University of South Australia

Claire Woods and Paul Skrebels

Students and an Undergraduate Program in Professional Writing and Communication: Altered Geographies

Abstract:

In this paper, we explore issues of design, sequence and theoretical bases for the BA (Professional Writing and Communication). In the first part of this paper we discuss the interdisciplinary frame within which this award is situated and its particular foundation in the ethnography of communication and rhetoric, defined by Andrews (1992) as concerned with 'the arts of discourse and with context' *(5). We describe different aspects of the degree program and reflect on the issues involved in developing the undergraduate learning experience offered to professional writing students. We offer examples of particular activities from two subjects with reference to student work.*

The words 'Altered Geographies', in the title of this paper, reflect the way all students need to take on different knowledge, skills, understandings and awareness of self as they enter the academe and encounter the different discourses and epistemologies of disciplines and areas of study. 'It is helpful to remind ourselves,' write Muchiri, Mulamba, Myers and Ndoloi, 'that one of the things a university does is alter one's sense of geography. This journey is part of what defines the relation between the university and the rest of society' (178). Mindful of this journey, the teaching team in the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) aims to enable students to achieve a reflective awareness of writing and reading practices and processes and also to develop the skills to investigate and adopt a critical and interpretative stance to the contexts, language, texts and discourses they encounter within and outside the academy.

The BA (Professional Writing and Communication) is an undergraduate award taught within the School of Communication and Information Studies. It sits comfortably alongside BA specialisations or what we call 'professional majors' in Communication Studies, Journalism, Information Management and Presentation. Students in all the awards take cognate or related studies from the other specialisations. Thus a student with a professional major in Professional Writing and Communication is quite likely to take a cognate in Communication Studies or electives in Information Management and Presentation (e.g. Desktop Publishing, Computing and Graphic Design). Sub-majors are taken in discipline areas, for example, Sociology, Gender Studies, History, Australian Studies.

In the past four years, the teaching team in Professional Writing and Communication, has been able to develop an undergraduate award which has not been burdened by some of the discipline-based conflicts which have beset English departments around the western world. We have not been forced to deal with the issues of composition v literature/literary studies as has been the continuing scenario in the U.S. We have not had to join directly the battle between English and cultural studies which has been part of the academic scene in the U.K., the U.S. and Australia.

The School of Communication and Information Studies is home to academics who have backgrounds in English/literary studies, writing, and in media, journalism and related fields. There are teaching areas which have effectively appropriated and extended areas once the domain of the English department - thus Communication Studies with its orientation towards cultural studies and broad-ranging studies in media, culture and society. There is a healthy and productive interdisciplinarity at work.

Established in 1994, the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) has evolved as an award based on what Ian Reid has termed an 'enlarged conception of rhetoric': not something to be extricated from the study of literature and culture, but an inclusive rhetorical education in which there is an important place for the study of how 'selves' are constructed through sociolinguistic practices. (111)

The BA (Professional Writing and Communication) has a theoretical and pedagogical coherence which includes writing and reading studies and language studies. The award is grounded in a broad-ranging dialogic and rhetorical approach; an interdisciplinary approach drawing on anthropology, communication and discourse theory, linguistics, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, feminist criticism and the theory and practice of the ethnography of communication.

The coherence comes from the integration of five pedagogical foci, first, an ethnographic perspective drawn from the ethnography of communication; second, a focus on the construction of knowledge and the discourse of the disciplines; third, a deliberate orientation to language studies - language structures and language in use; fourth, an obvious focus on text and discourse studies, that is writing and reading practices; and fifth, a specific encounter with and investigation of texts, literacies, writing and reading practices in context.

The professional major - comprising eight semester-length subjects (out of 24 subjects) taken over three years - includes an introductory writing workshop; studies in linguistics and sociolinguistics; studies in professional and technical writing; research studies in literacies and written communication in community and professional contexts; studies in texts, media, culture and society; and a wide range of writing and reading subjects including, the essay and literary non-fiction, autobiography and biography, short story, script writing for radio and TV, playwriting and so on. Each subject in the professional major builds on and complements other subjects. In design and delivery, each subject takes into account the orientations suggested by the pedagogical foci although the balance may shift depending on the subject.

Within the overall BA award, students can elect to take a further six subjects in writing, communication and cultural studies, information management and presentation (thus electronic publishing, desktop publishing etc.) or film and electronic media, depending on their particular interests. In addition, they study in at least one other discipline area or construct for themselves an interdisciplinary major to complement their professional major study.

There is a clear pedagogical orientation toward seeing students as writers/readers/researchers who are engaged in *techne* - the productive arts - specifically, in rhetoric or the *'arts of discourse'* (Andrews 5). Thus, students are engaged as makers; makers as writers, readers, and researchers. The orientation to *making* is set by two theoretical perspectives and a specific pedagogical imperative.

First, *making* is clearly positioned within a conceptualization of the domain of study (professional writing and communication) as *the arts of discourse*. Second, the orientation to *making* is positioned by the perspective offered by ethnography: the ethnography of communication and the *doing* of ethnography, and in particular, of writing as a researcher, as an ethnographer. The writing of (rather than the 'writing up' of) research seen and practised as a rhetorical endeavour, with the attendant meta-discursive issues raised for consideration, underpins much of what students do as they progress through the course and each subject.

Winterowd, the American composition/rhetoric scholar reminds us that 'composition/rhetoric is not only a body of theory, but also an art' (Winterowd 89). He continues:

> the goal for those who profess composition/rhetoric is practice; theory arises from practice; pedagogy has always been an essential part of the field; the consequences of this pedagogy are a central concern. In other words, composition/rhetoric is primarily concerned with *doing.* (Winterowd 89).

Doing or *making* is central to the BA (Professional Writing and Communication). The focus on *making/doing* is complemented by a focus of *critical reflection*. The *making and reflecting* comes through the many and varied writing and reading activities and processes in which students are engaged during their undergraduate years. They are readers and writers of all manner of texts. They are students of linguistics and sociolinguistics. They are researchers of language, discourse, literacies and writing and reading practices. They traverse the boundaries of disciplines and discourses and the boundaries between the contexts of the academy, the workplace and the community. Students are intensely engaged in wordsmithing and are likely to be more so as their working lives evolve.

Central to this endeavour is that students become deliberately 'ethnographers of their own situations' (Hymes 60) engaging with the world outside and with the discipline worlds within the academy. In doing this, as participant observers and researchers of contexts, they become engaged in the issues involved with gathering data and 'writing up' - recording data and observations, making decisions about selection of details, about presenting the self as researcher/observer and author, choosing an authorial position and so on. Research as rhetorical action is a central consideration in the undergraduate program.

We are interested in ways of enabling students to be the 'ethnographers of their own situations' - whether these contexts are the institutional site, disciplinary areas and their discourses, or the community and professional contexts in which they find themselves. Each of the subjects/courses which student takes in some way demands of them that they adopt something of the perspective offered by ethnography, of 'doing ethnography' and the 'writing' of ethnography. Such a perspective creates a way of teaching writing - or more precisely for supporting the involvement or initiation of students into ways of thinking about the world, about disciplines, about the construction of knowledge - of epistemologies.

It provides a way of engaging them directly as writers representing either their thinking about an issue, or their interaction with the information they gather from other writers, scholars, researchers, or the information they gather as part of their own investigations and explorations of specific situations, contexts or topics. As students investigate a topic or carry out a project or conduct research in a context, they must confront the issues involved in gathering data, of handling such information and constructing a written report, essay or paper, and of thus considering the reader and the persuasiveness of the text.

Such rhetorical concerns obtain in any writing. However, ethnographic writing with its inherent tension created by the subjectivity of the writer/researcher and the reader's expectations of objectivity and of the reporting of 'fact',

foregrounds rhetorical issues. Ethnography accepted by 'contemporary students of culture' as the written representation of culture, writes Van Maanen, is defined 'in terms of its rhetorical features such as the topical, stylistic, documentary, evidentiary, and argumentative choices made by an author and displayed in the text' (5). Further, the 'conceptual positioning' of ethnographic research and writing and of the researcher's role is highlighted. 'Reflexive, self-critical dialogic approaches to ethnography seem a contemporary necesssity', Van Maanen adds (5 footnote 29). Our students are encouraged to just such reflexive, self-critical and dialogic perspectives in all their work.

Problematising research theory and practice, including the writing of research has implications for the teaching of writing, particularly when students are involved as readers of research, and as novice researchers and writers of research. Constructing a pedagogy for teaching writing which draws on an acknowledgement of research as a rhetorical exercise engages teachers and students in particular ways. Our aim is to establish and sustain an orientation to inquiry, indeed to research, and to have students acknowledge that in all contexts and activities they are in effect *de facto* researchers while being writers, or students of history or language or literary studies or children's literature or geography. We would want them to develop the tools and means for making explicit in systematic ways what might usually be tacit awareness of the multiple contexts, including the contexts of disciplinary knowledge, they encounter.

Rhetorical and textual issues explored in practice at micro, macro and meta levels and a critical engaging with the discourses of the world are at the core of this undergraduate program. Andrews' conceptualisation of rhetoric as *the arts of discourse*, as I have noted earlier, is appropriate for the course: 'rhetoric, while on the one hand providing a meta-disciplinary unity for the arts of discourse...is a pragmatic, modest art concerned with the production of appropriately framed, clearly expressed messages and the reception of such messages' (Andrews 18).

Such a conceptualization means that writing and reading practices are seen as dialogic and as located in social and cultural contexts. In addition, the boundaries between language study and literary studies are surmounted by an orientation to a unifying rhetorical approach to language and texts. Such an approach illuminates the interface between different genres or forms of text. These are just the issues student writers encounter. Where does narrative begin or end? Where does argument infiltrate through use of metaphor or judicious stylistic choice? Where and how does everyday language bend toward the poetic? By examining writing in the sciences, history, sociology; by scrutinising the contemporary essay and non-fiction - particularly writing which popularises the topics once reserved for the scholarly consumption - and by reflecting on their own writing, students are drawn into considering such issues in a creative and critical way.

The approach overall is for students to read widely, explore reading and texts through writing, and to write from and beyond a range of texts to produce folios of drafted and eventually polished work. Thus, for example in exploring discourses in the disciplines, students may not only paraphrase passages from literature, sociology, history, or biology but write from and beyond them. That is, they might paraphrase in straightforward or creative ways but also use the original text as the catalyst for a response of their own. Such a response can be in any form they choose. The response need not be (and usually is not) directed at the text. Rather students 'take off' from the catalyst text in their own way. A powerful essay on poverty in western society once paraphrased might be the catalyst for a poem or a piece of short fiction. An exploration of the voices, allusions, and metaphors which construct and give authority to a newspaper article or an editorial comment, might prompt not only a formal written critique of the multiple voices in the text but also generate a piece of creative non-fiction, a short story, or a script.

The subjects we discuss in this paper highlight the non-traditional approach taken in the award. First we establish how two of the compulsory subjects (one at Level 1 and the other at Level 2), fit into the overall theoretical framing of the award. We offer a justification for their place in a BA award.

A Level 1 Subject - Writing and Reading Across the Disciplines

When first year BA students at University of South Australia enter the first class in the major in Professional Writing and Communication, they step into the subject titled *Writing and Reading Across the Disciplines* (admittedly a rather bland title). The title only partly describes the focus of the subject. The subject is the stepping stone, the first in a sequence of courses in writing, language and communication studies for students who see themselves as writers and have chosen to major in professional writing and communication.

The subject introduces all the foci, elements and processes which will gradually be built on throughout the award. The elements of Abrams' artistic transaction - the artist, the audience, work and the universe - and the five pedagogical foci (noted earlier) can be observed in the rhetorical activities in which students are engaged. In brief, students read widely across texts and materials from the disciplines and from a wide range of sources. They write in a variety of forms, developing skills in something as elementary as paraphrasing and summarising, and extending their skills in writing the personal essay (in Montaigne's sense of the journey or exploration of topic in personal ways for public consumption). Key activities include: rhetorical analysis of the persuasive devices in texts, and of the various frames which are imbricated in a text (see Reid); and discussions of the discourses of disciplines and different contexts. Finally, a significant activity is that they carry out research, from an ethnographic perspective as participant observer, in an unfamiliar 'cultural scene' and then write about it. We intend that they should (in Charles

Anderson's words) 'begin to deal with knowledge in "writerly" ways, not merely dumping what they know onto the page, but shaping it into texts that will appeal to and inform the outside reader' (241).

Class time involves workshop and small group work, where we share writing, discuss language issues and issues of representation, authorial integrity, style, audience and so on. Students are expected to keep a reading journal/writer's notebook. They present work in progress and receive editorial comments as well as our responses. This year we hired a professional editor to surface edit all first draft material. We want them to develop skills in editing their own and others' work and to acquire some working editorial skills and knowledge of editorial mark-up. In the future we intend to build a relationship between final year students in a Level 3 Editing and Publishing class and the first year class for this sort of editing interaction.

Gradually students build up a folio of pieces from which they choose five for submission in their final assessment. There is always a piece of writing 'on the go'. The major project - a minimum of 1500 words - is an *essai*/essay in ethnographic writing in which students represent for the reader a 'cultural scene' which they have explored during the semester. In this project, the rhetorical issues of representation; of dealing with knowledge in 'writerly ways'; of confronting directly the writer's responsibility to audience, to subjects, to his or her material and the decisions of form, structure and style; the issues of fiction/fact and of literary non-fiction are all foregrounded for scrutiny.

The subject statement handed out to students in their first class in Professional Writing and Communication includes this quotation:

> A good writer must be a good ethnographer. He (she) must carefully observe and record situations, events, behavior and ideas. Most of all, his (her) characters and their actions must be believable. They must make sense to the person who knows the culture the author is writing about. A good writer is able to convey to the reader the meaning of all those taken-for-granted aspects of experience. He (she) must, in other words, have an understanding of the culture his (her) characters are using to organise their behavior. (Spradley and McCurdy 4)

The quotation makes the clear connection between ethnography and rhetoric; research is rhetorical action and writers are researchers.

We can rewrite the first sentence here so that the ethnographer is foregrounded - 'a good ethnographer must be a good writer'. If we do this, then we can look more closely at what it is that the investigator - here the ethnographer/qualitative researcher - needs to do as a writer, and at the decisions to be made in presenting an account for a reader.

Van Maanen suggests of ethnographic writing that 'the fieldworker must display culture in a narrative, a written report of the fieldwork experience in self-consciously selected words' (Van Maanen 4). Specifically the written ethnography can be considered as a 'quasi-formal document based on field work' which is 'full of persuasive, yet questionable, rhetorical appeals' (vx). And because the ethnographer is a writer in a highly self-conscious way, we can examine the issue of authorial voice and the relationship the writer constructs with the reader as he/she seeks to provide a valid account/representation of a culture.

If we concentrate on the converse proposition - the good writer as ethnographer - we can focus on the ethnographer/writer's research methodology and thus on the process of gathering data, sorting and sifting, categorising, analysing, interpreting and articulating what has been investigated. The principles and processes of self as investigator can be directly applied to the process of investigating any phenomenon or issue.

Hymes talks of ethnography as being 'continuous with ordinary life' (Hymes 98). 'Much of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have. Our ability to learn ethnographically is an extension of what every human being must do, that is learn the meanings, norms, patterns of a way of life.' (98)

When students are asked to be deliberate explorers of place, people, discourse and other behaviours and activities, writing emerges from activities which are a more formalised and explicit extension of what students do every day of their lives; indeed what we all do every time we enter a new and unfamiliar situation or encounter a new idea, read or see a new book or film. In this course, the borders between the writing of literary non-fiction, of the popular essay, of travel writing and so on and the writing of qualitative research are opened up for exploration.

The first assignment for our students is a task of participant observation. Every second year, they are asked to attend Writers' Week at the Adelaide Festival. In the non-Festival year we ask them to find a place or event they have not visited before. Their task is to be the participant-observer, to take field notes (in their writer's journal/notebook) while observing acts, behaviour, discourse, artefacts, spaces and so on. They must then write to represent this scene to a reader, attempting to indicate what it is that makes that scene what it is. A basic question driving their investigation is: What do participants in that situation need to know in order to operate in that context? We ask students to attempt to describe, analyse and interpret what goes on and what the tacit rules or meanings are in the setting and for its

participants. We ask them to take on the role of the researcher/writer - writer/researcher, thrusting them into activities of data gathering via observation, document collection, informal interviews (a sort of participant 'chat' if appropriate) and then into the rhetorical process of representing their observations, analysis and interpretation; thus an engagement in a process of (in Hymes' words) 'narrative accounting', with all the dilemmas that process entails.

Decisions about how they will represent the scene or event are for the students to make. We do not request report format or formal academic essay. In fact we make no specification at all other than suggested word length (500 and no more than 1000 words). Thus students make decisions about how they as authors will position themselves in relation to their texts, what point of view or perspective on their subject they will adopt, what form, structure or style they will adopt, and how they will relate to the reader: that is, what persona will they adopt. This first task is in one sense a heuristic for exploration of rhetorical issues. The exercise is an occasion for tapping into the issues which drive all writing and writers. It is also an occasion for meta-analysis and critical reflection on their work as writers.

Thus students are inducted into the Professional Writing major. Thirteen weeks later, they submit their folio of writing (drawn from a wide range of reading and writing activities both creative and critical) and their final project; a more sustained study of an unfamiliar scene or situation carried out from an ethnographic perspective. This more substantial participant observation study (a mini-ethnographic study) is conducted in the second half of the semester.

Students are expected to choose a 'cultural scene' and on the basis of their field notes, ethnographic interviews, document analysis, discourse analysis and so on, prepare an account which allows for description, analysis and interpretation of the context. We present a brief introduction to the guiding concepts, principles, practices, ethics and research/writing issues of doing qualitative research from an ethnographic perspective. We stress that this study is not (and cannot be, given the time available and their inexperience as researchers and their minimal theoretical preparation) a substantial piece of qualitative research. However, it presents students with the issues of theory and practice including the ethics of both 'being in the field' and of writing about the context and participants. Class discussions reverberate to the concerns about data, the researcher's role and the writer's stance and so on. Here is how one student writer approached the task.

Kirstene Ost (1996), *7.45pm, Eyes Down*
Kirstene's final paper, *7.45pm, Eyes Down*, a study of a Bingo Hall, is threaded through with the strange jargon of the callers:

> Eyes down...a duck and a flea, twenty-three; retiring age, sixty-five; lucky for some, number seven. Halfway there, forty-five; doctor's order, number nine; sunset strip, seventy-seven. (Ost)

How did she understand the task? 'I had to go somewhere and observe people, activities and interactions. Talking and language was the focus' (Ost, personal communication). Her original idea was to study house auctions but a walk with her dog past a Bingo Hall prompted a memory of her first visit to such a place when she was 11 or 12 years old. She remembered the call of 'Legs Eleven'. 'It (her project) *had* to be Bingo - Legs Eleven!' she declares, recalling her decision with a certainty of purpose.

She speaks of how she thought of herself first as a researcher-observer, aware of her outsider status in the Hall, aware of the blank pages of her notebook which she began to fill with notes of everything she could see around her. Somewhere along the way in this process she found herself focussing on the language surrounding her, and in particular she began to note the callers' phrases. These she transcribed in detail. During the next stage of the observation process she found herself turning more specifically to the people and their behavior and actions. She visited the Hall three times and set herself up at first as an observer, next as a partial participant (playing one game) and finally as participant (for one night she did what all other players did).

Kirstene reflects on how she felt first like a researcher, particularly aware ('very conscious') of what it might mean to 'Be there, to smell it, to taste it, touch it'. The awareness of the need to provide as rich a description as possible guided her approach to data collection. Thinking as a writer came as she rode on the bus, walked her dog and as she contemplated what to make of her notes and data. Her intention was that her readers should' be able to close their eyes and see the scene'. She also wanted to write to entertain as much as to describe. She had no idea of her end product, although she was aware that the callers' phrase which had seemed so particularly distinctive would be woven into the piece in some way.

Interestingly, she (unlike many of the students) felt no need to situate herself into the piece. The authorial - 'I' was not an issue. She felt her role was to observe and describe as an outsider: 'I could *not* put myself it it,' she states firmly. 'I suppose that it would have been me in the Bingo Hall, rather than 'This is Bingo'. 'It didn't occur to me to put myself in it,' she reiterates.

As a writer, she found herself constantly thinking of her notes and data, seeking a pattern or a focussing image as she experimented with sentences and phrases which she noted on scraps of paper as she rode on buses and so on. Two elements helped shape the piece; first the callers' words which she used to punctuate her final piece and provide a device for dictating the atmosphere she wanted to evoke, and second, her attempt to present the scene from the point

of view of the participants - 'walking in the shoes of the participants'. She is proud of this piece and made copies for her family and wider circle of relatives and friends. Kirstene felt she had learned she could write not just because she had shaped a piece but because as she says, 'Everywhere I go now, I think, "Oh that would make a really good story".'

Student Folios

In addition to the participant observer piece, many pieces of work fill student folios. The Professional Writing team intends that at the end of their undergraduate years, students will have notebooks and journals, and folios of work which will be a clear record of their development, will enable them to reflect on their education with pride and satisfaction and will also demonstrate their skills to employers.

We would like their folios to be records of their development as what Douglas Hesse calls 'rhetorical citizens' (Hesse 12). Hesse (writing in the American context) stresses the need for undergraduate writers to have the opportunity to produce both personal and public writing. His is an expression of concern for what he perceives as a focus on personal writing at the expense of deliberative public writing (writing on real issues and writing for a public audience) in Freshman writing classes.

In particular, Hesse is concerned that students see themselves not only as 'learner, employee, professional, and private individual but as citizen, with something at stake and a voice in public discourses.' (11) I would expand Hesse's concept to include the full range of writing which reflects the student writer as someone who is able to use his or her skills as a writer, reader, document designer, and researcher to act on situations through texts, and who has the capacity to explore critically how 'selves', as Ian Reid suggests, 'are constructed through sociolinguistic practices' (111).

A Level 2 Subject - Professional and Technical Writing

Professional and Technical Writing aims to develop students as writers of a range of professional and technical texts, and to extend skills in revision, editing, and visual rhetoric. It does so by exploring and analysing texts from academic, government, and other workplace and public contexts, and by practice in writing some of the documents required in these contexts.

It is increasingly common for Arts faculties to offer 'service' subjects in technical writing within science, business and technology courses, where the emphasis tends to be on the acquisition of skills in various forms of writing and presentation necessary for success within particular professions. It is less common, I believe, for Arts students themselves to have the opportunity not only to become proficient in forms of writing not traditionally valued by the academy, but also to apply to these forms the criteria for judging their effectiveness as rhetorical practices in action. In Professional and Technical Writing, students can engage with technical writing using the kind of discursive rigour usually reserved for the more canonical texts of each academic discipline.

Professional and Technical Writing is an introductory subject, but even at this level the range of students enrolling in the subject forces an approach that goes beyond teaching a reductive set of skills to generic formulae. A substantial number of students are from other courses who take Professional and Technical Writing as a 'broadening undergraduate' subject, and who have probably already done a communication subject as part of their professional award. Others are mature-age students with varying degrees of experience in actual workplace communication. Some Arts students taking the subject as part of their major, sub-major, or cognate may fall into this latter category; most are relatively new to the field, and require both an introduction to the forms of workplace writing and an approach of sufficient academic depth to justify the time taken up by the subject within an Arts degree. Each of these categories of student warrants an exploration that will reshape their particular sense of the geography of the field, and this can be achieved through treating technical writing as the interaction of four problems or issues - those of information, persuasion, ethics, and adaptation (Lannon 10) - on the triadic relationship between writer, reader, and subject matter. The shape or form of the resultant communicative act can be described as the genre, and is a useful starting point for the rhetoric of the workplace: what works and why?

Postmodernist criticism has freed up our notions of genre, and the catalyst has been a willingness to study the ways in which 'functional' or 'non-creative' writing operates in many contexts. Thus Miller, in her 1984 article 'Genre as social action', 'argues against a formalist conception of genre, proposing instead to redefine genres, non-literary as well as literary, as typified rhetorical actions arising within a society in response to recurrent situations' (Smart 126). Swales narrows down the ownership of genres from 'society' to the 'discourse community', which he defines as a socio-rhetorical group - as opposed to the speech community, which is sociolinguistic (24) - having, among other characteristics, 'a broadly agreed set of common public goals' (25), and possessing 'one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims' (26). These definitions reinvest genres with a dynamism and evolutionary quality that are all too easily overlooked in traditional literary studies, where the genre is often merely the template for producing the 'well-wrought urn'. This is not to say that genres are free-floating or reinvented *ad infinitum*; discourse communities develop their own cultures and are in turn parts of wider cultures, culture being 'the more or less stable sum of the group's collective experience over time' (Anderson 227). But while conventionalised generic forms represent only temporary sites within a discourse community's culture, and cannot transcend the shaping processes of history, they are nonetheless sites providing 'a measure of rhetorical stability through regularities in written texts and in the production and interpretation of these texts' (Smart 126).

When forms are expressed in terms of critical notions of genre as rhetorical action, however, they become points of departure rather than ends in themselves. Anderson attributes the pedagogical shift from a logical positivist view with its emphasis on the mastery of forms to a social view of 'technical communication as a purposeful, dynamic activity intended to precipitate specific results in particular social settings' (Anderson 47-48), directly to, and indeed as part of, the postmodernist critical agenda. He models the two views thus:

Logical positivist view

Writer——————>Reader

channel

Social view

World now —> Writer writes —> Reader reads ----> Desired world

The pedagogical implications of the social view are that the tasks undertaken by students must involve writing for (and, it should be added, reading within) contexts that extend beyond the purely academic environment in which the lecturer is the only real target audience, and a demonstration of skills and/or abstract knowledge is the only criterion for success. The tasks must be genre-centred, in the sense of our definition of genres as flexible conventions used for maximum impact or effectiveness, and they must be 'goal-directed activities drawing upon a range of cognitive and communicative procedures . . . appropriate to a foreseen or emerging socio-rhetorical situation' (Swales 76). Anderson contrasts the criteria for setting and judging assessment tasks using the forms approach and the social approach:

FORMS APPROACH	SOCIAL APPROACH
Tasks	Tasks
• have no context specified	• are highly contextual
• transmit facts	• bring change
• aim at a generic audience	• aim at specific readers
• are evaluated for correctness and clarity	• are evaluated for effectiveness

(Adapted from Anderson)

In our approach to Professional and Technical Writing, we reinforce the social approach even further by drawing students' attention to the intertextual qualities of the 'meta', 'macro', and 'micro' levels of discourse. The meta involves the expectations and conventions at the level of society, culture and discourse community. The macro is at the level of genre, and involves formal choices appropriate to reader and purpose. The micro takes in textual details at the level of grammar, style and mechanics. The point we make is that the three do not operate as a sequence of steps for effective writing, but are contiguous and continual in their interrelationship. Thus when students edit and redraft their work, they do so for effectiveness (of which 'correct usage' is only one factor), bearing in mind that decisions made at one level affect and are affected by the other levels simultaneously. This obviously applies to writing under all circumstances, but in few other subjects can the point be made so clearly as in Professional and Technical Writing, with its explicit concentration on processes and outcomes.

Examples from student writing

Some examples from student writing illustrate the approach taken in Professional and Technical Writing, and serve as jumping-off points for further consideration of the theoretical stance underpinning the subject. These examples all come from the major assignment task, which is to write a report analysing a document in use in the public domain, commenting particularly on its effectiveness in terms of readership and purpose, and to attempt a whole or partial redraft of the document to make it more effective. Students must write a report of workplace standard, bringing to bear the issues and strategies dealt with during the semester's seminar classes, while at the same time positioning themselves as reader and (re-)writer of the subject document. What is particularly impressive in these examples is a refusal to be overwhelmed by the formal requirements of the subject documents; instead the emphasis is on effectiveness, that is, on the document's capacity for bridging the (often precarious) gap between reader and outcome.

Jane Clayton (1996) *The Adelaide Bank's* Terms and Conditions *brochure*

Clayton went straight to the user-end of the document by designing and distributing a customer survey before writing her report. The major problem expressed in the survey results was with the legal language employed in the document, but there were also problems with accessibility in terms of logical ordering of information and the use of graphical elements to assist in the retrieval of essential points from the document. While it may be argued that the primary purpose of the document is to cover the bank's legal obligations in relation to its customer services, and its language is couched accordingly, Clayton recognises the inherent contradiction between the brochure format, which is designed specifically for customer use, and the imperviousness of its language, and argues the case for Plain English. Rewriting legal documents into Plain English is a tricky undertaking, and not one recommended for the

novice. Nevertheless, in grappling with the issue, Clayton engages with a topical and increasingly urgent 'real-world' task, and finds ways of rewording the brochure. She also proposes graphically clearer and more logically sequential headings and subheadings, and concludes that the language and format of the current brochure 'show a lack of respect for the customer's needs and interests and consequently threaten healthy customer relations.' (8)

Emily Collins (1996) ***Instructions for the 28-day contraceptive pill***
The effects of misreading this document go without saying, and, while Collins has no problems with the actual information presented in the instructions, she believes that the writers have not tackled the admittedly 'difficult...job of trying to cater for an audience . . . with varying cultural backgrounds and reading skills.' (Collins 12) The instruction leaflet is very much the *locus classicus* of the technical writer, who frequently must write for 'multiple audiences' who 'will probably know less about the subject' than the writer, 'may differ in background knowledge, in needs and purposes', and 'may differ in reading strategies.' (Olsen & Huckin 59) This is in marked contrast to writing in purely academic contexts where, typically, the sole reader (the academic) is more knowledgeable than the writer, reads to focus on the writer's grasp of discipline-specific knowledge, and (a factor often overlooked in comparing academic and technical writing) actually reads the whole document (Olsen & Huckin 58).

Collins finds that the overall technical level is 'too high' for most readers, that the wording of certain instructions is 'clumsy and confused', and that the 'crammed layout forces even the most able reader to work hard to derive the information they need.' (2) Collins rates the instructions' 'index of usability' as low, because the reader 'must skip material and reverse directions while reading.' (Collins 4) She suggests unscrambling the sequence of instructions so that 'cautions about conditions and side-effects' are placed before steps, rather than intruding in between or coming afterwards. (4) In positioning herself as reader, she realises that the writer cannot assume that the reader will read first and act later. She also realises that the importance of the instructions renders the particular modality caused by the use of 'should' and 'please' as more than misplaced courtesy; there may be actual harm caused when steps are not stated with the appropriate 'authority and force.' (4) She then suggests ways in which graphical features might be manipulated to increase the readability and accessibility of the information.

Gemma Battersby (1996) ***Recommendations for the design and display of product recall notices***
This report, first of all, proves that the subject document need not be elaborate or comprehensive to generate meaningful valuable research into workplace writing. Secondly, it develops from an analysis of a very localised genre into what is effectively an ethnography of supermarket shopping. Taking a small product recall notice in a supermarket, Battersby demonstrates just how much of a genre this has become, having distinctly recognisable formal and linguistic qualities within a well-defined discourse community. In that definite action is called for (the return of a faulty product), Battersby considers the interrelationship between textual qualities such as the way the notice 'identifies itself as a product recall notice and as a warning to customers' (5) and contextual factors such as the timeliness and location of the notice (including *not* placing it on an automatic sliding door, as was actually done!).

In addressing the issue of audience and purpose, Battersby attempts to pin down very specifically the constitution of the discourse community in order to suggest improvements based on actual data. From the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1991 census figures, she identifies 4.44% of the population of the area as Italian speakers whose command of English is sufficiently poor to warrant a translation of the notice into that language (8). As small as this figure may be, as Battersby points out (1-2), in the light of the Garibaldi meat poisoning (in the same State) and the 'mad cow disease' outbreak, it is too significant to ignore. With this advice, and the need for more obvious generic markers such as prominent use of the word 'Warning', Battersby proposes to make the product recall notice even more effective.

Sue Caldicott (1996) ***A critical analysis of memo writing in the workplace***
Generic markers such as a key word or the layout of a proforma not only position the writer and reader, they also activate schemata which help to contextualise the information presented (see, for example, Swales 85). Perhaps few modern documents do this more effectively than the memorandum: the by now very familiar 'To/From/Subject/Date' heading presents the necessary preliminary information in a clear and concise manner and at the same time positions the writer and reader as colleague/member of staff/manager in the same organisation. Nevertheless, as Caldicott points out in her analysis of a memo reminding members of a large organisation about the use of Cabcharge, the rhetorical value of a memo relies as much on its readability and the degree to which the writer has assessed the reader's likely responses as on its form. The memo writer must not lose sight of each of Lannon's precepts that technical writing be 'clear, concise, fluent, exact and likable [sic]' (251). Writing strategies such as register, tone and modality play as large a part in the composition of a memo as does the correct format (which may be lifted straight from the most up-to-date word-processing programs anyway) or the clarity of the information. Thus, as Caldicott concludes, even though it is easy to view memo writing as a formulaic exercise, 'many of the elements, particularly those related to style, are subjective,' (7), and the place of the writer in relationship to the reader is by no means diminished.

Kyra Drewien (1996) ***A style survey of the*** **Torrens Water** ***newsletter***
Even an apparently 'correct' document produced under professional circumstances can misidentify audience and purpose at the macro-discourse level. The *Torrens Water* newsletter is produced by the Torrens Catchment Water Management Board to explain the activities and plans of the Board, and to provide residents living along the River

Torrens with advice regarding care of the catchment area. Drewien notes that six out of the fifteen articles are what she labels 'statement articles' which 'inform readers of the...Board's philosophy, current intentions and future directions.' (3) The populist magazine layout belies the overall technical report style of the content, with a resulting lack of clear purpose, and the question is begged as to whose interests are being served in this document, the residents' or the Board's? If the answer is the former, and the *Torrens Water* newsletter is not just an act of self-justification and self-aggrandisement, then Drewien recommends that the six 'statement articles' be collapsed into one, and that the rest of the essential information 'be summarised into key points' on a 'double sided, single page document' (14). Thus her analysis casts doubt on the very choice of genre itself, which in this case may actually be masking an implicit agenda.

Susanne Koen (1996) ***Reaching the people: an analysis of the problems encountered in...the [Department for Education and Children's Services] discussion paper*** **Creating our future: towards a charter 1996-2010**
Koen's report actually documents her own activities in relation to a South Australian Department for Education and Children's Services paper and is a most detailed, illuminating and damning account of the failure of a technical document to bridge the gap between Reader and Desired World. Of necessity, only a brief summary of Koen's account can be included here.

The Department for Education and Children's Services requested a response from school councils to its discussion paper which 'concerned the future of education in South Australia over the next fifteen years and was therefore of great significance to parents, teachers and students.' (Koen 1) Problems encountered with reading and understanding the document in the council of which she was a member led to Koen writing a synopsis of the original for local use; this in turn was requested first by other school councils, and subsequently by the Department for Education and Children's Services itself as the basis for a brochure which 'was subsequently published as a replacement for the original discussion paper.' (Koen i)

Koen maintains that the discussion paper failed as a technical document at all three levels of discourse. At the 'meta' level it had arrived within a climate of political uncertainty regarding educational funding and of industrial unrest, and at the end of the school year, with councils not due to meet again until the commencement of the next year. The implications of little or no response might then lead the Department for Education and Children's Services to assume a lack of interest in decision by councils, and that 'all decision making should therefore remain with [the Department for Education and Children's Services.]' (3)

At the 'macro' level, the '32 pages of densely packed content' and an 'illogical' format made for an 'uninviting and unreaderly' document (4). The document lacked a clear authorial hand: Koen discovered that it was the result of notes from various departmental 'brainstorming sessions' and coordinated by a 'writer', but no final editing was done before distribution, and the Department for Education and Children's Services actually admitted that 'the document is almost impossible to understand!' (5)

The lack of a clear author was perhaps most obvious at the 'micro' level. Koen's list of faults is too long to give here, but major problems can be summed up as:

- 'inaccessibility . . . due to layout and register' (6), creating obfuscation and a relationship between writer and reader suggestive of Fairclough's dictum of 'powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants' (cited in Koen 8);
- lexis which is 'highly suggestive of manufacturing and production' (1996: 8);
- a tone that 'negates the invitation to contribute' by creating a sense of decisions already taken (8-9).

Little wonder, then, that Koen 'doubts the sincerity' of the Department for Education and Children's Services' attempt at 'a democratic consultancy process' (9).

Like Drewien, Koen rejects the genre of the subject document as altogether inappropriate for the stated audience and purpose. She too suggests a hidden agenda in operation, one designed 'to maintain the status quo' (14). The synopsis written by Koen in response to this failure, which became in turn the official Department for Education and Children's Services brochure, demonstrates another important characteristic of professional and technical writing: much of it is unsolicited, and therefore relies even more upon its rhetorical impact to gain acceptance. The success of Koen's venture into (for her) previously uncharted territory shows clearly that the technical writer must have an adequate repertoire of genres, and the confidence and flexibility to employ each for its maximum effect in whichever discourse community it must operate.

* * *

The value of professional and technical writing as a set of discipline skills and knowledge is obvious; in its capacity to deal concretely and immediately with the concept of genres as rhetorical actions taking effect within specific

discourse communities, its place within the University of South Australia's BA (Professional Writing and Communication) degree is indisputable. That the field of endeavour in Professional and Technical Writing is potentially congruent with the teaching and learning strategies advocated within cultural studies and other disciplines dealing with signifying practices - strategies such as Pope's 'textual intervention' (1995) and Carter and Nash's analyses of 'style' and 'literariness' (1990) - warrants further opening out of this infrequently explored territory to students everywhere.

Conclusion

Students are engaged in making sense of learning contexts and disciplines and through being introduced to the dilemmas of writing whether they carry out a participant observation study or undertake a study of language in situation; write a short story, a non-fiction piece such as a travel essay; write up an investigation of literacy and literacy practices in a workplace or community (a major qualitative study carried out in their degree); or develop documentation for a particular context and situation. We want them to engage with the decision-making that goes on as they investigate and analyse particular phenomena - particularly rhetorical actions and artefacts - and, when they as writers report the results of the investigation to others or write in any way for public consumption. They must acknowledge that language and discourses are not neutral; that language in use is always socially, culturally and ideologically motivated; that texts are social acts; that meanings arise in context; and that they as language users, as writers and readers, are engaged in a complex plurality of discursive relationships.

Leading students in understanding the role of discourses in organising meaning and in creating subjectivities means providing ways in which they can make transition from the personal to the public, from the individual to the community, from the local to the global in their language use. Thus, the writing and reading, as well as the investigatory projects in which they are engaged in each subject, should mean that students are 'makers', students of the arts of discourse - of rhetoric as praxis. They are, in Coe's words, engaged in rhetoric, 'as a study of how wordlings word'. Rhetoric, he says, 'also becomes a study of discourse communities and how they commune.' (Coe 341)

In defining rhetoric thus, Coe draws on Kenneth Burke who wrote:

From within or
from out of
the vast expanses of the
infinite wordless universe
we wordy human bodies have carved
many overlapping universes of discourse
which add up to a
pluriverse of discourses
local dialects of dialectic
(Burke, cited by Coe 344)

Writing students are therefore engaged in essentially humane studies - those which focus on the individual, society, culture, ideological and political subjectivities and shared discourses, as well as the discourses of difference. They are engaged in finding their voices while acknowledging the voices of others. In undertaking professional writing and communication as a broad field of study, students should leave university as confident and skilled writers, readers and researchers well equipped to explore and produce texts and discourse in different situations.

Associate Professor Claire Woods and Dr Paul Skrebels lecture in professional writing and communication in the School of Communication and Information Studies, University of South Australia.

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Notes and debate generated from this article
Brian Dibble and Julienne van Loon
Anne Surma

TEXT
Vol 1 No 2 OCTOBER 1997
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au