How organizational politics takes us beyond rhetorical categories,

Exploring the Blind Spot: Audience, Purpose, and Context in "Product, Process, and Profit"

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Abstract

Technical communicators have long turned to audience, purpose, and context as they analyze situations. But Mirel's article demonstrates that audience-purpose-context is too weak a framework to handle the job of detailed sociopolitical analysis: not only is it inadequate for analyzing the needs of end users, it is also inadequate for analyzing situations within the writer's organization. In this response, this paper explores the weaknesses of audience-purpose-context and points to alternative sociopolitical frameworks.

H.5.2 *User Interfaces—training, help, and documentation; user-centered design*

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Introduction

A few years ago, I attended a conference presentation in which the panelists recounted their recent workplace research projects. What struck me about these presentations was that all three stories had surprising twists that underscored how the researchers' expectations were proved false by the complexities and contingencies of the workplace. For instance, one panelist described how she and her team were contracted to revise FCC manuals to make them more usable to pilots—only to find that in doing so, they had rendered the manuals unusable for a powerful shadow audience of bureaucrats and regulators. The manuals were a failure because, although the panelist had analyzed the situation, she hadn't complicated the situation enough to anticipate all stakeholders' interests. The other two panelists had similar stories.

I thought the panel was excellent, and at the end I asked the panelists about the implications for designing workplace documents—that is, what the stories could teach us about how we approached applied situational analysis. The lead panelist stared at me as if I had asked him to recite his ABCs. Then, in a sense, he did: He intoned "Audience, purpose, context" and sat down.

I frequently share this story with my graduate students to illustrate the hold that the holy trinity of situational analysis—audience-purpose-context—has on rhetoric in general and the field of technical communication in particular. Even after three outstanding presentations demonstrating that this framework is too weak for the demands we place on it—even after the workplace's complexities and contingencies proved too much for this simple tripartite analysis—the lead panelist still retained faith

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in it. Certainly audience-purpose-context is a powerful heuristic that is exceedingly valuable at a certain point in a writer's development, for instance, in a freshman-level composition course. But incidents like the one above suggest that audience-purpose-context is poorly suited to *sociopolitical analysis*, particularly of the internal workings of organizations.

Barbara Mirel's research has consistently challenged the trinity of audience-purpose-context. That's one of the reasons that I admire her work. And her paper "Product, Process, and Profit," to which I respond here, highlights the issue of situational analysis in particular, for it is in great part a story of the failure of situational analysis. Not the sort that we're used to talking about—the analysis of "end users," whoever they might be—but rather the sort that is necessary for political survival in an organization.

The sociopolitical analysis of our own workplace situations has long been a blind spot for technical communicators, preoccupied as we are with serving as liaisons between an organization and the users of its products. We tend to focus on technical communication as instrumental, and consequently we don't spend much time talking about how to analyze, maneuver through, and survive within our own organizations. And we certainly don't raise those issues very frequently in our technical communication classes. Exploring that blind spot can lead us to uncomfortable conclusions about audience-purpose-context, but also to ways that we might more thoroughly explore such situations.

In the following sections, I examine "Product, Process, and Profit" with a special focus on the audience-purpose-context triumvirate and how Mirel complicates it. At the end, I discuss some alternatives to audience-purpose-context and how those alternatives might be used to conduct more complex situational analyses.

Audience

Like the other terms in the trinity ("purpose" and "context"), "audience" is a deceptively simple term. Who is your audience? In oratory, the answer seems simple: the audience is whoever can hear you. (But things aren't that simple, even in oratory. Kaufer and Butler (1996) describe how in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Douglas crafted his remarks for the physically present audience, but Lincoln pursued a more successful strategy by crafting his remarks for the wide newspaper audience. In more recent news, part of John McCain's startling performance in the 2000 Republican primaries came from his willingness to curry the favor of the press—who were not his core audience, but who helped to shape his message and give him media coverage that he might not have otherwise received.) In writing, the answer similarly seems simple: the audience is the "end user"—the person who will use your text to accomplish certain workplace tasks. "Which tasks?" one might ask. Why, the ones you envision them accomplishing.

But this is a tautological definition: that the user is whoever we might imagine using our texts. Certainly the definition is in widespread use, usually implicitly, and sometimes explicitly: some have argued that writers give roles to readers (e.g., Coney and Chatfield, 1996; Coney and Steehouder, 2000). But that definition can blind us to the complexities of our audiences, and exclude from "audience" people who extensively use our texts. For instance, in one illuminating study (Schriver, 1997), Karen Schriver expresses impatience that anti-drug-abuse brochures must go through several layers of bureaucracy to get to their audience, teens at risk. In describing document designers as "standing between the reader and the organization" (p. 201), Schriver closes the possibility of examining stakeholders both within and without *various* organizations—department heads, legislators, taxpayers, teachers, guidance counselors, drug prevention advocates, parents—as important audiences who use the brochures to accomplish their own various agendas, meet their own goals, and learn information for their own purposes. The anti-drug-abuse brochures are treated as wholly concerned with meeting the needs of teens, yet

if we examine the blind spot, we find that these are terribly politicized documents used in a startling number of activities. Such documents can only succeed by finding ways to marshall the support of multiple stakeholders.

In "Product, Process, and Profit," Mirel does examine the blind spot: she recognizes that the improved interfaces that her team produced play different roles inside as well as outside her organization. They are articulated or linked to various arguments—over funding, over effort, over time, resources, and personnel. They are rhetorical statements that are read and used by people within as well as without the organization. They are political and strategic as well as instrumental. They are used for strategic problem-solving as much as they are for quantitative problem-solving. They are produced through straight-ahead work and through renegade action. They are ends, but also means. They are used to disallow hirings and justify firings. Indeed, usability, often considered to be a finishing gloss for products, in this story becomes a tool for fundamentally changing the organization—by prompting the dismissal of its chief advocate.

Purpose

What is purpose? Alert readers may have already noted that purpose has been touched upon in the discussion of audience, largely because any nontrivial understanding of audience has to go beyond simple demographics to what the audience is doing and what goals they expect to meet. The separation between audience and purpose, then, is somewhat artificial, an attempt to split one exceedingly vague concept into two slightly less vague ones.

Yet purpose remains fixed to audience and to the author—it is implicitly conceived as the congruence of their aims. For instance, suppose that I write a manual describing how to use Microsoft Word. I assume that the end user (the imagined audience) and I share the goal of teaching the user how to (among other things) create new documents, use styles, and avoid calling technical support. But the user may have aims that I don't share, such as writing Word macro viruses or calling technical support people at their homes at 3:00 am. I don't document this useful information because although it meets the user's goals, it contravenes the goals of my organization. (One of the reasons that I dislike the term "user-centered" is that it hides the fact that technical communicators actually do try to marginalize, inhibit, and discourage certain types of users and assign circumscribed roles to those readers.) You won't find this point discussed in standard software documentation texts, but it is nevertheless so.

In part, "Product, Process, and Profit" is a tale of purpose come unstuck. The implicit agreement between organization and user is disrupted because the organization is no longer able to speak univocally: the deep contradictions among (for instance) product, process, and profit engender dissonances among the purposes of actors in the organization. Near the conclusion of Mirel's story, usability thrives because it is densely linked to political positions of certain actors, and thus becomes a useful tool in the larger political struggle (rather like phonics or creationism). As Mirel points out, "Breakthrough innovations in usefulness are unavoidably political" (p. 3). And in this story, the breakthrough innovations arguably served internal politics more than they did the putative users.

But Mirel's case study brings us only part way in understanding purpose as political, because if purpose is indeed a sort of contract between the organization and the user, we should recognize that users break this contract just as frequently as organizations do. Anyone who spends much time observing workplace communication knows that the fruits of technical communicators' labor are used in ways that we do not envision (e.g, software manuals are used as doorstops, paperweights, good or bad examples for other technical communicators, objects of rhetorical analysis in classrooms, proof of software purchase, etc.) and that users

often ignore our documentation in favor of ad-hoc documentation that they produce themselves (in Post-It notes, e-mails, oral lore, etc.). (See Spinuzzi and Zachry, 2000, for more examples and a further discussion of what they might mean.) The concept of *purpose* begins to fragment under scrutiny as we realize that any artifact we produce might be used for largely unpredictable aims, both inside and outside our organizations, and that those aims may change at any point.

Useful, sociopolitically oriented frameworks exist…that resist the reductive trinity of audience-purpose-context

So: What is purpose? The definition implied by the common use of the term in technical communication literature is something like "the congruence between an organization's interests and a user's." But, again, such a definition is unsatisfying—more often than not, that congruence is transitory and deeply flawed.

Context

What is context? Context, like audience and purpose, can be exceedingly vague—indeed, far vaguer than the other two. Although some useful elaborated theories of context exist (see Russell, 1997), context is most frequently appealed to as a useful ellipsis, one that allows us to focus on specific aspects of an analysis while ignoring the rest. We talk of political context, social context, cultural context, ethical context, situational context (to pile vagueness upon vagueness), etc. And these contexts allow us to bracket off what we want to study (the "text") from everything else in the universe (the "context").

Context as a vague notion hides complexity and submerges politics; it makes the blind spot possible. For instance, in one textbook (Anderson, 1999), the author invites students to "fill out your mental portrait of your readers by imagining how the following circumstances might influence their response to your communication" (p. 64)—treating context as a sort of slim adjunct to readers, a sort of cloud that follows them around. And although this author does mention context in political terms, he does so in a rather limited way: "If you are requesting cooperation from another department that has long been a competitor of yours for company resources, you will need to call upon special diplomacy" (p. 65). Notice that in this textbook, context encompasses the "circumstances," etymologically the things that "stand around" the intended reader. The analysis doesn't seem to be reversible; that is, students aren't shown how to take, say, political context as a starting point for finding out who might read their documents. And context isn't explored any further; the textbook does not explain how one might investigate context, differentiate contextual factors, decide what part of the context is significant to one's particular needs, or examine contextual cues to learn more about the audience and its purpose. Indeed, beyond telling us that context exists, the textbook seems to provide almost no explicit guidance in how to detect and use it. In this textbook, context is a device that allows us to separate the audience from everything that surrounds them—society, culture, history, politics, material environment, etc.—ignoring the question of whether such a separation can be effected in the first place.

Mirel wisely avoids this temptation to use "context" to turn swathes of the sociocultural fabric into scenery. Rather, she examines the blind spot, the social and political processes inside the organization, the internal divisions and contradictions that drive innovation at Visible Solutions—and is rewarded by insights into how papering over those contradictions ultimately sabotaged those innovations:

Frictions in the actual venture were consequential. Complicated and two-edged, they incited abuses of power *and* sparked creativity and innovation. Creatively, provocative debates and frictions inspired usability innovations as

nothing else could. Were frictions, as in Jack's story, truly to disappear, that disappearance would have taken with it much of the vitality, vision, and sense of mission of the group. In fact, that is exactly what happened. (p. 7)

What is context? Context is the backdrop that recedes so that we can give our attention on the text, the one thing we want to examine. Yet Mirel does an end run around context, managing to weave a more complex narrative that recognizes various sociocultural components as dynamically and reciprocally participating in the successes and failures of Visible Solutions.

Wanted: A New Framework for Sociopolitical Situational Analysis

What I hope I've shown thus far are the inadequacies of audience-purpose-context, particularly related to the blind spot of intra-organizational politics, and how Mirel's case study exposes and resists those inadequacies. Yet if we are to abandon this framework, with what do we replace it?

Useful, sociopolitically oriented frameworks exist, ones that resist the reductive trinity of audience-purpose-context and that make exploration of the blind spot possible. In fact, Mirel has already covered some of this ground in another essay, " 'Applied Constructivism' for User Documentation" (1998). In this essay, Mirel describes the impact of constructivist theory on documentation (The term "constructivism" is rather contested, with some assigning it very different meanings than Mirel does. In this reply, I'll use the term the way Mirel does in her 1998 article):

> Unlike instruction oriented to unit tasks in which software operations and human cognition are tightly coupled, a constructivist lens on documentation widens task boundaries to include the social, cultural, and technological dynamics of users' work. This perspective assumes that task knowledge is "in the connections," in the meeting of material, social, cultural, institutional, technological, historical, and individual forces.... These forces mediate knowledge in complex activities in ways that cannot be taught as foolproof, standardized procedures with rule-bound relationships. (p. 16)

Mirel goes on to list relevant social theory on which her constructivist approach to documentation is based: the sociology of knowledge, activity theory, the politics of technology, distributed cognition, situated learning, cognitive complexity theory, genre theory, and pragmatic philosophy (p. 18). All of these provide what audience-purpose-context does not: highly articulated frameworks—and often even models—of political, social, cultural, material, institutional, technological, historical, individual, and other factors that help to constitute the milieus in which we operate. Indeed, we could add other sociopolitical frameworks to this list as well, such as actor-network theory and ethnomethodology. These frameworks forsake the simple answers of audience-purpose-context in favor of more complex and ultimately more productive ways of analyzing and talking about complex sociopolitical systems.

For instance, an activity theory (AT) approach (Nardi, 1996, 1998) rejects the basic triad of audience-purpose-context for a more nuanced view in which consciousness, meaning, and purpose are understood as inherently social. In AT, *people* are understood as collectively working together to transform a certain *object*—for instance, Visible Solutions might be understood as mainly devoted to developing succeeding versions of software. The organization attempts to transform its object via a variety of *mediational means* (software programs, organizational documents, narratives, etc.); applies various *rules or habits* to its endeavors (company strategies, pecking order, regulations); operates within a larger *community or set of communities* (such as the world of software research, the dot-com economy, etc.), and *divides its labor* in certain ways (some people are VPs, some are software developers, some empty the trash). Yet according to AT, there are always *contradictions* or tensions among these elements of the activity;

such contradictions produce both innovation and conflict. An activity theory analysis of Visible Solutions might shed light on the very different corporate cultures that were bound together with the creation of the company, and how those cultures' different objects and goals embedded contradictions in the activity. Those contradictions ultimately ripped the company apart, as people within the activity began using artifacts (such as the software interface) and abstract concepts (such as usability) as tools for meeting very different goals.

Another approach, distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995; Ackerman and Halverson, 1998, 2000), emphasizes how individuals and groups interact with tools to solve problems. According to distributed cognition, cognitive tasks are distributed across the whole of the social system. For instance, users of Visible Solutions' data interpretation program were able to share the task of interpretation with the program—it was able to perform some of the cognition for them. Without the software, they would not be able to do their jobs in the same way, if at all. We can turn a distributed cognition analysis to more political tools as well: the system of chits that helped the organization do the cognitive work of assigning priorities, the system of standard processes that helped the organization determine when a solution was ready to be brought to market, etc. And we can examine the organization as a dynamic system in which goals changed, certain cognitive tasks became more or less valued, and tool systems were adopted, altered, and discarded to match the changes in cognitive work.

A third approach, actor-network theory (Engeström and Escalante, 1996; Latour, 1988, 1993; Miettinen, 1999), focuses most explicitly on the political nature of the interactions within Visible Solutions. Actor-network theory (ANT) postulates that actor-networks are interdependent collectives of human and nonhuman actors; ANT does not distinguish between the two types of actors, claiming that the distinction is not useful, since "entities gain their identity only through other entities, through interactive relations" (Miettinen, p. 176), and it is those relations that are important. Those relations build networks. And the more actors are mobilized in a particular network, the more durable and powerful the network is. For instance, Mirel's renegade usability efforts were hailed by Jack, the CEO—who had previously been unconcerned with usability—because by endorsing her efforts, he could bring them into alignment with his goals. That is, usability became more powerful because it was aligned with an already-powerful coalition that included Jack, Mitchell, the other cronies, the larger dot-com culture, and a variety of other human and nonhuman actors connected with Visible Solutions. As a part of this larger network, usability helped to dislodge those affiliated with other networks (such as Stan, the VP who had align himself with a network that included "Old Pyrrhtel" processes). Yet once it had been used in this way, usability lost its power in that network; Mirel notes that despite some self-congratulation, upper management made no plans to continue usability efforts (p. 22). ANT helps us to examine the political alignments and alliances that were built, maintained, destroyed, and terminated at Visible Solutions.

The three sociopolitical frameworks that I have used as examples here (activity theory, distributed cognition, and actor-network theory) do not just provide the tools for complex postmortem analyses. They also provide complex lenses for proactive situational analysis. Suppose that rather than asking about the audience, purpose, and context of a given workplace, we ask: What sorts of activities are taking place here, and what deep contradictions drive their innovation and their conflicts? How does the larger organization distribute its problem-solving tasks, to what ends, and how do tools affect how these problems are solved? What political networks are active in the organization, what alliances have they made, and what sorts of alliances are likely in the near future? Such questions are far more nuanced than the traditional ones about audience, purpose, and context. And it is only by turning to explicitly sociopolitical frameworks that we can answer them.

Conclusion

At various points in this commentary, I promised to return to the questions: What is audience? What is purpose? What is context? Briefly, audience, purpose, and context are categories that together form a rhetorically powerful heuristic. That heuristic draws its power from its simplicity: seemingly, the whole world can be drawn into the framework and categorized. And at a certain point in the writer's development—for instance, in a freshman-level composition course—this heuristic is exceedingly valuable. But as I have tried to show, this powerful heuristic is poorly suited to sociopolitical analysis, particularly of the internal workings of organizations. Thus the blind spot that I have discussed throughout this response.

More complex situational analyses require more complex analytical frameworks. Mirel has pointed us towards such frameworks, explicitly in earlier papers and more implicitly in "Product, Process, and Profit." Let's take advantage of these frameworks, both in our own work and in teaching them to our students.

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