

## The Development of Transitional Writers: The Role of Identification Strategies in Workplace Writing Competence<sup>1</sup>

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The writing processes of professional writers in organizational settings have been studied, from a variety of perspectives, in both academic and nonacademic settings. These various studies of professional writing have contributed to our thinking about a developmental, sociocultural model of the adult writer in professional and workplace settings. Such a model necessarily entails theorizing the diverse and often tacit organizational constraints of workplace culture (e.g. as a “community of practice”<sup>2</sup>) and their effects on the writer’s goals and strategies. Some research focuses on writers employed within specific workplace settings,<sup>3</sup> often exploring the enculturation of new employees into workplace genres;<sup>4</sup> and some follow the transitional writer entering an

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<sup>1</sup>An early version of this paper was presented at the Conference of the Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge UP, 1998). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text.

<sup>3</sup>L. Odell and D. Goswami, eds., *Writing in Nonacademic Settings* (New York: Guilford, 1985); J. Selzer, “The Composing Processes of an Engineer.” *CCC* 34 (1983): 178-187; A. Pare, “Discourse Regulations and the Production of Knowledge,” *Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives*, ed. R. Spilka. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993) 111-123; C. Herndl, B. Fennell, and C. Miller, “Understanding Failures in Organizational Discourse: The Accident at Three Mile Island and the Shuttle *Challenger* Disaster,” *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*, eds. C. Bazerman and J. Paradis (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1991). 279-305.

<sup>4</sup>J. MacKinnon, “Becoming a Rhetor: Developing Writing Ability in a Mature, Writing-Intensive Organization,” *Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives*, ed. R. Spilka. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993) 41-55; G. Smart, “Genre as Community Invention: A Central Bank’s Response to its Executives’ Expectations as Readers,” *Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives*, ed. R. Spilka (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993) 124-140. Subsequent references for MacKinnon appear parenthetically in text.

academic discipline.<sup>5</sup> Other studies focus on the differences between student-writers and professional writers.<sup>6</sup> Less common are studies of transitional writers (between the classroom and workplace) in nonacademic settings. Lutz's study of student-writers and organizational culture in a coop placement is one example.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Kastman Breuch<sup>8</sup> has reported on the types of behaviours and relationships student writers develop with clients for whom they are doing research reports; Wickliff<sup>9</sup> has reported survey results that provide evidence of the long-term values of client-based group projects in technical communication courses; and Freedman is currently completing research into genre acquisition by students in work placements.<sup>10</sup>

Such work has reinvigorated discussion of important issues for professional writing instruction, such as what can be taught explicitly, what can be acquired only tacitly, and how a transitional learning environment might be structured to induce tacit knowledge. For example, in their exploration of the differences between workplace and classroom learning processes and learning environments, Dias et al. (1999) probe the pedagogical constraints of classroom instruction and the possibilities of creating productive transitional spaces. In addressing these

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<sup>5</sup>C. Berkenkotter, T. Huckin, and J. Ackermann, "Social Context and Socially Constructed Texts: The Initiation of a Graduate Student into a Writing Research Community," *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*, ed. Bazerman and Paradis (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1991) 191-215; J. Giltrow and M. Valiquette, "Genres and Knowledge: Students Writing in the Disciplines," *Learning and Teaching Genre*, eds. A. Freedman and P. Medway (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, 1994) 47-61.

<sup>6</sup>A. Freedman and C. Adam, "Learning to Write Professionally: 'Situated Learning' and the Transition from University to Professional Discourse." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 10.4 (Oct.1996): 395-427; A. Freedman, C. Adam, and G. Smart, "Wearing Suits to Class: Simulating Genres and Simulations as Genre." *Written Communication*. 11 (1994): 192-226; P. Dias, A. Freedman, P. Medway, and A. Pare, *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text.

<sup>7</sup>J. Lutz, "Writers in Organizations and How They Learn the Image: Theory, Research, and Implications," *Worlds of Writing*, ed. Matalene (New York: Random House, 1989) 113-134.

<sup>8</sup>L. Kastman Breuch, "The Overruled Dust Mite: Preparing Technical Communication Students to Interact with Clients," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 10.2 (Spring 2001): 193-210. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text.

<sup>9</sup>G. Wickliff, "Assessing the Value of Client-Based Group Projects in an Introductory Technical Communication Course," *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 11.2 (1997): 170-192.

<sup>10</sup>A. Freedman, "Catching the Wave: Rhetorical Genre Studies in 2001," Draft of Conference Presentation: Oslo Genre Symposium, 2001. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text.

issues, they have drawn their theoretical principles from rhetorical genre studies<sup>11</sup> and the concept of a “community of practice” as a “learning community” — that environment designed to create a “zone of proximal development” for learners, where they can interact with experts as “legitimate peripheral participants”.<sup>12</sup>

The framework for this paper also emerges from rhetorical genre studies and the concept of authentic participation, and, within this conceptual frame, focuses on transitional writers and the acquisition of effective “identification” strategies,<sup>13</sup> a key factor in meeting the needs of a multiple, organizational audience. In this paper the concept of “identification” is Burkean, from his elaboration of the Aristotelian appeal to pathos into audience identification, on the one hand, and division or separation from “the other,” on the other. Burke’s development of this concept as a rhetorical strategy anticipates the more “consubstantial” or empathic turn of Rogerian rhetoric. The central hypothesis of this paper is that the ability to achieve identification, especially where differences persist, depends on understanding the rhetorical situation from inside a subculture. By focusing on identification as a unit of analysis, I hope to learn how identification strategies operate in organizational contexts and how they influence genre performance.

The transitional writers in this study are writing students who have studied the basics of professional writing through formal instruction and are now, midway through their program, engaged in a major workplace writing project that they undertake for the course, “Researched

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<sup>11</sup>A. Freedman, “Catching the Wave: Rhetorical Genre Studies in 2001.” (Draft of Conference Presentation: Oslo Genre Symposium, 2001); C. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly J. of Speech* 70 (1984): 151-167.

<sup>12</sup>E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1998); J. Lave and E. Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1991); J. Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991); M. Cole and Y. Engestrom, “A Cultural-historical Approach to Distributed Cognition,” *Distributed Cognitions: Psychological and Education Considerations*, ed. G. Salomon (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1993) 1-46. See also R. Burnett, “Decision-Making during the Collaborative Planning of Coauthors,” *Hearing Ourselves Think: Cognitive Research in the College Writing Classroom*, eds. A. Penrose and B. Sitko (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 126-146, for recommendations on creating a classroom-based zone of proximal development for learning collaborative skills. Subsequent references for Lave and Wenger appear parenthetically in text.

<sup>13</sup>K. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1962). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text.

Reporting.” This semester long research project is to be completed for a nonacademic organization. For most students, this is an unfamiliar genre. As fledgling consultants, they are destined to acquire only a partial knowledge of the client organization. Such transitional writers have been described by some as not yet fully “rhetorically mature”.<sup>14</sup> Hudson depicts such learners as occupying a “multidimensional space” because they are responding “simultaneously” to more than one community.<sup>15</sup> The influence of such a mixture of genres and communities is seen to account for the appearance of inappropriate rhetorical features in the documents produced by transitional writers. It is likely that their difficulties, such as construing the target genre in its full situatedness, will occur unless a writer is initiated into and supported within the organizational context by central members of a community of practice. Such support requires both access to an organization and membership. Whereas access is usually available to new employees, for the transitional student-writer it can be difficult to become recognized as a legitimate participant of a working community, and then to be invited in. Membership can also be blocked by the influence of school culture, by its genres and practices of evaluation (Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare). The school context and its imperatives can act as impediments to achieving the attenuated attention to organizational practices that is necessary for the creation of authentic legitimate peripheral participation. A local analysis of how transitional student-writers realize specific rhetorical features, here “identification” strategies, in their written products should point towards and help explain how such features are learned and how context functions in genre acquisition.

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<sup>14</sup>J. MacKinnon, “Becoming a Rhetori: Developing Writing Ability in a Mature, Writing-Intensive Organization.” *Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives*, ed. R. Spilka. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993) 41-55; C. Miller, “Response to Elizabeth Tebeaux,” *CE* 41.7 (1980): 825-827.

<sup>15</sup>R. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1980) 142-143.

This study set out to examine how transitional students employ identification strategies, how their approaches to identification are related to organizational knowledge, and what implications there might be for writing pedagogy. Briefly, the findings revealed that the transitional writers I observed did not always successfully negotiate their goals with those of their readers because they lacked the rhetorical maturity necessary to adapt strategies of identification that fit their client's organizational culture. Evidence of student strategizing and audience reception suggests that, for those students who were not successful in creating satisfactory identification, barriers to access and participation with members of the organization contributed to gaps and misconstruals of organizational knowledge, and that some of this knowledge seems to be "tacit" and not susceptible to explicit instruction.

The following sections provide a brief background of the writing program students were enrolled in (including a description of the research report course and the assignment) and the methods used to collect data (for both textual and oral evidence). I describe three client organizations and the respective purposes of each research project and then report and discuss the results of the study in order to analyze the identification strategies students adopted in the context of their construals of organizational knowledge. In the concluding section I discuss the implications this study may have for a developmental model of professional writing competence in organizational contexts and for professional writing pedagogy.

## **1. Background**

The participants in this study were six professional writing students (working in pairs) and three representatives of the client organizations who worked with the students, first negotiating with them a suitable research question, and then providing ongoing feedback. A description of the

writing program and the assignment will help develop a portrait of these six transitional writers and go some way to explain the situation they found themselves in when they undertook this research project.

The professional writing diploma program has been offered for ten years now at a community college. It is a two-year, five-semester program, generally characterized as a post-degree or post-basic professional program. Students' ages range from early twenties to late fifties, and they come with a diverse background of experience: many have been writing for a living, many have an undergraduate degree, some have advanced degrees, and some are making a career change. In addition to the application of standard entrance requirements, they are interviewed by the program coordinator and dean, write an entry-level writing assessment, and submit a portfolio of their writing. The program is very intensive and requires a major commitment on the part of students. Curriculum is designed to provide a combination of practice (manual production, desktop and electronic media, interpersonal relations, personal narrative, and professional readiness) and theory (writing, communications, document design, public relations). Half-way through the program students complete an extended work placement. Most graduate as accomplished professional writers, and many find suitable work shortly after graduation. Others may have to wait six months or so, but eventually they too find employment that meets their expectations.

The research project is the major assignment in a second-semester course, "Researched Reporting." Of the first semester courses designed to help prepare students for the second semester, those specifically relevant to the research report include an interpersonal communications course, a research methods course, and a course in workplace writing that introduces students to rhetorical genre theory, reception theories of meaning, and sentence-level stylistics. The research report is the dominant writing task in the course, with the additional

requirements of satellite documents — an initial proposal report and two progress reports. Students complete these reports collaboratively with a self-selected partner. Required research activities include an extensive literature review and the use of at least three different but appropriate empirical methods. Two analytical essays are also required as supports for writing the reports: one is a genre analysis of four organization-based research reports students must find for themselves (completed by groups of three or four); the other is an analysis of the culture of their client organization (completed independently). The course involves readings on readability, genre theory, and issues facing students writing for client organizations. Students are introduced to the report assignment at the end of the first semester, so they have time to search for and secure a client who is enthusiastic about the project, who can identify an authentic research problem, and who can be available as an “insider-expert” for feedback on drafts, access to employees, customers, and documents, and consultation when necessary. Usually one of the two students in each collaborative pair has a relationship with the client organization, and acts as a go-between for the other partner.

## **2. Method**

This study is based on accounts of report production and reception, over an 18 week period, by six student-writers and three organizational clients, who as “insider-experts” became the “readers” of drafts. Rhetorical analysis of the documents produced for the project also provided relevant data. As is customary in the course, each pair of students completed the research project for an organizational client. Accounts from client readers were elicited through interviews (some discourse-based), questionnaires, and think-aloud comments; accounts from the student-writers were elicited through interviews and questionnaires. Unsolicited commentary

from students was also included in the data. Rhetorical analysis was applied to the initial proposal, two progress reports, an organizational culture analysis (an essay), and the final report. Interviews and questionnaires focused on student-writers' knowledge of the organization's culture, readers' assessments of the writers' organizational knowledge, writers' accounts of their textual strategies, and readers' responses to the reports. Over the 14-week semester, students visited the organization, met with their "insider-expert," other employees and managers, and sometimes the organization's own clients or customers. The regularity and degree of contact with the client organization varied, depending on client availability and research needs. Suffice to say, students were admitted varying degrees of access to the culture and community.

### **3. The Organizations**

The three participating organizations reflect the kind of diversity one might imagine a writing consultant would encounter: an established little league soccer association, a community school administered jointly by a provincial ministry and a local school board, and a national student press. Each report focused on an organizational problem that had been negotiated by the pair of writers and client-reader as important and addressable. For each report these negotiated goals and salient aspects of the situational context are described briefly here to give a sense of the rhetorical situation students were responding to, the organizational culture that they had to "read" in order to produce an appropriate response, and what access they had to the organization as a community of practice. The names of organizations have been changed or made generic to protect confidentiality.

The purpose of the research report for the little league soccer association was to investigate "the need for increased legal liability insurance and professional legal counsel"



because the organization had “recently been troubled by the threat of legal action against the organization and its volunteer members.” The soccer association is a volunteer organization (one of 37 in the province) whose “objectives are to control (regulate) [little league soccer] and to promote an active interest in [little league soccer] for youth...in the City” (final report). The report was “confidential,” intended only for members of the executive of the soccer league “who are voters responsible for decision making and changes within the association”(proposal). In their final report, the writers recommend seeking legal counsel to ensure liability insurance is sufficient, using alternative dispute resolutions for handling internal disputes, and improving communications between coaches, players, parents, and administrators. One of the students, who had been involved with the organization for nine years as a “soccer parent,” had fairly accessible, regular contact with the insider-expert; the other student had only sporadic contact and relied on the first for communication.

The writers of the second report, for a national student press, cited their purpose is to investigate “the problem of how to increase student newspaper satisfaction with its advertising arm” (proposal), especially in the western region of the country. It is suggested that advertising decisions tend to favour certain centres of the country, and disadvantage the western region. The students identify their readership as follows: the western regional coordinator, the regional advertising representative, a member of the commission that reviews the advertising department (progress report), and “anybody associated with [the national student press], who will have access to our report either over the listserver or at the next [annual] conference” (proposal). In their final report, their main recommendation is that the “advertising body of the [national student press], in conjunction with the [provincial] student newspapers, form a commission for the next [annual regional] convention.” They recommend that the “commission will be charged with the goal of

creating an action plan” in order to address “the issue of advertising revenue lost in [the province] due to mishandling, unorganization [sic], or lack of representation” (executive summary). Both students were working as writers and editors on their own college student newspaper, which is a member of the national student press, and both had attended regional and national conventions of the national press organization. One student was considering running for the position of [national student press] liaison. They had easy access to members and sources within the organization at the regional level.

A third pair of students undertook to investigate “the causes for the low enrollment of programs at [the] Community School,” to report on “comparative models of successful community school initiatives,” and to make recommendations (letter of transmittal, final report). To clarify, a community school is distinct from a mainstream public school for, in addition to the regular school programs, it offers community programs geared to improve student success. For example, after regular classroom hours end, students can participate in activities such as aerobics classes, day trips, and craft workshops. Community school programs are typically government funded and targeted towards families in low-income communities. The writers identify one of the challenges to the school as its “multi-organizational structure” and “diverse group of individuals” (executive summary). In their proposal they document a very complex readership that includes the coordinator of the community school (their insider-expert), members of the community school’s facilitation team, and the principal and staff of the elementary school, which shares facilities and resources with the community school. They note that parents are also potential readers. They report that their “most pressing obstacle is the severe lack of communication at [the school] between faculty, administration, the parent advisory committee, community school coordinator, and the parents themselves.” In the final report they recommend that the community

school “create an awareness of potential internal resistance multi-organizational initiatives face, bring parents into the school, and develop a long range administrative plan” (executive summary). One of the students was a current member of the executive of the parent advisory committee and had children attending both the elementary school and the community school. She had ongoing and active involvement with the organization and made efforts to bring her partner into a comfortable working relationship with the insider-expert and others within the organization.

A summary list of the three organizations, research problems, and insider-experts is provided in Table 1.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Problem/Issue</b>	<b>Insider-Expert (reader)</b>
Little League Soccer Association	The feasibility of developing measures such as liability insurance in the event of a lawsuit (e.g. by parents)	Second VP of Executive
Community School	The viability of programs offered by the community school, in light of low enrollments and tensions with the elementary school that houses and competes with community school programs for space and other resources	Community School Coordinator
National Student Pres	Dissatisfaction with its advertising department, partly based on a perception of regional inequities	Western Regional Coordinator

Table 1. The Three Client Organizations, Research Issues, and Insider-Experts (Readers)

#### 4. Results

In this section, I provide overviews of the findings for each report project in the form of three scenarios: “The unaddressed reader,” “A good story at the reader’s expense,” and

“Identification.” These scenarios are followed by a detailed discussion of the thinking and strategies that seem to have formed the basis for the students’ approaches to audience and thus for their overall identification strategy.

Not surprisingly, I discovered that the insider-experts (client-readers) placed paramount importance upon a “friendly” reception of the report by the primary, intended readers — it was from this perspective that they judged the writers’ research and textual strategies. Consistency with their expectations evoked comments such as “good” and “right”; deviations from these expectations evoked concern, negative comments such as “not sensitive” and “not true,” and judgmental questions about the inclusion of potentially inflammatory content. For their part, the writers also regarded their audience’s expectations as important, but not always as paramount: sometimes, they heeded one component of their audience and de-emphasized the needs of another (“other readers”), and sometimes they did not accurately anticipate certain expectations, apparently construing their audience and exigence in terms of factors either not salient to the audience or to some other genre feature. There is evidence of three different types of responses: (1) writers who did not address their readers’ expectations; they dismissed or ignored their readers’ needs; (2) writers who misconstrued their audience because they employed inappropriate strategies borrowed from another, incompatible genre; and (3) writers who met their readers’ expectations through an effective strategy of identification. In one case, the soccer association report, there is evidence of problems arising from both problems with audience recognition and genre interference. The following organizes the findings into three scenarios that summarize students’ strategies and their clients’ responses.

#### *4.1 The Unaddressed Reader: The Soccer Association Report*

From the beginning the writers of the soccer association report tended to focus on the problem of “violence” in the sport. They recommended, in this negative context, improved training and behaviour of the association’s coaches as the best approach to addressing the liability issue, whereas the Vice-President wanted them to focus on an investigation of liability insurance and other legal aspects of protecting the association. This difference in priorities was first identified as a problem in the initial proposal where the students referred to “a recent incident involving suspension of a player and indiscreet actions on the part of the coach.” While the students considered the recent case important (because it had moved the Board to consider liability insurance in the first place), the Board judged it as having such negative significance that its potential political impact required omitting mention of it. Instead of heeding the VP’s direction, in the first progress report the students included newspaper clippings about the case and violence in the sport in general, featuring a coaching expert’s comments, with a summary and quotations from their own interview with this expert.

In response, the VP expressed serious concern. According to the students, she apparently defended the organization and called into question the character of the coaching expert whose comments had been cited. In a second progress report, when the writers again focused on coaching and violence and dismissed the option of buying legal liability because of the expense, the VP redirected them, in written comments, back to the question of liability insurance: “Please include the recommendation of buying legal liability insurance. Whatever the cost (I’m sure we will obtain figures from...), it will be discussed and voted on by the Executive.” The instructor also gave the students advice: “Your reader is expressing a strong need and expectation here — she seems concerned you may be losing this focus.” In the final report the violence issue still dominated over the liability option. In an interview afterwards, the VP indicated she found the

emphasis on “violence” and coaches” to be “unsuitable.” To the recommendation to “take all possible measures to discourage violence,” she responded, “We already to this — discourage violence,” and wondered why this recommendation was in the report, “since the whole [region] teaches heads-up already.” On the report itself, she had simply written: “Lastly, will the adoption of these...recommendations eliminate our need for liability insurance? I don’t think so!”

On another issue, explicit disagreement arose over recommendations regarding parent participation. In the first progress report, the writers had urged more parent incentives for volunteer participation in the association. The VP responded that parents already have incentives:

I believe that rewards are that usually your child likes the parent to be involved and share their enthusiasm (much like school activities). Other rewards are that you get to meet many new and nice people — just like I met [the writer’s partner]! — and these people are your social life for the season. There are team parties, travel to out-of-town tournaments, etc., even some fund-raising events are fun — car washes, garage sales. Another “reward” is that if you do your “job” well, it improves things for the kids and Association. I guess these are all emotional rewards, not monetary. The only perk the Exec gets is a Christmas dinner!

In the second progress report, the writers reiterated the recommendation for greater parent participation. Obviously frustrated, the VP explained again why this was an inappropriate focus:

Each parent (family) is told at the parent/coach meeting that they will have a duty to do on the team — some do this better than others — how can you force people to do jobs?...[The] bottom line...[is that] you can’t force parents to do voluntary work, if they are forced to do it, it’s not done correctly, or they cause trouble. So

what really happens, the parents that want to do it and enjoy doing the work take over the others' jobs — then get criticized for it!

At this point, after discussions with the students, the instructor advised them to “take into consideration these constraints [as above on volunteers] on any recommendations” they make. In the final report, instead of the parent participation recommendation the students made recommendations for a job description for parent volunteers and improved communication about violence to parents. There was no response from the VP on this change.

#### *4.2 A “Good Story” at the Reader’s Expense: The National Student Press Report*

The writers of the report for the national student press also encountered problems with reception, but for different reasons. The regional coordinator, their insider-expert and reader, found certain elements in the final report inappropriate and counter-productive. In an interview she cited undue negativity, inaccuracy, and an undesirable generality in the recommendations. The students had conveyed disparaging and negative judgments of members of the newspaper coalition, who are largely volunteers. They quote a member of the executive they interviewed who declares that “at least a certain percentage of people who are hired at [the press] are complete washouts.” They say elsewhere that “everyone [in the press] complains about [the advertising department].” And, in backgrounding the organization, they report that the former liaison officer [between the advertising department and the press] “ran off and got married to the then president of [the press].” The Coordinator was particularly disturbed by a reference to the apparent indiscretion on the liaison officer’s part, which she asserted was a rumour. Overall she felt these types of statements showed an insensitivity to the audience, and speculated that the writers may have wanted to “lighten it up” and create “drama,” effects that they would strive for in newspaper articles but which were not appropriate for this research report. This seems supported by the

writers' own description of the features of student press writing, which they quite seriously and cynically claimed should include "inside jokes, personal touches, references to star wars and alcohol, and rambling prose." As writers for the student newspaper, they were perhaps not conscious of importing such features into the report genre. Furthermore, they chose to be direct with their readers, a strategy that would likely backfire with a purportedly apathetic audience of volunteers:

We learned that there was a lot of apathy that we had to overcome in order to achieve our goals. So, we had to state our conclusions up front, and we had to make sure the conclusions were dramatic enough and do-able enough for the people of [the press] to take notice.

#### *4.3 Identification: The Community School Report*

The third pair of writers experienced, not a clash, but a synchronicity with their insider-expert's perspective and expectations. The community school Coordinator had, from the beginning, identified the need to be sensitive to both staff and faculty (invested in the elementary school) and parents (invested in the community school) — two constituencies using the same facility whose desires were sometimes at odds. Consistent with this expectation, one writer noted that "the introduction had to be soft," for they didn't want to reinforce the belief of some community members that the problem originated with the elementary school (as opposed to the community school). They also reported they had "downplayed" some of the recommendations in the introduction because these "involved ideas that have been rejected by teaching and administrative staff at the school;" they had "attempted to use language that showed empathy and understanding while at the same time being informed...because of the sensitivity of our topic and because some of our conclusions would not be welcome news." They reported they had tried to



use modality (“may not be enough,” “we feel,” “we believe”) and were cognizant of negotiating between two audiences: the receptive (community school) and non-receptive (elementary school). They decided to make the recommendations “not too strong, rationalizing and explaining potentially offensive suggestions;” and, “keeping in mind that school staff made up a large portion of [their] potential readers,” they chose “to scuttle around the conclusion without directly stating it.” These writers apparently had heard the concerns of their client that the two opposing components of the report’s ultimate readership should both be “addressed” and at the same time their differences had to be respected. Upon reading the final report, their insider-expert, the coordinator of the community school, registered her enthusiasm and agreement.

## **5. Discussion**

In an effort to elucidate why these writers either satisfied or did not satisfy their readers’ expectations, the following discussion provides a more detailed analysis of their strategizing around audience through the deployment of an identification strategy, and how this strategizing was dependent on their organizational knowledge.

Two of these cases illustrate obvious tensions between writers’ goals and the expectations of a complex readership. The writers’ strategies seem to betray an incomplete knowledge of the client organization and the genre. This may be a result of limited access to a zone of proximal development where they could learn “on the job,” so that students construed their audience using means external to the rhetorical situation. This led to compromised reader-writer identification, which these findings suggest is a critical factor in how favourably intended readers received these reports. This section analyzes the strategies of identification, both unsuccessful and successful, that students adopted, and attempts to link these efforts to the larger issue of genre acquisition,

with identification as the genre feature in question, and its relationship to organizational culture and shared knowledge.

Audience-writer “identification,” it should be pointed out, does not mean that readers and writers must share exactly the same goals, although this is a popular interpretation, and is perhaps what lies behind those instances where students are not able to convey their findings without offending or otherwise creating unnecessary political resistance to their statements. According to Kenneth Burke “You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (Burke p.55). But such identification is not a matter of adopting another’s beliefs, values and creeds as one’s own — a conclusion which I think the writers of the soccer association report made, such that they arrived at an impasse over priorities and focus — a state of conflict that blinded them to other available means of persuasion. Instead, as Burke says, identification is achieved “first by inducing the auditor to participate in the form, as a ‘universal’ locus of appeal, and next by trying to include a partisan statement within this same pale of assent” (Burke p.59). Such forms of persuasion can, Burke continues, “readily awaken an attitude of collaborative expectancy in us...the audience is exalted by the assertion because it has the feel of collaborating in the assertion”(Burke p.58). With this experience of “collaborative expectancy” or “this pale of assent,” the effective writer can then integrate a dissenting or “partisan” view. Through the appeal to pathos, identification can arouse this collective emotional momentum as a basis or common ground for dissension.

It is the subtlety of this strategy that I think escaped some of these student-writers and that I think in part explains the success of others. The adversarial model of conflict seemed to stalemate the students writing the soccer association report, blinkering them to the possibilities of identification as a strategy for both containing and conveying differences. And since it is

organizational knowledge, that contextual dimension of genre, which offers the means for such rapprochement, merely recognizing the problem was not sufficient. Such knowledge was especially lacking for one writer of the little league soccer association report. As the “outsider,” she was dependent on her partner, a “soccer mom,” for information and strategy: “I discovered that it’s very important to have a certain degree of familiarity with the organization.” At least in part, she attributes the problems with their report to an incomplete enculturation of her partner: “[she] was just a soccer mom, not involved with the Executive in the past. A deeper familiarity is, in my opinion, invaluable.”

The “soccer mom,” on the other hand, had much cultural knowledge but had difficulty making it explicit: it’s “a feeling based on nine years of talking to parents.” This probably led her to value certain strategies she felt would suit their readers: she said she wanted to take “care in choosing ‘non-inflammatory’ words that might threaten [the association’s] autonomy, i.e. ‘should’ rather than ‘must,’ ‘suggest’ or ‘encourage’ rather than ‘advise’ or ‘recommend;’” she noted that “there may be more than meets the eye to this complex situation...diplomacy and ‘arms length’ dispassionate style needed here.” And, contrary to her partner’s perception that she was not in touch with the executive, she reported that her ongoing relationship with the VP (now in a fifth year) and three interviews with the association’s President had helped her understand their “attitudes.” She characterized the “executive” as sensitive to any perception “that they might be perceived as ‘controlling’” and “protective of their autonomy.” Her partner interpreted this differently: “I thought they’d be kid-centred but they were power-centred and defensive, not at all open to criticism.” The data suggests, however, that the organization is in fact very child-centred, and in this interest it is self-protective. The direct criticism that this student preferred, the “truth” as she called it, would have been a painful and immediate reminder that apparently the executive

of the association did not want. The student's stance here falls into the category of student-client problems that Kastman Breuch calls "overruled requests" whereby "students would sometimes recognize a request made by the client, but simply 'overrule' it" (Kastman Breuch p.197). She explains that in such cases students inappropriately step outside of their role as "originators" of the report into the client's role of "evaluator" (Kastman Breuch p.206); quoting Petraglia, she suggests that the writers may not be "able or willing to legitimate [the exigence] as real."<sup>16</sup>

Awareness of the organization's values and priorities, it seems, comes with learning the culture. The "soccer mom" commented retrospectively: "I believe one's intuition regarding organizational analysis and the understanding or at least partial understanding of the various 'undercurrents' within organizational cultures just takes *time*." Her partner, on the other hand, who had very limited access to the organization, had felt cut off from the culture and "in the dark:"

Because I had judged the organization, I had to be more alert to what was my opinion, what was hearsay, what was fact, and what was speculation...[an interviewee source] helped me to understand the ways organizations like the [soccer association] operate. I feel I have been in the dark about these things.

Their different exposures to the soccer association led to a tension within their partnership and unresolved disagreements about strategy, and likely explain the ineffectual audience orientation of their report.

For different reasons, the writers for the national student press seemed unable to identify with the experience of volunteer members who constituted a major segment of their intended audience, opting instead to divide themselves from these apathetic "washouts" and "complainers."

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<sup>16</sup>J. Petraglia, "Spinning Like a Kite: A Closer Look at the Pseudotransaction Function of Writing," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 15 (1995): 29.

Such explicit division apparently left them only with the option to confront, a directness which may have had for them the appeal of the drama of newspaper writing. They seemed to have an almost cavalier disregard for their audience, focusing in their account of the process on establishing their own style (which one writer described as “computer lingo” and “intellectual trendiness”). Nor did they construe their insider-expert as a “client,” viewing the regional coordinator more as a friend and colleague than as an organizational representative:

She’s one of my best friends, I’ve known her two years. I also call upon her often in her professional capacity when my newspaper has problems.

I’ve known [the coordinator] for about one year, as a friend and as a paper person.

As a friend, instead of a client, the coordinator’s requests were apparently “unheard” by the students (Kastman Breuch p. 198). The writers thus deferred the work of developing the specific recommendations and professional stance that the regional coordinator wanted.

Instead of the tact, care, and self-effacement that an effective strategy of identification would have required, they chose to work on directness and drama and their own “style,” as illustrated in the following excerpts from the final report:

The aforementioned malaise between newspapers and [the advertising department] has been created over the last few years by several conditions; [the advertising department’s] *consistent mishandling of advertising accounts...the insensitivity that [its] board members have shown* towards papers from outlying regions, and a *Byzantine set of laws*, and bylaws...

[Provincial] papers want someone in [the province] selling national ads. *This is a nice idea*, but it would be extremely difficult to implement. *First of all, where would this salesperson come from?*

[The advertising department] has a strong belief that no one but them is really capable of dealing with national clients, and if the papers try to do so, they will *just mess things up*. [emphasis mine]

It may be argued that, to some extent, they had misread the conventional situation in which a research report is produced; in this situation, a research report for a national student press would entail a greater degree of formality than an article in a student newspaper. One of the students reveals this genre confusion, reporting that she was unprepared for “meshing the constraints of a formal report with [the] informality of [the] organization’s style.” The familiarity and immediacy of the practices and values of the college newspaper (a subculture of the student press) thus contributed to this confusion.

Greater cultural knowledge of the executive’s values and expectations would have helped the students see that there were two genres situated in two different organizational contexts, and requiring different approaches. The coordinator identified the challenge of learning about these values early on: “They will need to talk to [national press] ‘dinosaurs’ ([members] that have been around for more than a few years) to get as much info as possible. This could be difficult.” In a think-aloud interview after receiving the report, she indicated that the students should have done more organizational research; she described their reporting of the employee romantic liaison as “insensitive:” “this could be a rumour they believed...[there is a] “difference between fact and rumours...they did not do their research!” When asked how they would learn this, she said they needed to “talk to a lot of people...read minutes...[and] “go to the conferences.” The students themselves seemed to have some awareness that they did not have an adequate familiarity with the organization for the purposes of their report. One alluded to the reality that, unlike the student national press, “most organizations have a longer length of membership,” a factor that would limit

the availability of “old-timers” (“dinosaurs”) as sources of organizational learning. Her partner believes that “the inspiration for the report can not be taught,” perhaps suggesting a less than authentic engagement with the project. He also would advise other students to start “early...so that the interviewees [sources inside the organization] and the interviewers can establish more of a rapport, which would lead to greater depth,” implying that a stronger relationship with members of the organization is necessary for substantive reporting.

The students writing for the community school met with much greater success, in part because they were able to create a sense of common ground with both factions of their audiences. The coordinator had flagged the need for “buy-ins” from “staff” as well as “parents;” she had let them know that the principal of the school had a “tendency to take [such reports] personally” so that “full support is needed from the teaching and administrative staff.” When the final report arrived, she was pleased with its “inoffensive” approach. The anticipated unpopularity of their findings and recommendations did not result in division or polarity, but operated as a rhetorical challenge — how to present negative findings and at the same time retain the good will of a split audience, neither of whom might be happy with the recommendations. Though their findings implied there was some resistance among the elementary school staff to proposed changes and a lack of support among some parents who had wanted the community school programs in the first place, the writers made a point of “talking their language.” As a parent with children attending both the elementary and community schools, one of the writers had learned this language. She had known the coordinator for seven months through the school, where they both had young children; they attended meetings of the Parents Advisory Committee, shared conversations in the schoolyard and on the phone, and once collaborated in setting up a community school activity. Both writers and reader knew the recommendations would not be met positively by all intended

readers, including the board that employs the coordinator, so they emphasized those values to which both school communities subscribed. These were summed up in a phrase that the coordinator identified as key to the report's reception: a "holistic family-centred approach," a phrase she indicated she would be incorporating into her own year-end report. The portability of this "consensual term" attests to its efficacy as a term of identification.<sup>17</sup> The coordinator herself was very pleased with the report; her single comment on the final version was "just great!"

Both students understood the importance of access to the organization, and their references to learning "by the seat of your pants" and "life experience" indicate they had some awareness of the tacit nature of their learning during the research project. The student affiliated with the community school commented as follows:

Tasks, challenges, skills that [the professional writing] program cannot prepare students for, would be what I call "by the seat of your pants" interactions and communications. When you are researching a PROBLEM you have to realize that looking at problems is often uncomfortable. I don't know how you teach people to deal with this. Our first semester [interpersonal communications] course did help a bit, but when what you are doing is uncomfortable, situations come up where you are on the spot. You can't predict how people will react when you are poking about asking questions about something that is uncomfortable.

The student outside the organization, and dependent on her partner as her liaison, specifically identified the issue of access: "students...need some measure of access into the organization — like an employee — so that the student can tailor the report to suit the organization." And she noted that the writing program could not have prepared her for the client's responses:

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<sup>17</sup>J. Giltrow, "Canadian Contexts for Public Advocacy: Briefs as a Genre," *Technostyle* 7.3 (1988): 17-25.



Getting reactions from your client — every situation is different and brings different reactions. [The writing program] can't teach you that — it is life experience — your own interactions with the client — how you handle problems — again, every situation is unique.

She stressed the significance of having the experience of working as an “employee” instead of being a student, of having learned “something about ‘doing a job’ for someone.” Her position was, however, still peripheral: to the coordinator’s abbreviated evaluation of the report (“just great!”), she responded that she wanted to hear more, but that the full meaning would likely be available to her if she were more of an insider: “If closer to the situation, [I] might have understood better what ‘just great’ means.”

## **6. Implications**

Two key implications emerged from this study. The first suggests that an important element of rhetorical maturity is a strategic, practical orientation to audience that depends on the acquisition of both tacit and explicit features of organizational culture. The second suggests that the academy’s tendency to judge and critique workplace practices in terms of idealized versions of power and ethics is counterproductive to the everyday strategic work of identification that is at the heart of functional organizations.

### *6.1 Writing Development: Identification, Audience, and Organizational Culture*

A developmental model of how adult writers acquire greater communicative competence in workplace genres should account for “rhetorical development in context” (MacKinnon p. 42). The results of this study suggest the acquisition of effective identification strategies is dependent on organizational knowledge and that it is rhetorically situated; that it entails the strategic use of

organizational knowledge for building a necessary ground — for raising and integrating differences — that is audience considerate and that can result in successful reader-based documents. For example, every organization has its own practices of dissent. The writers of the soccer association report resisted adjusting to political sensitivities that were customary within the organization. One writer, valuing “freedom of expression” and “truth” over the organization’s desire to elide potentially damaging material, did not apparently recognize what was very likely a legitimate enactment of organizational solidarity, and missed an opportunity to present her findings in terms of receptive ground.

Such recognition and learning involves what Miller refers to as praxis or practical knowledge<sup>18</sup>: it requires much more than the classroom-based capacity to write for the teacher or an academic discipline, or to imagine one’s audience or a hypothetical situation. Rather, the development of adult writing competence involves an expansion of the writer’s range of rhetorical innovation through the *in situ* experience of, and membership into, specific and often complex social contexts. As students’ comments suggest, some of this organizational knowledge is tacit and can be acquired only by participating in the “ambient community” (Lave and Wenger p. 100) of the organization: “It’s a feeling,” it’s “undercurrents within organizational culture,” “it takes *time*,” it’s learning “by the seat of your pants,” it’s “life experience.” The experiences of these students suggest that instructors could enable their students’ success in meeting the needs of organizational clients by designing these transitional spaces for accessibility and potential membership (Wenger), and by providing concurrent classroom scaffolding that will help them recognize genre regularities and develop a repertoire of rhetorical strategies for assisting specific

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<sup>18</sup>C. Miller, “What’s Practical about Technical Writing?” *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice*, eds. Fearing and Sparrow (New York: MLA, 1989) 14-26.

organizational cultures to harmonize or incorporate differences through their own local ways of writing and persuading (genres and other situated practices).

### *6.2 The Classroom and the Workplace: Tension and Transcendence*

A second issue is the potential interference and disabling tension that can occur as transitional students negotiate the imperatives of two communities. The developmental or learning challenge goes beyond simply reifying a stillborn competition between genres or ethics, though some argue for a pedagogy that would maintain such a tension and foster a conscious critique of workplace practices.<sup>19</sup> This approach not only ignores Miller's argument for the praxis of ethics by individuals in specific organizational contexts (Miller 1989), but also aggravates the already polarized and unproductive attitudes of academia versus workplace rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> More important, for transitional students it can create tensions between workplace and school, and result in unsatisfactory written products. One writer of the soccer association report experienced this tension as a serious problem that she never satisfactorily resolved. She could not reconcile the academic valuing of the pursuit of "truth" and "freedom of speech" with the coordinator's concerns:

Our collaboration boiled down to: was the grade more important than the final product for the [soccer association]? I felt I had to compromise on one or the other.

The writers of the national student press report, (subsequent references appear parenthetically in text) similarly influenced by academic culture, misread their challenge as a conflict between

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<sup>19</sup>R. Spilka, "Influencing Workplace Practice: A Challenge for Professional Writing Specialists in Academia," *Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives*, ed. Spilka (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993) 213.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, D. Sullivan, "Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Technical Communication as a Practice," *Humanistic Aspects of Technical Communication*, ed. P. Dombrowski (New York: Baywood Publishing, 1994) 223-234.

satisfying the requirements of the assignment (writing a “formal” report) and satisfying their client (an organization with an “informal” culture).

For the most part, however, although transitional students in this professional writing program do often experience a tension between classroom and workplace imperatives, they are not usually hampered by it. In fact, much anecdotal evidence indicates they revel in their involvement with organizations and readily accept that, to satisfy their clients, it will be necessary to engage in much more work than is usually required for classroom tasks. They transcend the classroom with enthusiasm. Because they participate on the periphery of a community of practice, in an incipient zone of proximal development, their activities broach authentic participation and it seems that they can sense the experience of legitimate participation. Such transitional spaces should invite instructors to provide structures that will create the conditions for the development of authentic learning communities. Kastman Breuch suggests a number of strategies instructors can incorporate to help transitional students achieve legitimate access and so avoid what Petraglia refers to as “pseudotransactionality,” writing that turns towards the classroom and away from truly transactional purposes (Kastman Breuch p.195). These include a variety of activities and skills (including “Rogerian reflecting”) that fall under the three categories of client interviews, listening, and seeking clarification (Kastman Breuch pp.202-208). To create an integrated pedagogy, however, such skills and activities need to be expressions of a larger pedagogical framework, and I would suggest that a rhetorical genre approach that looks to designing communities of learning provides a promising theoretical orientation for such a framework.

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