Pseudotransactionality, Activity Theory, and Professional Writing Instruction

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Pseudotransactionality—writing that is patently designed by a student to meet teacher expectations rather than to perform the "real" function the teacher has suggested—is a problem that has frequently troubled writing teachers, especially professional writing teachers. This article attempts to analyze the problem from a sociohistorical perspective by using two Russian theoretical exports: (1) M. M. Bakhtin's concept of genre and (2) Vygotskian activity theory. The article concludes by suggesting how a sociohistorical perspective might help to counteract pseudotransactionality in the professional writing classroom.

Probably all teachers of professional writing have a dozen stories about *pseudotransactional writing*—that is, writing that is patently designed by a student to meet teacher expectations rather than to perform the "real" function the teacher has suggested. Let me begin this article by sharing such a story.

A few semesters ago, I asked students in my junior-level business communication class to write actual request letters to be sent to a genuine nonacademic audience. Students were given broad latitude in what they could write about: some chose to ask for information about a product, others wrote to realtors asking about the availability of housing, and so forth. The students were to hand in two copies of the letter along with a stamped, addressed envelope; I was to mail one copy of the letter to the audience and grade the other copy. The assignment was, of course, designed to be transactional—after all, it involved a "real" audience—yet as I graded the papers I was disappointed to see that the letters were a mix of transactional and pseudotransactional voices. The letters requesting product information, for instance, nearly all contained copious praise for those prod-

ucts. The letters requesting realty information explained in great detail *why* the students needed the information. In short, the letters tended to concentrate on verbal display at the expense of the brevity that usually characterizes such requests.

It is ironic that a supposedly transactional assignment brings out excesses of pseudotransactionality in students' papers. Yet, in retrospect, I suppose I should have expected it. In "Spinning Like a Kite: A Closer Look at the Pseudotransactional Function of Writing," Joseph Petraglia defines *transactional writing* as "that which does not pretend to function in any way other than it does" and *pseudotransactional writing* as "solely intended to meet teacher expectations rather than engage in a transference of information for the purposes of informing the uninformed or demonstrating mastery over content" (21). Petraglia sets up two poles here; my students' papers are situated somewhere in between them, but closer to the pseudotransactional pole than I would like.

Pseudotransactionality is a particular problem for professional writing instructors. After all, few students are expected to write a comparison-contrast essay or a theme on a controversial topic after they graduate. But students quite often have to be prepared to write professional documents during internships and in their post-graduation jobs. Most writing teachers want them to be prepared to write transactionally, just as future employers expect them to be prepared.

In this article, I explore the problem of pseudotransactionality through the lens of two related theoretical approaches, Bakhtinian genres and Vygotskian activity theory. The first part of this article elaborates on the two approaches and uses them to discuss why pseudotransactionality appears in the first place. The second part suggests how we can deal with pseudotransactional writing as we teach our students to write for their future workplaces.

Bakhtinian Genres

A growing number of scholars from various theoretical camps have embraced M. M. Bakhtin's concept of communication as sociohistorical rather than structural (e.g., Cole; Morson; Emerson; Wertsch; Berkenkotter and Huckin; Kent, "Hermeneutics"; Brady). For instance, externalists such as Thomas Kent view communication as "a hermeneutic guessing game" that cannot be reduced simply to a "grammar or theory of cognition" (*Paralogic Rhetoric* 158). Kent sees in Bakhtin's concept of genre a way to describe this uncodifiable activity (166), since genres "cannot be reduced to a set of conventional elements that function together as a structural or organic whole" ("Hermeneutics" 295). Similarly, sociocognitivists Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin view genres as "dynamic rhetori-

cal forms" that "change over time in response to their users' sociocognitive needs" (4) and must be evaluated in terms of those needs.

In the Bakhtinian conception, genres evolve under pressure from two forces: history and addressivity. *History* influences the genre because each genre evolves from a previous genre (see, for instance, Voloshinov 68, 86, 93), and that previous genre exerts some pressure on what the new genre looks and acts like, even if the individual writers are unaware of the history of the genre (Ritva Engeström 202).

Addressivity also influences the genre: each genre evolves to fit a new activity that might be similar to yet different from the activity that the old genre responded to (Medvedev/Bakhtin 132; Kent, "Hermeneutics" 299). The genre cannot be separated from the activity to which it responds; it only makes sense in localized "spheres of human activity and communication" (Bakhtin 64; see also 65). Genres clue us in to what hermeneutic strategies we might successfully employ to understand an utterance *in a particular activity* (Kent, "Hermeneutics" 301-02).

Thus, genre is formed by the meeting of history—the past genres from which the present genre evolved—and addressivity—the changes that language users make to the genre in response to events. As Charles Bazerman puts it, "the regularities that appear in the genre come from the very historical presence of the emerging genre," but "each new text produced within a genre reinforces or remolds some aspect of the genre" (8) because each new text responds to a localized set of circumstances and a localized activity, and that response itself becomes a part of the genre's history. Berkenkotter and Huckin also stress the role of activity: "both genres and genre knowledge are more sharply and richly defined to the extent that they are *localized* (in both time and place)" (13-14). That is, although genres are influenced by the general features that their histories provide them, those features might be dropped or altered in localized instances of the genres because of the localized events to which they respond. (See Yates and Orlikowski for an example of how one genre, that of the memorandum, has evolved since its inception in response to various events).

To analyze how genres evolve, then, we—and students—need a sociohistorical approach to analyzing particular workplaces, one that allows us to see how both history and addressivity shape genres within those workplaces. One suitable approach is activity theory.

Activity Theory

Activity theory has its roots in L. S. Vygotsky's circle in the 1920s and was further developed by Vygotsky's colleagues A. N. Leont'ev and A. R. Luria (Raeithel 396). Although activity theory has its roots

in Marxism, it also was apparently influenced by the non-Marxist ideas of the Bakhtinian circle: the contemporaries Vygotsky and Bakhtin never cite each other, but some commonalities are evident (Emerson 27), and many scholars have connected the Bakhtinian concept of genre with activity theory (Davydov and Radzikhovskii; Emerson; Ritva Engeström; Yrjö Engeström, *Interactive Expertise*; Morson; Prior; Wertsch). Among the commonalities are, of course, an awareness of history and of social interaction.

Activity theory uses a unit of analysis that I will term an *activity network* (AN). In an activity network, one or more *subjects* use a *tool* to achieve an *object(ive)* (Russell) that results in an *outcome*. The activity itself is the cyclical transformation of an object (Yrjö Engeström, *Learning* 78). Perhaps the best way to explain this unit of analysis is through an extended illustration (figure 1).

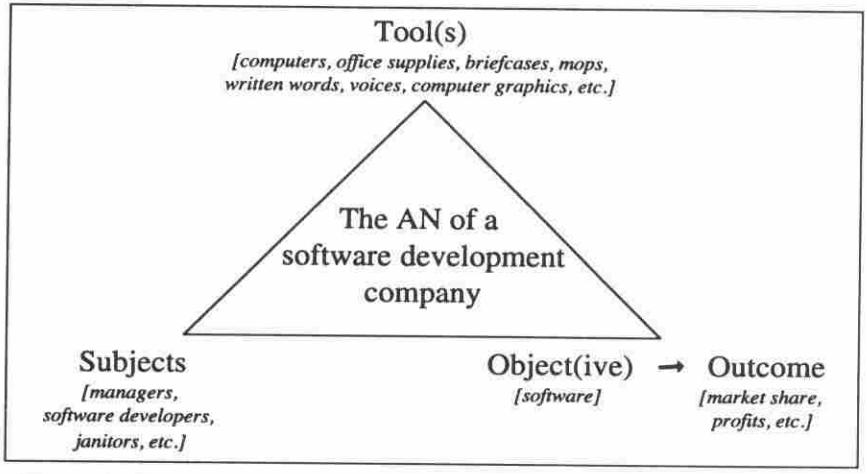

Figure 1. The activity network of a software development company.

In figure 1, the *subjects* are the people who are engaged in the AN, that is, those who carry on the activity of the institution. Although they perform different jobs and thus different actions—for instance, programmers generally program and janitors generally clean—those actions contribute to the institution's *object(ive)*: software (Russell 53). The object(ive) has a double meaning, because it refers both to the object to be transformed and to the objective of transforming it, an objective that elicits different actions from different people within the AN. As the institution transforms the object (in this case, by developing and releasing new versions of a particular software package), it achieves a continually occurring *outcome*. Here, outcomes might include accrual of market share and profits.

The subjects mediate the transformation of the object through their use of *tools*. Here, the tools are both physical (computers, office

supplies, briefcases, mops) and semiotic (written words, voices, computer graphics). And just as physical tools have evolved to address certain activities, so have semiotic tools. "Variance in semiotic tools" stabilized through typical use, Russell suggests, "may be called *genre*" (54).

Like variance in other kinds of tools, genres have evolved under the pressure of history and addressivity. History can be seen both as institutional (the way an AN's genres have evolved) and individual (how a person's experience with particular genres has shaped that person's use of the genres). Addressivity can similarly be seen as institutional (the strategies an institution employs to handle recurring events) and individual (how an individual adapts a genre to address particular needs). Different ANs can use the same tools in their different activities, but those tools will be used differently and will tend to evolve differently to meet the different needs of the subjects.

Naturally, a genre that has evolved in a particular AN—our mythical company, for instance—will differ significantly from a similar genre in another AN, such as that of a professional writing classroom.

Classroom and Workplace Activity Networks

Professional writing classrooms tend to attempt to replicate the activity network of the workplace through various means: having students participate in simulations (Freedman et al.); asking students to write in response to extended case studies (Driskill 42; Rozumalski and Graves); asking industry professionals to set assignments, give lectures, lead field trips, and evaluate papers (Hart and Glick-Smith); and engaging students in actual writing opportunities (Mansfield; Hill and Resnick; MacKinnon; Anson and Forsberg; Lutz). The latter sometimes results in documents that might even be used in industry (Reither 202-3).

Nevertheless, many agree that these efforts have limited success, primarily because for the students, classrooms are not workplaces (Reither 205; Mansfield 72; Freedman et al.). Each classroom and each workplace is a different AN. We cannot replicate "the workplace" because each workplace is different, just as each class is different. Granted, some of these ANs are parts of larger activity networks and therefore share some similarities—for instance, software development companies tend to use tools similarly because they belong to the same industry—and they may use tools in ways similar to the ways participants in computer science classes do, since those students are pursuing the object(ive) of entering the software development AN. Figure 2 shows a simplified relationship between the activity networks of a computer science classroom and a future employer; if we wanted to pursue a broader analysis, we could conflate these two into a larger

activity network (that of "software development") in which a more diverse set of subjects uses a more diverse set of tools to transform a more general object(ive).

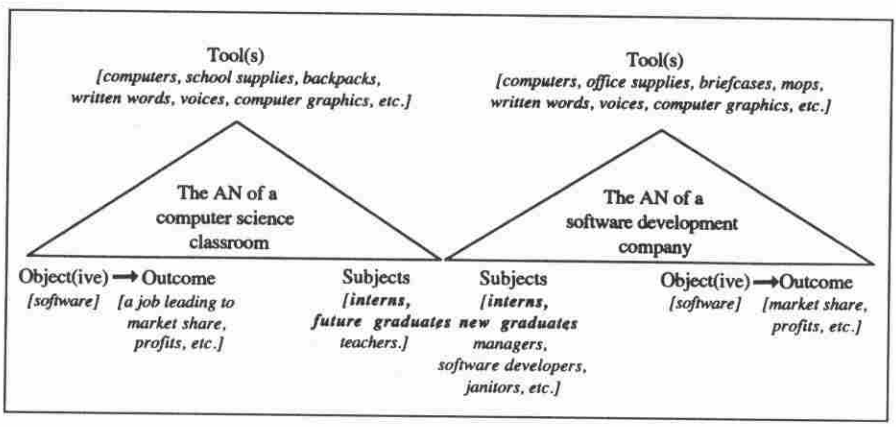

Figure 2. Two activity networks—the student's program of study and future employer.

As Anne Herrington points out, "each classroom presents a community in its own right, situated at once in two larger communities: a school and a disciplinary community" (333). Yet our professional writing classrooms attempt to teach future engineers, foresters, architects, botanists, and chemists as well as future computer science students. Each of these students is trying to join a community or AN that has evolved "standard" genres that meet its particular needs and reflect its particular history. That AN may contain several other ANs whose tools differ to meet *their* particular needs and reflect *their* particular genres.

To their credit, many if not most professional writing teachers realize that their students' future workplaces are too diverse to imitate in a single course, but they sometimes have trouble helping their students grapple with learning another AN's tools in a way meaningful to the ANs that those students are trying to enter.

One result is pseudotransactionality, which can be seen as a sort of overarching genre developed to facilitate certain object(ive)s of the writing course AN. Pseudotransactionality, to put it another way, can be conceived as a bundle of habits that a writer uses to achieve an object(ive). When a writer attempts to learn a new genre composed of a new set of habits, the old habits can interfere, as in the case of an engineering student who found himself writing in a workplace setting during an internship:

> Jason evidently anticipated an audience that would evaluate his text based upon its correctness. That is, he saw a writer/audience relationship that echoed a common student/teacher relationship.

> Partly this was because Mark was to some degree functioning like his teacher. But partly it was also because until this point he had probably seldom or never written for anyone who wasn't a teacher. His entire experience of writing fit into that mode. (Winsor 25)

The student's past encounters with a genre and awareness of the teacher's goals cannot help but affect the genre's form. What results is a genre adapted for meeting the object(ive)s of the particular classroom AN in which the student writes, not the object(ive)s of a particular workplace. And, as the quote above points out, such a genre can take some time to unlearn.

Researchers have long recognized that classroom ANs tend to have object(ive)s that are quite different from those of workplace ANs. For instance, Freedman et al. claim that "classroom writing" and "workplace writing" have four basic differences (Table 1).

Table 1

Differences between classroom and workplace writing, according to Freedman et al.

Classroom Writing	Workplace Writing
Epistemic: For its own end.	*Instrumental*: For a separate end.
Writer-oriented: Focused on the writer's knowledge or skill. A rhetorical display.	*Reader-oriented*: Focused on how it affects the reader.
Ephemeral: Exists/is used only for a brief time.	*Continued*: Exists/is used indefinitely.
Evaluated: The reader has no stake in the document's success and therefore merely evaluates the document.	*Collaborated on*: The reader has a stake in the document's success and therefore collaborates with the writer.

Typically, a workplace writer's documents are for multiple audiences within an organization (Forsberg 46); they are part of a dialogue with a community of peers (Odell 19). In marked contrast, students' writing is clearly shaped by a very different relationship with a single reader (Freedman et al. 202, 204; Forsberg 45; Petraglia 24) and is primarily epistemic, that is, aimed towards producing tangible evidence of the students' competence as measured by the teacher's criteria (Reither 201-02). And students know that teachers typically will attempt to evaluate them all using the same static set of criteria—something that is usually not true in the workplace. This is not to deny that some writing assignments can include all of the characteristics of workplace writing, but we must be aware that students are *also*

addressing the activity of classroom writing, and that activity inevitably affects the forms of their utterances. The resulting versions of the genre are pseudotransactional: they have evolved to accomplish the goals of a specific classroom rather than those of the workplace that the classroom supposedly emulates.

Although teachers may be able to spot the characteristics of pseudotransactionality in a particular document, they might not be able to accurately predict what writing strategies will work better for a workplace AN. In fact, students are in many ways better prepared to evaluate their workplace genres than their teachers because of their interaction with related ANs. Dorothy Winsor, for instance, finds that her four research subjects "learned to write like engineers at work largely by trying to function within the engineering community" (19) during their internships.

Even within their coursework, however, students are learning how to function within their "communities" or ANs. Students studying computer science, for instance, are studying to enter that particular discipline or AN, an AN that encompasses both classes and workplaces. This AN has certain object(ive)s that shape its tools. For instance, the needs of this AN have produced the genre of the software development plan, a genre that tends to be telegraphic, have a highly articulated outline, and use visual genres such as finite state diagrams. This genre tends to be quite concise and organized compared to many other workplace genres.

Now suppose that an English teacher unfamiliar with the computer science AN tries to help a computer science student with a proposal, which includes a software development plan. The teacher is probably not familiar with the genre the student is using or the AN that most strongly influences the student's document, and may thus tend to give advice that will not be as successful. For instance, the teacher might advise the student to elaborate on a certain section, or to be less obvious about the document's structure. In a classroom AN, this unfamiliarity with workplace ANs may lead to nothing more than the student shrugging her or his shoulders and revising the document to make the teacher happy—sort of a rhetorical detour in the student's education, something that may not actually hurt (although it probably will not help either).

If, on the other hand, the student takes the advice to heart—and judging by the number of people who are unwilling to break meaningless rules about placing conjunctions at the beginning of a sentence or splitting infinitives, this is a real danger—then that student could be negatively affected by the teacher's advice. The advice becomes part of the student's personal history with the genre; it becomes a habit that the student will have to unlearn as she or he continues in the computer science AN.

To sum up, although a teacher may have greater knowledge of

general hermeneutic strategies (or at least what the AN of technical writing instruction constructs as general hermeneutic strategies), she or he knows less about the student's AN, and therefore may give advice that directly *contradicts* the object(ive)s of the AN.

Encouraging Students to Enter Workplace Activity Networks

If we accept the claim that genre evolution is constrained (although never fully determined) by addressivity and history, pedagogical implications follow. Below, I attempt to outline a few ways to encourage students as they write within various activity networks.

First, as Reed Way Dasenbrock suggests (29), we should teach the various systemic elements of communication, the common habits that are often collected into professional writing genres, descriptively rather than prescriptively—that is, sociohistorically. I am thinking specifically of *genre habits that are rhetorically effective in most relevant ANs*—habits such as including certain information in the heading of a memorandum, for instance, or inserting an abstract at the beginning of an experimental article. We should be able to explain not just *what* the habits associated with a common professional genre are, but also *why* those habits have historically built up and *why* they have evolved differently for different ANs. Resources here might include sociohistorical research on the genre, such as Yates and Orlikowski's research on the memorandum or Bazerman's on the experimental article. As we teach genres as collections of habits, we should append the caveat that they are *similar* to the genres writers might use in certain activities, not templates that writers *universally* follow or that are automatically successful. That is, we should continue to require of the students the actions of evaluating and writing that they traditionally perform in our classroom, but encourage them to examine the specific object(ive)s that are addressed by *their* disciplines' genres.

Second, we can ask students to take part in an AN outside of the English classroom, perhaps as apprentices, interns, or participants in a workplace (see Mansfield; Hill and Resnick; MacKinnon; Anson and Forsberg; Lutz) or as students in a program of professional education in their chosen field (Ackerman; Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman; Bazerman; Britt et al.; Herrington; Kent, *Paralogic Rhetoric*; McCarthy). The particular AN is not necessarily important: the point is not for the students to learn general "writing" skills, but rather to learn how to examine and appropriate localized genres and how to understand their uses in that AN. They should not expect to pick up merely a list of conventions. Rather, they should analyze the sociohistorical actions within that AN, because those actions strongly influence the genres that are used within those ANs. Such an analysis

might involve shadowing workplace professionals; interviewing writers; recounting particular incidents found relevant to their writing; examining previous documents to determine why they were or were not successful; ferreting out the object(ive)s of the AN and of related ANs; and determining how the student's own documents address those object(ive)s.

Such analyses can benefit not only the individual students but also the entire class: students can share their experiences, as various scholars have suggested (see Anson and Forsberg; Spilka). Thus, students can learn from each other how their activity networks shape the genres used within them. By reflecting on and sharing their experiences, students can demonstrate to each other the variations within workplaces, and as a result may begin to see genres as vital and evolving.

Finally, students can rhetorically analyze the workplace documents that they and others produce within their workplace ANs, explaining their rhetorical choices. Such rhetorical analyses would be transactional, because they do not pretend to be other than what they are. Additionally, rhetorical analyses fall within the focus of the teacher's field: the collection of habits into genres, the forming of utterances. Such an arrangement lets the teacher off the hook. No longer does the teacher have to judge the workplace document, a document whose genre addresses an AN that the teacher does not fully share and therefore cannot fully evaluate.

Implications

Some readers may be wondering at this point whether I view professional writing as something that must be learned entirely within the AN for which it is intended. Not at all. As Anson and Forsberg demonstrate in their study of interns, participating in an AN does not necessarily teach one the skills necessary to succeed within it. Simply immersing a student in a workplace AN is a bit like the old method of teaching a child to swim by throwing him or her in a lake: the method might often work, but the price of failure could be quite high. At the same time, the traditional approach of teaching students generalized communication strategies without reference to localized ANs will not help much either, as Thomas Kent takes pains to demonstrate in the last chapter of *Paralogic Rhetoric*.

In this article, I have argued that students should join other ANs and use the professional writing classroom as a forum for discussing them and as an opportunity to examine their practices. By involving students in a localized AN, we can encourage them to write transactionally and to learn *how to learn* genres.

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