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Using Problem-Based Scenarios to Teach Writing

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Abstract

The ability to communicate effectively remains a critical skill for obtaining a job and achieving success in the workplace; however, many still lack these skills. In particular, graduates lack adequate writing skills. This article advocates the use of problem-based scenarios to teach writing, which focuses on authentic rhetorical framing similar to writing done in the workplace. A sample scenario is provided along with three responses, showing the type of issues involved in helping students develop writing skills appropriate to an organizational context.

Keywords

writing pedagogy, problem-based learning, persuasive messages

A critical component of professional success is the ability to write effectively (American Management Association, 2010; Glenn, 2011; Rentz, Flatley, & Lentz, 2010). However, recent graduates, along with many in the workplace, lack good writing skills (Hines & Basso, 2008; Minton-Eversole & Gurchiek, 2006; Quible & Griffin, 2007; Speck, 1990). The need to develop workplace writing skills in the academic setting can be better achieved by recognizing what's often lacking with the focus of academic writing and understanding how to use problem-based scenarios to develop writing skills for the workplace.

This article advocates the use of problem-based scenarios to teach effective writing, with an emphasis on rhetorical principles rather than content or format only. In this way, the act of writing not only improves students' communication abilities, but in the tradition of social-rhetorical theory (Berlin, 1987), it is a catalyst for critical thinking, also one of the "critical skills" identified in the American Management Association's

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2010 study. A sample scenario is used to demonstrate the process as well as the issues involved in such an approach.

Academic Writing Assignments: What Is Lacking?

One factor that leads to inadequate writing skills in the workplace is the type of writing students are required to do in their academic training. Typically, students are asked to write for the purpose of showing an instructor (the expert) how much they know about a certain topic. Although this may seem appropriate in an academic setting, it is the exact opposite of what is required in the workplace. In the workplace, the writer (as expert) attempts to explain new or unfamiliar information to others to help them draw conclusions, make recommendations, and solve problems (Schneider & Andre, 2005, p. 198). Most academic writing assignments "focus on content and format to the exclusion of the higher level analytical skills needed to connect that content and format with the needs of specific audiences to accomplish specific tasks" (Paretti, 2006, p. 189).

This focus on content and format is reflected in many college-level business communication textbooks, with multiple chapters on format and grammar. These textbooks also focus on specific types of documents, such as "the most common business letters"—good news, bad news, persuasive, informative, and so forth. Since not all business communication instructors have rhetorical training and may rely on supplemental textbook material in their approach to teaching, the assignment and approach described in this article is particularly relevant. Novice writers may come away from a business communication course feeling that they need only find the right format or template for a particular writing situation to ensure effective communication. Students learn to use a "fill-in-the-blank" approach for a generic audience. This approach lacks the higher level skills of understanding a rhetorical context and creating messages appropriate to varying audiences, contexts, and purposes.

Using Problem-Based Scenarios

The movement toward service learning and client-based project work in the classroom, with corresponding communication assignments, attempts to address the need for more complex and authentic writing and communication situations. However, coordinating such projects and finding an adequate number of them on a continual basis frequently proves challenging (Scheiber, 1991). In addition, these projects require significant preparation to create a foundation of necessary knowledge and skills. An alternative or supplement to these types of writing situations is the use of problem-based scenarios (Jebb, 2005; Pennell & Miles, 2009). Scenarios and analyzing accompanying responses to scenarios can provide a rhetorical framework that provides students with the basis for determining effective or ineffective communication.

Using Scenarios to Articulate a Rhetorical Framework

Using context-based problems and scenarios can help students understand and develop effective writing skills (Victor, 1999). Scenarios—short situational vignettes

that introduce individuals, problems, and real-life situations—provide a rhetorical context that reflects the types of situations professionals respond to in writing. The use of scenarios and other problem-based approaches has been found to increase student motivation and help in developing higher level thinking skills (Thomas, 2000). Critical to students developing better writing in response to scenarios is the explicit discussion of such concepts as audience, context, and purpose, not only in initial instructions but also in discussions concerning students' responses to the scenarios.

The following section provides a sample scenario that is appropriate to use in a variety of situations, from a business communication class to a marketing class to a business law class. In each of these situations, the rhetorical effectiveness of the message should be taught and discussed, along with any content-specific material. After the sample scenario, three examples of student responses are given. A brief review of the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of each response shows the types of consideration and discussion that can help students understand what makes an effective or ineffective response.

Problem-Based Scenario Sample

You are the credit manager for FlashExpress, a growing credit card company, and your department receives hundreds of applications for credit cards each month. Frequently, you receive credit card applications from individuals under the legal age who are applying for a credit card. Legal regulations prohibit you from issuing a credit card to underage applicants unless a parent or other guarantor cosigns with them. If the minor does not pay, then the guarantor becomes responsible for the account. In addition to requiring a guarantor, FlashExpress requires underage applicants to fill out an additional supplemental form.

In your role as credit manager, write a letter to Todd Riley, a 17-year-old underage applicant, responding to his request for a credit card. Consider your audience, the context, and the purpose of your letter. Your letter should explain that you have enclosed a necessary supplemental form, along with a new credit card application, both of which need to be filled out. The guarantor must sign both forms. To expedite processing, Todd should mention on the top of the application that he has applied for credit previously and should return the application and supplemental form directly to you.

Identifying the Rhetorical Elements of Effective Writing

Students can be asked to write a response to the scenario with little formal discussion or reference to the rhetorical elements that make an effective response. In this type of approach, the principles are then arrived at inductively, with the rhetorical elements and examples of successful writing being identified in a follow-up discussion, along with an appraisal of areas lacking in effectiveness. Alternatively, prior to writing, instructors can review principles that make an effective response to the scenario. Specifically, this scenario focuses on the rhetorical issues of audience, context, and purpose.

Rather than merely providing templates for a specific type of writing (e.g., deciding that the Todd Riley scenario requires a bad-news letter format—his request for a credit

card is denied), a problem-based approach focuses on students mastering essential rhetorical elements and understanding how to apply them in unique situations. This approach deters students from using a cookie-cutter approach to writing a bad-news letter. Fundamental to effective communication, writers must develop an awareness of both the situation and the audience to craft an appropriate message given the context and purpose of the communication to that audience.

Documents will differ in content and style depending on whether the audience is sympathetic or nonsympathetic, whether this is a first communication or the last of a series of multiple interactions, and whether the purpose is to inform, persuade, or entertain. Critical thinking is required as students work through the process of reconciling all of these elements to produce an effective written response to the scenario.

Applying Rhetorical Principles to the Scenario and Evaluating Responses

Once students become familiar with the elements necessary for writing an effective letter and understand the importance of adapting communication or writing for a particular audience, context, and purpose, they can effectively apply what they have learned in a problem-based scenario situation. Evaluating responses to scenarios is often the most instructive part of the learning process for students, with the instructor teasing out differences in approaches, showing student work as an example, and discussing strengths and weaknesses. Three responses to the FlashExpress scenario follow, with a rhetorical discussion of issues related to the response interspersed.

Response 1: Loren Lackluster

Dear Mr. Riley:

We are very appreciative of your interest in obtaining a FlashExpress credit card. Your business is very important to us. Unfortunately, due to existing laws, we cannot issue a credit card to anyone under the age of 18 without an adult cosigning the application. The adult acts as a guarantor who is responsible for your account if for some reason you are unable to make payment. If you would like to be considered for a FlashExpress credit card, you must fill out the enclosed application along with a supplemental form, and you must have your guarantor sign both forms. Indicate on your application that you have applied previously, and then return everything to us for processing. I am really very sorry for all this extra work and hope you will accept my apologies for this inconvenience. Have a great day.

Sincerely,

Loren Lackluster
Credit Manager

Critique of Response 1

This response characterizes novice writers and writers trying to adhere to a traditional bad-news letter organizational strategy: indirect beginning/buffer, explanation, and then refusal (refusal often implied), pleasant ending, or hopeful ending (Bovee & Thill, 2012). Too great a focus on an organizational strategy or predefined format results in this type of response. With the Todd Riley scenario, it is important to ask, "Is it really 'bad news' that is being conveyed?" In discussing this with students, an instructor may ask if a good news or persuasive response is more appropriate (you can get a card, but there are some additional things you must do). The scenario suggests the purpose is not clear-cut, that a single, predefined organizational pattern may not be best suited to the response.

Defining the Purpose, Audience, and Context

Technically, dangling modifier. In addition to defining the purpose, students also need to consider audience and context. Who is the audience? Are there multiple audiences? What language is appropriate for those audiences? Although Todd is likely viewed as the primary audience, certainly his parents or someone else who would serve as a guarantor should be an additional critical audience to consider. And what information should be stressed and with what consequences? For example, it is critical to get the signature of a guarantor (required by law), but would stressing that the guarantor would be responsible to cover payments if Todd was unable be construed as encouraging Todd to be irresponsible? Perhaps most important, Todd, and likely his parents, may be overwhelmed with the jargon and complication of trying to get a card. The response focuses on what cannot be done and why, with confusing instructions for someone who wants to follow through and still get a card.

Using Appropriate Language

Considering the audience, the language is stilted and formal, with technical jargon. Is it critical to use the term *guarantor*? Can more positive terms be found than "unfortunately," "sorry," "inconvenience," and "apologies"? Is addressing a 17-year-old as "Mr. Riley" the most effective way to build rapport? These are all rhetorical questions that can be explored in helping students craft the most effective response. The next response is an improvement over the first one but still has some deficiencies.

Response 2: Justin Improved

Dear Todd Riley:

Thank you for your credit application to FlashExpress. It pleases us to receive a credit application from a responsible young person, and we genuinely value your interest in choosing FlashExpress.

BOX (continued)

> Regrettably, legalities prevent FlashExpress from creating a credit account and issuing individual cards to anyone under the age of 18. Given your age, you have two options:
>
> - Reapply when you are 18
> - Fill out the enclosed forms and have an adult cosign to guarantee the account. Return the forms to my attention.
>
> If you return the material, refer to your previous application. It will speed up the application process. We at FlashExpress look forward to working with you in your credit needs.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Justin Improved
> Credit Manager

Critique of Response 2

The second response is an improvement over the first one. The applicant's first name is used along with his last name, Todd Riley, which seems more appropriate than "Mr. Riley" for a young person, although it still sounds impersonal. A positive spin is placed on Todd's interest in getting a card—to be a responsible young adult. Negative or confusing details and terms such as *guarantor* have been eliminated, and overall the tone is more positive. However, if your goal is truly to get Todd approved for credit, using a word like *regrettably* and providing a deferred option—reapply when you're 18—do not bring about the desired end. Of course, in a class discussion this may also be an opportunity to talk about the ethics behind getting a young person potentially in debt—whether, philosophically, you or the company should be extending credit to underage individuals who may not have the skill or maturity to use credit appropriately.

Visually, the second response also has better access or chunking of information. Rather than a dense single paragraph, it consists of two short paragraphs and bulleted items, making the information easier to scan and read. The third response goes a step further in showing more awareness of the rhetorical context and eliminating the less effective aspects of the first two responses.

Response 3: Paula Persuader

Dear Todd,

I was delighted to get your application today for a credit card. I handle all applications from people younger than 18. We'd love to issue a FlashExpress credit card to you, Todd. All you have to do is complete the following steps:

1. Fill out the enclosed application and the supplemental form.
2. Have an adult, probably your mom or dad, sign both forms (the person who signs the form becomes responsible for the account if for some reason you cannot make a payment).
3. Write on the top of the application "Applied Previously." This will help me speed up the whole process.
4. Return both forms to me at the following address:

Paula Persuader, Credit Manager
FlashExpress Credit Company
185 E. Isabella Road
Oil City, MI 48858

Todd, I'm glad you chose FlashExpress. I hope to receive your new application within the next few days. Please give me a call at 1-800-GET-CARD if you have any more questions.

Sincerely,

Paula Persuader
Credit Manager

Critique of Response 3

This final response does the best job of accommodating all the rhetorical elements of an appropriate response to the audience, given the context and purpose of the letter. The manager's goal is to establish a relationship with a young client who potentially will have a lifetime to be a valued consumer/user of a FlashExpress credit card. The awareness of the audience's age is evident with the simple first name salutation. The language is straightforward, with minimum jargon or technical words and nothing that would cause a secondary audience, such as parents or others who are cosigning, any concern. At the same time, the letter states clearly that the cosigner will ultimately be responsible if payment is not made. The intent and tone is positive, conveying that the

young person is trying to establish a positive credit history, which the appropriate use of a credit card would do. The letter does not suggest that Todd is just trying to get into debt or be irresponsible about it. The letter is upbeat, not explaining what the company cannot do but focusing only on giving four simple steps (outlined effectively) that need to be completed for the applicant to obtain and begin using a FlashExpress card.

Although structurally the third response is the most straightforward and accessible, instructors can also explore questions of tone with students. Does the third response sound more like a cheerleader or marketing sales pitch than a professional response to a request for a credit card, with words such as "delighted" and "love" and the frequent restating of the applicant's name? Reviewing each of the responses for their strengths and weaknesses helps students gain a greater appreciation for the many rhetorical decisions made in creating effective communication.

Benefits of Using Problem-Based Scenarios

A problem-based scenario moves students from traditional academic prose—where students demonstrate mastery of principles and knowledge to an instructor—toward more professional, applied writing, complete with a realistic rhetorical framework and the accommodation of audience, context, and purpose. Most important, this approach to teaching students to write in a professional context will better prepare them for the workplace. To develop good writing skills, an individual needs to be aware of the various issues discussed in this article. Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach or a sterile rhetorical pattern, the use of scenarios prompts students to think critically about what and why they are writing and for what purposes.

One of the distinct benefits of the scenario approach is the ability to make the need to write seem real (Tedlock, 1981). And the need for effective writers in today's workplace is real. As individuals become more competent in writing and responding to rhetorical scenarios, they can begin to use writing to transform their own thinking and that of their organizations (Amidon, 2005). Problem-based scenarios provide one way to establish a more authentic context. Students learn to develop skills needed to create the type of genuine documents representative of the communication needs of organizations in today's business world.

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Bios

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