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Treating Professional Writing as Social *Praxis*

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To explore how professional communications are shaped by the worlds of work, scholars have drawn on several different ways of thinking about the relationship between texts and contexts—literary theories, sociolinguistics, organizational theory, ethnography, and theories of composition. I would like to draw on classical rhetoric to develop a philosophical justification for stressing the social and ethical dimensions of business and technical writing. I am not specifically interested here in how we can apply the techniques of classical rhetoric to professional writing, but in how we can revitalize classical rhetoric's general emphasis on ethical and political values. While classical rhetoric assumed ethical and political values that need to be questioned, it does provide a context in which to ask questions about values, questions that are too often ignored in professional writing classes. Classical rhetoric is particularly useful in talking about technical and business writing because Aristotle's three-part conceptualization of *theoria, praxis,* and *techne* undercuts the dichotomy of theory and practice that often limits instruction in "practical" writing to the mere techniques of the craft. Classical rhetoric can also help us develop a broader social perspective on practical writing, a perspective that includes not just the social context of the company or profession but the larger public context as well.

Classical rhetoric is the source of many of our basic concepts, particularly our concern for purpose as a controlling element in discourse, but we often fail to look beyond the techniques of classical rhetoric to examine the philosophical perspective that gave classical rhetoric itself a purpose. For the tradition that began with Isocrates, this perspective is civic humanism. For civic humanists like Isocrates and Aristotle, rhetoric and the closely related studies of ethics and politics are the means of producing citizens with practical wisdom, or *phronesis*. Such citizens can say the right thing at the right time to solve a public problem because they know how to put the shared beliefs and values of the community into practice. According to Aristotle, practical wisdom is not merely a technical skill at problem solving, nor does it depend on a mastery of some theoretical abstractions about the nature of truth and beauty. For Aristotle (and for civic humanists generally), practical wisdom is based on a broad-based understanding of the shared experiences

and traditions of the community that enables us to discover what is best in a particular situation. To be able to do this, we must interpret how the shared knowledge of the community speaks to the practical situations in which we find ourselves. In the process of working with these common problems, we also come to find ourselves in the larger moral and intellectual traditions of the community. From this perspective, practice is thus holistic and self-reflexive because when we work with the practical problems of the community, we learn its shared traditions and discover our own place in those traditions.

All of this may seem to be a very abstract way to think about composition, but the basic concepts of this approach are evident in the workplace and in the classroom. When we observe inexperienced people at work, we often find that while they have mastered the theoretical knowledge and technical know-how of their profession, they do not really know how to put the theory or techniques into practice because they lack experience with the situations that the profession addresses. To become an experienced professional, the individual must learn the "common sense" of the professional community—the common assumptions and practical good sense that an individual gains while learning how to work from the community's shared assumptions to address the problems of the field. Because such practical awareness is particularly essential to learning how to talk and write like a professional, we try to emphasize practice over theory and technique in our writing classes, despite our students' repeated requests to specify rules for how to do this or that. We know that writing cannot be reduced to formulae because every problem requires a solution that suits the particular situation and audience, and we hope that with experience our students will gain a practical awareness of how to translate theory and technique into practice. The limitations of formulaic approaches to written products and processes are strikingly apparent outside the classroom because problems and audiences have histories, and the novice who does not share the community's history of dealing with the problem cannot easily draw on the shared practical wisdom that the community has developed to address such problems. As new professionals gain experience and learn how to "think like a lawyer," or "talk like a engineer," they absorb the practical knowledge of the community as well as its ethical and political values, but they often do so tacitly and without reflecting on what is really involved in talking and thinking like the men in the gray flannel suits.

Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom can help us talk about professional communications in a way that makes explicit both the self-reflexiveness of practice and the practical importance of the moral and intellectual traditions of the community. This broad understanding of what it means to be "practical" is particularly important in discussions of professional communications. Too often, when we use terms like "technical writing" in their traditional sense, we perpetuate a concept of writing itself as merely technical, and we marginalize ourselves as mere technicians of the word. We need

to reexamine such conceptions because they contribute to a whole line of thought that treats technical know-how as if it alone could solve problems. This line of thought assumes that knowledge is an object—a portable commodity generally called information—and defines writing as a technique of information processing. This perspective has considerable political significance because it supports the popular idea that the "information society" is apolitical, a society where access to information equals access to social power. When we instead view knowledge as socially constructed and writing as a process of constructing shared knowledge, we widen our frame of reference to include an awareness of the social implications of writing and the social responsibilities of writers. In this way, we can broaden our view of writing beyond the cognitive processes of the isolated individual and study how writers negotiate not only shared knowledge, but also values and power. Such a view of writing will help us teach students that professional communications is not a *techne*, not mere rhetoric, but a social *praxis* with inescapable ethical and political responsibilities.

Theoria, Techne, and Praxis

A basic understanding of the civic humanist tradition is important for those of us who work with practical literacy because we are often confronted inside and outside the academy with the tacit assumption that the humanities are founded on an aesthetic philosophy that is opposed to the basic ethos of the world of work. Actually, in the classical period at least one variety of humanism, civic humanism, was defined by its efforts to negotiate between the pragmatics of public life and the abstractions of the academy, and the study of rhetoric was central to those efforts. Civic humanists like Aristotle and Isocrates attempted to negotiate between what they perceived to be the amoral *techne* of the sophists and the theoretical abstractions of Plato's Academy. In response to these two extremes, Aristotle and Isocrates emphasized the ideal of the broadly educated individual who possesses not certain knowledge but practical good sense, *phronesis*, a moral and intellectual ideal that justifies shared belief against abstract speculation and mere technical expertise. The individual with *phronesis* knows how to act in areas where what is best cannot be known with certainty (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1140a). In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle treats *phronesis* as essential to the ethos of the civic orator, and in the *Nichomachean Ethics* he identifies practical wisdom with the central ethical question of how to live well, a question that cannot be answered with finality but must be discovered moment by moment in the situations in which we find ourselves (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1140b). The concept of practical wisdom is thus fundamental to Aristotle's basic idea that rhetoric is a social art integrally related to the traditional values of the community and the ethical development of the individual.

We have tended to ignore the practical philosophical perspective that first made rhetoric a humanistic discipline because we inevitably read history

from our own perspective, and our orientation has been to see rhetoric as a theory, with composition as the *techne*. When we thus limit ourselves to the techniques of writing, we betray our own limited understanding of the practical awareness needed to translate technical knowledge into practice. The complexity of this process is evident every time we encounter a student paper that follows all the technical rules but fails to speak to the problem in terms appropriate to the situation. Classical rhetoric opposes our self-limiting tendency to treat "practical" writing as if it were the same as "technical" writing. The practical philosophical perspective of classical rhetoric also shows us the importance of combining speculative inquiry, technical expertise, and practical awareness into a unified philosophy of writing as a social *praxis*, which is what I would like to do in the rest of this essay.

The social philosophy of civic humanism is a good place to start, but it has obvious limitations that make it less than a final answer. Athens was after all a society where one-third of the population was enslaved. Nonetheless, the civic humanist tradition presents us with a concept of practice and a concern for public practice that challenge some of our own limitations. The contemporary relevance of this tradition has been stressed by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who has argued that Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* adds historical and moral dimensions to the ways we interpret experience (*Truth and Method* 489-90). Gadamer has made important contributions to the current interdisciplinary efforts to redevelop a broad humanistic philosophy of public life. These efforts provide a wider context for studying communications within professional communities, and Gadamer himself provides a useful way of interpreting the practical significance of the moral and intellectual traditions of such communities.

The Interpretation of Social Practice

Gadamer has drawn on Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom to develop a holistic and self-reflexive model of interpretation. For Gadamer, the contemporary idealization of the scientific method makes a technical method an abstract philosophical truth; and, as a result, we begin looking to technical methods as if they provided practical wisdom: "In order to work out an orientation which brings together *both* methodological access to our world *and* the conditions of our social life, it was natural for me to return to the preceding philosophical orientations and ultimately to the tradition of the practical and political philosophy of Aristotle" ("Social" 311). For Gadamer, scientific objectivity is of limited practical value because it denies traditional values and tradition itself a place in practical understanding. Gadamer argues that when we work to make sense out of experience, our interpretations arise out of the traditions of our interpretive community. These traditions shape the way we interpret the world because they provide both the terms in which we initially define an experience and the larger frame

of reference that gives those definitions significance. When we draw on the shared knowledge of the community to make sense of an experience or a text, we broaden our personal and historical awareness because we come to understand our own place in the traditions of the community. This self-reflexive process develops through a constant dynamic of assessing the whole against the part and the part against the whole. In this "hermeneutical circle," we move back and forth between the traditions of the community and the specific situational context in which we find ourselves, the situational context and the text itself, and the overall meaning of the text and its individual parts.

While hermeneutics may seem esoteric to those uninterested in critical theory, the model is quite consistent with our understanding of the reading process.2 Reading is an interactive process. We constantly shift back and forth between projecting "schema" onto texts and assessing how such patterns of thought are actually realized in particular passages. These schema can include a form like a narrative or a pattern of connotations that we associate with a topic. These forms and patterns of associations structure how we read a text. For example, if an IBM personnel director were reading a personnel report documenting the recent layoffs at a facility that had been closed, he or she would have a whole set of assumptions about the form the document would take and the information it would include, and such a reader would draw on these expectations to provide a frame of reference for reading the text. These schema would be drawn from the reader's previous experiences with similar documents, and his or her application of those schema would be shaped by the social contexts in which those prior experiences occurred. The reader's history with IBM would no doubt make him or her aware of its traditional commitment to retrain or relocate employees rather than simply laying them off, and this awareness of the accepted attitudes of the community would influence how he or she read the text. The director would regularly shift back and forth between considering the shared attitudes of the organization and evaluating what had been done and how it was presented in the text. What such an example suggests is that reading, like writing, has a basic social dimension because the shared knowledge and experience of a community provide the larger context in which we interpret experience.

Hermeneutics provides a model of interpretation that locates reading and writing in the shared knowledge and experience of the interpretive community, and for this reason hermeneutics has influenced some of those who have established the current interest in the social construction of knowledge within interpretive communities. Thomas Kuhn has drawn on hermeneutics for his influential view that scientific knowledge is socially constructed:

What I as a physicist had to discover for myself, most historians learn by example in the course of professional training. Conscious or not, they are all practitioners of the hermeneutic method. Consequently, the discovery of hermeneutics did more than make history seem consequential. Its most immediate and decisive effect was instead on my view of science. (xiii)

Stephen Toulmin has also argued that we are not just objective observers and recorders of experience but active participants with experience. According to Toulmin, unlike rationalists and empiricists, "our place is within the same world that we are studying, and whatever scientific understanding we achieve must be a kind of understanding that is available to participants within the process of nature, i.e., from inside" (209-10).

Hermeneutics is particularly compatible with ethnography, which shares the controlling assumption that the scientific method limits our understanding of social experience by denying the values and beliefs that we use to make sense of the world. According to Clifford Geertz,

> The hermeneutic circle . . . is as central to ethnographic interpretation . . . as it is to literary, historical, philosophical, psychoanalytical or biblical interpretation, or for that matter to the informal annotation of everyday experience we call common sense. (240)

"Common sense" is in fact a useful term for the "local" (rather than objective or universal) knowledge that ethnographers like Geertz study. In basic respects, ethnography and hermeneutics seek to understand much the same sort of knowledge, the knowledge of the traditional assumptions and values of the community that shapes how people act, write, and read. This mastery of the shared wisdom of the community is the very sort of knowledge that Aristotle idealized in his concept of practical wisdom. Like hermeneutical critics, ethnographers do not attempt to isolate their own role as interpreters of this practical wisdom because they recognize that life is not a laboratory and that they are active participants in the interactive process of reading the texts of experience. Hermeneutics also emphasizes that we are not only intellectually but also morally involved in the interpretations we make with experience. This ethical self-reflexiveness is also evident in ethnography at its best, as for example in the work of Shirley Brice Heath.

While Geertz and Heath have shown an awareness of the ethical and political dimensions of social texts, those who have applied ethnography to composition and professional communications have often cast the participant-observer status of the ethnographic researcher in the value-neutral terminology of the social sciences. This silence is important because research methodologies provide us with languages in which to talk about experience, and if a methodology does not include terms for addressing ethical and political values, they cannot be readily discussed by the research community. Research communities are known by the languages they speak, and if those of us who study professional communications do not address ethical and political issues, then we marginalize ourselves as mere technicians of the word. However, we should not be silenced by mistaken beliefs that social science methodologies provide value-free ways of talking about writing because such beliefs are in fact at odds not just with ethnography but with progressive thought in the social sciences in general. For example, in *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah and his coauthors have put forward an influential argument for redefining the social sciences themselves as public philosophy: "social science as public philosophy, by breaking through the iron curtain between the social sciences and the humanities, becomes a form of social self-understanding or self-interpretation" (301). For Bellah, as for Gadamer, this new self-awareness comes from a renewed attention to tradition, in this case the traditions shared by the humanities and social sciences: "Social science is not a disembodied cognitive enterprise. It is a tradition, or set of traditions, deeply rooted in the philosophical and humanistic (and, to more than a small extent, the religious) history of the West" (301).

Hermeneutics' concern for the practical *and* moral significance of the traditions of interpretive communities can help us avoid the mistaken belief that one can study and teach writing in a value-free way by treating it as a set of techniques, an empty vehicle for information and a method for solving pre-existing problems. Hermeneutics and ethnography offer useful strategies for interpreting how traditions shape social practices like writing, and in our own tradition we can see a model of practice that does not isolate the techniques of communication from traditional values. The classical rhetorical ideal of practical wisdom is not just compatible with contemporary strategies of interpreting common sense in social action, it is a traditional ideal that serves us well now. The ideal of practical wisdom links technical skill and moral self-reflection by showing that one without the other is impractical because each represents only a partial understanding of the shared knowledge of the community. Values divorced from practical strategies for solving problems are of limited social utility, but so are practical techniques divorced from shared values and wisdom. Practical wisdom is particularly relevant to studies of professional communications because they have generally been dominated by a lack of awareness of tradition and a self-limiting concept of what it means to be practical. The two problems are closely related. The idea that writing is simply a technique of information processing (like the idea that the information society is an apolitical technical matter) shows a lack of awareness of history. This lack of awareness isolates technical knowledge from the questions about value that arise when one examines a social practice in the broader context of traditional values.

Information Processing and the Information Society

As we are well aware, the general relationship between professional communications and the humanities has been problematic at best in the modern academy. Some of our colleagues in English departments view

business and technical writing with indifference or outright hostility because they believe that the humanities must speak for traditional cultural ideals against the amorality of the marketplace. Of course, this is hard to do if nobody is listening, and the isolation of the humanities from practical concerns has often made them a distant voice in society. While academic humanists have suffered from their limited involvement with actual social practice, technical and business communications can also be criticized for a lack of philosophical depth. As a result of their intellectual isolation, they have often been taught as a set of formulaic genres, or more recently a formulaic process, rather than as a social practice that involves important ethical and political issues. Such issues have not traditionally been a major concern for teachers of technical and shared writing because their belief in scientific objectivity reinforced their idea that technical writing was a value-neutral *techne*. The conception of technical writing as the processing of technical information has particular significance for the practical role of the humanities in the "information society." Ironically, while most of us have ignored the relationship between writing at work and shared values, that relationship has been of keen interest to those who advocate "corporate cultures" as a means to instill company values in employees. This raises an important question: when corporate managers are talking about values, can humanists afford not to?

While proponents of the "information society" preach the idea that information itself is power, they have also advised corporate managers to create strong cultures to make sure workers attach the right values to information. Popular books and articles have been telling us so persistently that the information economy is opening up access to social power that the basic line of reasoning has become a commonplace: (1) in the information economy, wealth and power are no longer dependent on physical resources or labor; (2) traditional criticisms of economic and political inequities are passé because they assume a production-based economy and stratified social hierarchies; and (3) unlike the old scarcity-based economy, the information economy does not really perpetuate social inequities because information can be "shared" (see Cleveland, for example).

From the start, the ideology of the information society and the interest in organizational culture have developed together. In fact, 1956 marks the milestone when for the first time more people were working with informa-tion than producing goods, and it was also the year that *The Organization Man* first appeared. The need for "strong" corporate cultures to control the alienation of organizational men and women is the basic theme of a whole host of more recent books like *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge, A Passion for Excellence* and *Reinventing the Corporation*. Since actually controlling information flow is difficult in "information organizations," these books emphasize the need to manage how workers interpret informa-tion. In this respect, the new "value-centered" philosophy of management

can be seen as an effort to establish value systems that can operate as systems of control within the less objectified hierarchies of the information economy.

Many of us would probably like to criticize all of this as the newest sophistry, which is what it very well may be. However, when we treat writing as a value-neutral *techne*, and thus take what has traditionally been seen as the sophistic view of rhetoric, we make ourselves irrelevant to the public debate over the practical significance of shared values. The conception of writing as a *techne* is clearly evident in the traditional emphasis placed on formulaic written products like business letters and technical reports. However, this conception also underlies the cognitivist research on the composing process that won the Conference on College Composition and Communica-tion's award for the best essay published in its professional journal in 1986 and again in 1988.[3] This influential line of research describes human reasoning with mechanistic metaphors and elaborate computational models in the assumption that social context can be treated as a subprocess of "the flow of *information*" within the brain (Flower et al. 21). By reducing context to a methodological concern, this approach totally removes writing from the realm of shared values and history in such a way as to reduce the teaching of writing to "mere" rhetoric, an amoral *techne* that can be applied to whatever problem is set for it but cannot challenge the social forces that pose the problem. By reducing thinking and writing to the technology of information processing, the cognitivists reproduce the political economy of the informa-tion society and model the human mind on the machine that is the paradigm for that economy: the computer. This approach is fundamentally at odds with the civic humanist tradition because cognitivists define human communica-tion as a technical process rather than a value-laden social practice, and it is at odds with humanism generally because it treats the human mind itself as a machine.

The cognitivists' reduction of human thought and expression to the processing of information reflects both the specific impact of our most recent writing tool, the computer, and our general idealization of technical knowl-edge. As Ong emphasizes, the technologies we use to communicate inevita-bly shape how we think, but "the principal danger is that instead of appropri-ating technology to consciousness we may appropriate consciousness to technology" (190). It is not an accident that cognitivists use computer models to describe human consciousness as if it were routinely methodical in its problem-solving response to stimuli. They assume that knowledge is itself technical and can be reduced to rule-governed procedures that can be applied to situations. However, it is precisely the cognitivists' inability to "control" for the situational nature of shared knowledge that profoundly limits their approach, for like the computers it is modeled on, the cognitive approach cannot account for the overwhelming practical importance of shared knowledge—"world" knowledge that cannot be catalogued because it is itself a catalogue of all the shared experiences of the community. The rich patterns

of association that shared experience bestows upon a member of a community cannot be reduced to technical rules or theoretical abstractions because the common sense of the community is inextricably situated in the shared history and practical experience of the community. The limited success of artificial intelligence can be attributed to the fact that the commonsensical associations that inform how a community acts and talks cannot be reduced to rule-governed procedural knowledge, and neither can a rich social practice like writing be meaningfully understood as merely a technique for information processing.

As Aristotle's practical wisdom and Gadamer's hermeneutical interpretation emphasize, the ways a culture interprets its problems to itself are as untranslatable as its language. As any ethnographer knows, practical social knowledge can be portrayed in "thick descriptions," but it cannot be defined and catalogued. Hermeneutics and ethnography are connected to rhetoric by the shared assumption that practical knowledge is always in some respects situated and local knowledge because it is located in the historical traditions of the community and arises out of the practical experiences shared by that community. The most basic concept of rhetoric is perhaps the rhetorical situation because rhetoric is the art of saying the right thing at the right time, the art of recognizing what needs to be said to this audience and this problem and how best to say it. It is just this situational nature of effective rhetoric that technical methods of teaching writing try to minimize. When we consider the rhetorical situation not as merely a technical concept but as a basic paradigm that defines most significant social knowledge, then the connections between classical rhetoric and the current interest in the social construction of knowledge become clear and fundamentally important. Social practices, whether they be forms of writing or forms of etiquette, are situational modes of social action because they are shaped by the dynamic social experience of the community. Such symbolic forms of social behavior are also inescapably shaped by the traditional political and ethical values of the community.

The public discussion of corporate cultures presents an important challenge to those who want to teach professional communications as more than a technique of information processing. We should, I think, avoid both the holier than Dow attitude of academic humanism and the technologization of literacy that unreflectively serves the interests of business and industry. The very term "corporate culture" will strike some of our colleagues as an oxymoron because some believe that culture is a higher plane of disengaged intellectual and aesthetic expression, but we can best defend the broader ideal of culture as the expression of shared meanings and values by getting involved in the public debate over the practical significance of shared values. The concept of "public" can itself help us enter the debate over "corporate cultures" because when we broaden our frame of reference beyond the corporate problem solver to focus instead on the ideal of the public citizen, we can then begin to place the organizational context in the

larger context of public life. This larger context is important because one of our most pressing challenges as educators is to promote an awareness of the practical public responsibilities of technical knowledge, including new technologies as well as new methods of managing workers. To do this, we must instill not just a practical awareness of the larger social and historical contexts of technical problems but also a personal sense of the need to respond to the collective forces that shape our lives. The information explosion has destroyed this shared sense of responsibility by barraging us with messages about the power of technology and other forces that are divorced from the traditions of the community and the needs of individuals.

Locating Organizational Cultures in the Larger Public Context

A concept of the public is essential to any approach to professional writing that would be either consistent with civic humanism or relevant to the practical effort to exercise some control over our public lives. According to Thomas Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*, "Transactions between singular persons and groups bring a public into being when their indirect consequences—their effects beyond those immediately engaged in them—are of importance" (64). In other words, when the results of a social act begin to affect those not directly involved, the threat to the common interest leads people to organize and establish rules and institutions to control the problem. A public is thus created to oversee the shared interest. As Dewey points out, while working together to solve common problems is an objective fact of human life, the transformative power of *"signs or symbols"* is necessary to convert "associative behavior into a community of action saturated and regulated by mutual interest in shared meanings" (153; see also Bizer; Miller).

This transformative process is precisely what is meant by corporate culture, but for collective problem-solving to be symbolically transformed into a "public," the community must have a shared practical understanding of how to advance its members' interest. From Dewey's perspective then, organizations can only be considered public communities if individuals are able to organize around the problems that are posed by the collective experiences in those organizations. This process can indeed be fostered by the freer flow of information that technology makes possible. However, when members in social groups think of technology and information only as objective entities, then the problems that the technologies themselves pose cannot generate shared interests or practical understandings of how to protect them.

Dewey's concept of the public is apt because such communities of shared interest are, in fact, continually developing around technological problems, from environmental protection organizations to computer user groups. However, Dewey also stresses that legitimate communities of shared interest do not develop in isolation from the larger community:

> The robber band cannot interact flexibly with other groups; it can act only through isolating itself. It must prevent the operation of all interests save those which circumscribe it in its separateness. But a good citizen finds his conduct as a member of a political group enriching and enriched by his participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations. (148)

Whether one sees a corporation as at least potentially a public community or as merely a "robber band" depends of course on how one views the whole ideology of capitalism. Dewey himself saw a clear connection between the objective fact of collective problem-solving, the development of communities of shared interest, and the practical ideal of democracy as a public community based on common interests. If one took a more radical perspective on this line of thought, one could argue that capitalism makes shared interests impossible because it objectifies the worker, the workplace, and the products of labor and denies all of them any real value outside the exploitative exchange system of capitalism. However, from either perspective, the basic question for humanistic educators remains much the same: how can we provide our students with a practical understanding that the information society is a socially constructed world and not just the product of technological advancement, and that technology and information are themselves not merely matters of technical expertise but are social practices that must be held accountable to our shared values and needs?

Dewey's concept of the public can help us answer this question because he offers a means to connect the contemporary social perspective with the larger tradition of civic humanism. When we reject the view that writing can be understood as an isolated psychological process, or even a value-free sociological process of constructing knowledge, and come to view it instead as a means of putting the shared traditions of communities into social practice, then ethical and political issues become integral parts of the theory and practice of professional communications. Only with a concern for the shared social context and cultural traditions can writing at work or in the classroom be meaningfully understood as a human problem of public significance. In theory and in practice, this understanding will be hermeneutical because the larger social and historical contexts shape how we write and what we write for. If we are to teach technical writing as a social practice, we must discover ways of developing students' ability to interpret how traditional values and assumptions speak to practical problems. We can foster such "practical wisdom" by developing a pedagogy that contributes to our students' ability to locate themselves and their professional communities in the larger public context. If public communities develop around shared problems and foster the practical traditions that speak to shared problems, then we must place the social construction of problems and solutions at the center of instruction. However, this pedagogy must be defined not as a problem-

solving approach, which would encourage the idea that problems are simply out there in the objective world awaiting technical solutions, but as a problem-posing approach that explores how problems are initially defined in ways that create public communities. If our students are to gain some control over their public professional lives, then they must be able not just to solve problems but to question how social problems are defined and how professional communities define themselves by the problems they address.

Social Construction and Social Empowerment

Social constructionism can broaden our understanding of professional communications classrooms if we redefine writing as a social practice not just in terms of the immediate social context—the specific organization or discipline—but in the terms of the larger public context. Such a redefinition will lead us to pay more attention to how our shared traditions shape the ways we write about practical problems. This awareness can empower individuals by helping them discover how to use traditional values and assumptions to negotiate solutions to problems. We can foster this awareness by encouraging students to analyze both how shared assumptions are put into practice within organizations and disciplines and how these communities themselves function in the larger public context. To do this, we must make the ethical and social dimensions of professional problems an explicit object of study. One way to do that is with the case method, but with cases that address practical moral choices of broad political significance. Our students will then be better able to locate themselves and their professional communities in the shared traditions of public life. Hermeneutics can provide a philosophy of practical understanding appropriate to this effort, for as Gadamer emphasizes, "the real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable" (*Philosophical* 13). When professional communications are studied and taught as a social practice, then the literacy we teach will become not just the ability to read and write professional documents but the ability to question and act on shared problems through language. Such literacy is a means of reflecting on one's self and acting on one's world, a means of self realization in social *praxis*.

One of the greatest threats to such a humanistic approach to practical literacy is our fragmented sense of the situational contexts in which we study, work, and play with language. The study of the social contexts of practical writing has suffered from the limited involvement of the humanities in public life because this marginalization has led us to study isolated texts and processes rather than the ways that language works to construct shared knowledge and values in social communities. When we separate a text, whether it be a novel or a technical report, from its context, we do not just limit what we teach, we limit those we teach because they do not get a practical understanding of how we write our "selves" into the world. The goal of the humanistic teacher of professional communications should be to focus

students' attention on the basic problems that constitute a specific discourse community, and we should encourage students to explore how those central problematic issues are reflected in the theoretical assumptions, technical methods, and social practices of that community. As students analyze how the community works, they will gain a practical understanding of the inter-subjectivity of language, of rhetoric in its broadest sense. They can then begin to understand that for members of professional communities "how we do things around here" is neither an objective given, nor merely a set of shifting conventions, but a social dynamic that has practical power for solving shared problems. When students have a broader perspective on the problematic issues and situations that the community is organized around, they become aware of their own place in "how things are done" and can then ask themselves if that is how they want to do things and how they want to express themselves in the things they do.

Paulo Freire has developed just such a program for teaching literacy as a social *praxis*. He has argued that reflection on one's self and one's social world must be integrally tied to social action at all stages of instruction because "thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world" (64). This argument is based on the assumption that human beings are creatures of social *praxis* because they pursue projects of common interest that lead to an understanding of themselves in action in the world (90-91). Freire's approach has recently received concerted attention, and justifiably so. His concern for social *praxis* is basic to the relationship between rhetoric, ethics, and politics that has been fundamental to civic humanism from the classical period. Civic humanists have traditionally placed rhetoric at the center of their concern for the social implications of knowledge, and this concern is still vital to the study of writing if it is to be more than "mere" rhetoric. Rhetoric at its best contributes to debates over shared values and assumptions, debates that themselves sustain the life of the public. When we ignore such ideals, we make ourselves mere technicians of the word, and our students lose an important opportunity to discover the relationships between their professional aspirations and our shared traditions and public problems.

As we become more aware of how we define ourselves and our social worlds by the ways we put shared assumptions into words, we become better able to study and teach professional communications as a social practice. While this may sound like a terribly idealistic and theoretical way to think about technical and business writing, the point is that we cannot be both technicians of the word and humanists because there is a basic contradiction between teaching writing as a technique of information processing and teaching writing as the negotiation of shared values and knowledge. We have to make a choice. One approach has a long practical philosophical tradition behind it, and by pursuing that line of inquiry we can contribute to the current interdisciplinary efforts to develop a philosophy of public life that advances

humanistic values, a philosophy that is practically engaged in the world beyond the classroom. The other approach has made us marginal members of the social worlds that we work with inside and outside the academy, technicians who can help businesses better convey their messages but cannot question how and why those messages have been chosen because their concern is with problem solving, not with the social construction of the problem itself.

If we choose to teach technical writing as social practice, we will use the hermeneutical strategies of ethnography not just for research but also for teaching. In this way, we can teach our students how to interpret the shared assumptions and values of a professional community and apply them to solve its practical problems in ways that serve public needs. Professional writing will then cease being a technical skills course and instead become "practical," in the most valuable sense of that word.

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Notes

[1] Lester Faigley has insightfully summarized the sources and implications of the social constructionist perspective on composition. Kenneth Bruffee has been a major advocate of that perspective, and important criticisms of such perspectives have been made by John Schilb and Cy Knoblauch. Together with the earlier essay by Patricia Bizzell and the recent interview of Richard Rorty in *JAC*, these articles show how social constructionism itself has challenged and overcame the cognitivist school. Now that social constructionism has become predominant, its basic assumptions and priorities are being questioned, debated, reinterpreted, and/or coopted to fit evolving positions in the disciplinary dialogue.

[2] Louise Wetherbee Phelps discusses this process in these terms in her influential article, "Dialectics of Coherence," and her recent book presents a fuller analysis of the links among Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom, the hermeneutical model of interpretation, and the current disciplinary interest in rhetoric as a social *praxis*.

[3] The difference between these two award-winning articles provides an interesting insight into the evolution of the disciplinary dialogue. These articles were chosen by leading researchers as representing the best essays in their organization's journal, and as such, these articles represent an idealized vision of what the discipline should be doing and how it should be talking about what it does. The 1986 article (Flower et al.) unabashedly describes human understanding in terms of the lock-step movement of information through a computer program and presents its conclusions in an elaborate computer model with boxes within boxes and subprocesses within processes. From this period of Baroque scientism, cognitivists moved to confront the rising criticisms of social constructionists. The 1988 article (Haas and Flower) shows a rhetorical sensitivity to competing discourses that is totally lacking from cognitivism in its period of predominance. Nonetheless, by the middle of the article, the authors have lapsed into talking about the same issues in much the same frame of reference: the mind as machine and the composing process as information processing.

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Forming and Meaning: Writing the Counterpoint Essay

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Although many composition teachers talk about the need to find "organic" forms in composing, students are often content to organize their writing in formulaic ways, frequently resorting to the five-paragraph theme—an introduction followed by three or four supporting points and a summary conclusion. Most students have internalized this form to such a degree that it has become the "default drive" for expository writing. When teachers ignore the form that student writing will take, they are not necessarily allowing students to produce organic structures but are generally encouraging conformity to standard patterns of exposition.

Much of our resistance to discussing form with students comes from a romantic view of composition that posits form as a product of inspiration and suggests that specifying a form for composition, therefore, inevitably limits a writer's individual genius. In other words, form is often associated with conformity, with rigid rules and "boiler plate" prose.

However, as students become aware of different options for organizing discourse, they are not simply learning alternative methods of arrangement; they are learning new ways of thinking about their subject. A growing recognition that form serves a generative purpose in writing, that it liberates rather than limits many student writers, is evident in the scholarship of such writers as Chris Anderson, Richard Coe, Frank D'Angelo, Keith Fort, and Ross Winterowd. Further, Ann Berthoff argues that form is the creative force behind composition:

> We encourage [the] experience of writing and thereby the auditing of meaning by providing linguistic forms, syntactical and rhetorical structures, not for imitation but for use as speculative instruments. Forms are not cookie cutters superimposed on some given, rolled-out reality dough; forms are not alien structures that are somehow made appropriate to "what you want to say." Forms are our means of abstracting; or, rather, forming is abstracting. (77)

By recognizing form, students learn to think in abstractions, to govern the chaos of experience.

But one of the difficulties of teaching form is that students may focus on a particular form's requirements and lose sight of its function. For example,