formulating of one's texts) the actually or apparently immaterial: on the one hand, the various readers and the context(s) of their interpretation and use of the texts; and on the other, the rhetorical and moral issues at stake in specific communication and reception processes. Thus, the practice of professional writing must be approached as an *imaginative* activity *in order that it can also be ethical*. To emphasise the imaginative dimension of professional writing is to draw attention to the complex process of conceptualising an appropriate ethical and rhetorical relationship (text) between writer(s), subject and reader(s). This clearly also involves the exercise of judgment, an activity which, as Hannah Arendt convincingly argues, has a dynamic connection with the activity of imagining (or, in her words, an 'enlarged way of thinking'):

> The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its individual limitations, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others "in whose place" it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all (Hannah Arendt, quoted in Benhabib 1992: 8-9).

Clearly, then, to treat the activity of imagining as crucial is also to encourage student writers to care about and value the place of readers as legitimate sites of particular actions or reactions in response to texts - actions or reactions that may *differ from those desired by the writer*. As Clark comments: 'We need to imagine the discursive collectivities that are essential to individual and social life in a way that requires participants to acknowledge the distinctiveness and the differences of others, and to commit nonetheless to the transformative work of cooperation and connection' (Clark 1998: 22). Finally, to emphasise the imaginative dimension is to differentiate this genre of writing, as an academic and as a professional discipline, from its traditional associations with conventions, formulae, templates and products, and to look rather at the seminal issue of writing and reading processes as contingent, provisional and unstable, and therefore as the negotiable exchange of meanings and values within the community.

Rhetoric

The pivotal role of rhetoric in professional writing pedagogy and research is evident, particularly in the United States (in composition and English studies), but also in Australia and the UK (see, for example, Berlin 1996; Olson & Dobrin 1994; Andrews 1992). As I see it, however, *unless* rhetoric (as theory and practice) is understood as *vitally* connected to notions of ethics and imagination, it cannot deal adequately with writing as a process of 'going to meet others' or of the written text as a site of the shifting and competing beliefs, values and interests of, for example, government, corporation, community or individuals. Therefore, rhetoric, as I use the term in this paper, is 'a primarily verbal, situationally contingent, epistemic art that is both philosophical and practical and gives rise to potentially active texts' (Covino and Jolliffe, in Fleming 1998: 176). As a theory, rhetoric - which can productively

draw on feminist and poststructuralist theories for its strengthened articulation - is concerned with investigating the inscribed and interpretable effects (semiotic, practical, cultural and subjective) of written communication, and with the related significance of power and of knowledge of those effects. The focus on language *effects* (readings, significances, consequences) moreover, embraces the centrality of the relationship between writer and readers(s), and presupposes the functional and ethical dimensions of professional writing: clearly such writing very often *does* something (whether intentionally or not); it can have concrete or material results. It is clear, therefore, that professional writing practice must focus on how effects are produced, what those effects are likely to be (how far they are self-conscious or knowable, as far as the writer is concerned), and to what extent the effects intended by the writer can be supposed to match those desired, understood or interpretable by the reader.

'The primacy of signifying practices in the formation of subject and society means that language can no longer be seen as the transparent conduit of transcendental truths' (Berlin 1996: 68). The term rhetoric, in its popularly-used sense, is often represented as opposing 'reality', as if an apparently objective reality could actually be expressed through 'good' language, truth-ful language. This all too familiar misconception does, nevertheless, alert us to an important characteristic of rhetoric as offering a *version* of knowledge, truth or reality. Kevin DeLuca puts the same idea slightly differently, when he remarks that 'within a discursive frame, rhetoric is no longer an instrument in the service of reality, but, rather, becomes constitutive of the meaning of the world' (DeLuca 1999: 342).

The theory and practice of professional writing as rhetoric therefore involves being self-conscious about how specific objectives are formulated as authoritative (professional) texts that address readers; analysing the (inevitable) partiality of written communication and the knowledges or ideas represented; and evaluating the versions of culture, community, subjectivity and activity that readers may subsequently imagine and realise from those texts.

Conclusion

As I finish this paper, an acrimonious debate rages about the Federal Government's recent submission to the Senate Inquiry, in response to the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission report, *Bringing Them Home*. The report deals with the removal of Aborigines from their homes and families between approximately 1910 and 1970, and suggests steps that should be taken in the process of reparation. The Government, in its submission, declares that 'there was never a "generation" of stolen children', arguing that the policy which gave rise to the process of removal was 'essentially lawful and benign in intent' (Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Inquiry into the Stolen Generation 2000: ii-iii). The Government's text undermines the experience of the Aborigines involved, through focusing on the assumed good intentions which motivated the removals rather than on their often tragic effects. In other words, the writer (in this case, the Government) has failed to exercise imaginative judgment in the formulation of its text, and failed to acknowledge the power of its rhetoricity. This is highlighted by remarks made by Senator John Herron, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, in an interview with Kerry O'Brien for 'The 7.30 Report', following the release of the Government's submission. Herron commented that he felt great sympathy for those people affected by removal from their families, but 'it's hard to get passion across in a submission. You've got to put it in words. You can't portray emotions in words. It's very difficult to do' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2000.) The ethical implications of such assumed naivete are far-reaching.

Instead of taking responsibility for the forced displacement of Aborigines and the impact of that displacement on their lives, or instead of seeking a conference of shared meanings with the most interested readers of its report - Aborigines, the Government (through its representative text) has left them feeling powerless to make any use whatsoever of a document that has written them out of their experience. The erasure of the term 'stolen' is evidently not simply a 'whiting out' of text on the page; rather, it constitutes the 'official' erasure of the tormented history of indigenous Australians.

Our task as teachers, theorists and practitioners of professional writing in Australia is clearly a large and significant one.

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