A Taxonomy of Communication Acts For The Design of Advanced Writing Courses

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Many advanced writing courses should be designed to meet the professional needs of students in various disciplines, specializations, and career fields. Traditional models of composition and rhetoric, however, may not adequately or directly address needs such as these, aspects of which assume rhetorical considerations that are somewhat tangential to the concerns traditionally addressed in composition and public discourse courses. Accordingly, I outline a taxonomy of communication acts which, while not exhaustive, introduces additional alternatives that can address the diversity of these needs more effectively. Such a taxonomy illustrates how technical writing -- one distinctive form of advanced writing course -- compares and contrasts with composition and other types of rhetoric courses. It also illustrates the need to develop an additional model, that I label "social systems communication." A taxonomy of communication acts provides a means by which to define objectives and distinguish among types of advanced writing courses.

1. A Taxonomy of Communication Acts

Various types of writing courses can be classified along a spectrum of communication acts with composition at one extreme and organizational communication at the other, with public discourse and social systems communication in between. Composition focuses on the agent--the writer--and is concerned for selfactualization and development of the individual. Organizational communication focuses on the purpose and effect of the communication, the context for action by the organization, and the role of the professional in that context. Public discourse is relational, and focuses on the relationship between the individual and the public in the relevant arena for public action. Because of the complexity of our society, social systems communication, at the interface between public discourse and organizational communication, mediates among various organizations, institutions, and interest groups in the relevant societal arena.

The concept of the role of the writer is the basic factor in this taxonomy, because it is distinctive in each of the four types of writing I have identified. The writer is the expressive self, the public self, the organizational self, or the societal self. After the role of the writer is clarified, the other factors of the communication situation must be analyzed: The occasion, the context, the audiences, and the purpose of the communication. These factors enable different types of courses to be distinguished from each other systematically (Table 1). Although these factors in one form or another are present in various rhetoric models, I explain them in a general systems context (in addition to general systems theory, I am indebted to Richard E. Young, et al., who introduce systems theory into Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970). This assumes that the communication is a process by which the organization and expression of human activity changes, transforms, evolves—communication is the dynamic change mechanism.

Occasion provides the stimulus or cause of a communication act. It establishes a need to communicate as a means of resolving some issue or eliminating a dissonance perceived by the writer in his or her role. Without an occasion, people as well as the system function routinely and habitually. Information transfer continues to occur, but volitional communication acts are not required. Context is the field within which the communication occurs. It establishes the boundaries that contain the relevant subsystems and relationships for the communication.
Every discrete communication act has a particular context - - simple or complex, compact or extended - - within which all participants have roles. Audiences are all participants in the communication act. These various participants have different roles that depend on the occasion and the context, and are involved in the communication actively or passively to varying degrees. Purpose comprehends the specific effects on the audiences and consequent actions and changes in the system the writer intends to occur because of the communication act. Determining the purpose of a communication act requires skilled cognitive acts by the writer, who must thoroughly explore the occasion, context, and audiences. Purpose is the keystone of the pre-writing process if the writer is to design an effective bridge of communication.

2. The Characteristics of Each Communication Act

These factors provide a matrix by which to distinguish between four types of communication acts and which provide one basis for the design of different types of advanced writing courses. Composition, public discourse, social systems communication, and organizational communication assume different concepts of the role of the writer, occasion, context, audiences, and purposes. For example, composition assumes a context of private or individual lives, public discourse assumes a community of shared values, social systems communication assumes a societal system of interrelated groups and institutions with diverse goals, and organizational communication assumes an organization of mutually reinforcing roles with common goals. The boundaries between these four types of communication acts are not distinct in practice, where they appear more as a spectrum than as a taxonomy of discrete types. The taxonomy, however, suggests essential characteristics that do differ and that can yield unique sets of rhetorical principles and strategies.

COMPOSITION. Composition assumes communication between individuals as individuals (Table 2). The writer is a personal self, and the uniqueness of the writer's feelings, values, ideas, and cognitive and expressive skills are as significant as those shared in common with the audiences, who are perceived as sensitive individual selves. The occasion for communication - - and at the lyrical extreme almost self-expression rather than communication - - might best be described as existential, the need for self-realization or for establishing and modifying relationships with others. The context for communication is that of shared personal selves from intimate social circles to regions and nations. The purpose of the communication often primarily is affective: perhaps self-actualization might be an appropriate term. Composition heightens our values, emotions, sensitivity, awareness, consciousness as well as increases our mastery of cognitive processes and skills. The personal essay is a typical form of composition, although for the purpose of this article I could include writing as well.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS COMMUNICATION. Social systems communication assumes communication between persons in diverse but explicit societal roles (Table 4), and the concept of role yields what I think to be a distinctive form of communication in public systems, which I am labelling “social systems” to avoid confusion with the label, “public discourse.” These persons participate primarily in terms of those roles rather than in terms of public selves as members of a community. The writer and the audiences participate in specific roles as members of business and industrial organizations, public agencies of all types, various societal institutions and associations, and clearly delineated public interest or societal groups. Unlike public discourse, which assumes a community of shared values and goals, social subsystems (institutions and the like) and relationships. Writer and audiences present themselves in terms of those subsystems and relationships, and, in practice, the occasion and context...
must be realized before the relevant various participants and relationships are known. The communication act requires various tradeoffs and compromises among them. Ideally this would be a non-zero sum game, but it often becomes a zero sum game in which not all roles and relationships can be positively reinforced. The occasion and context can be very local, such as a neighborhood zoning issue, or national, such as a synthetic fuel issue. The purpose of social systems communication is to optimize social decision making as a stage in a dynamic, open-ended process.

A traditional form of social systems communication is the adjudicative legal proceeding in which almost all participants communicate in terms of roles prescribed by the nature of the proceeding - civil, criminal, investigative, discovery, arbitration, etc. Even the jury, the so-called "public" in a trial, participates in a role clearly delineated by the systems context. Another increasingly prevalent form of social systems communication is the position paper, often presented at a legislative committee hearing. In a hearing, all participants communicate in terms of their roles as prescribed by the nature of the policy issue involved rather than as private citizens or as the "public". Most interorganizational communication, among both public and private institutions, in a public policymaking context can be best defined and taught, I think, as "social systems communication."

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION. Organizational communication assumes communication between persons defined in terms of organizational roles and objectives (Table 5). The writer and his or her audiences consciously define themselves in terms of these organizational roles, which establish the relationships and communication paths among them. The organizational context also establishes hierarchies of objectives and values that define the issue and context and that determine the purpose of organizational problem solving. Within an organization different units, such as manufacturing and design, have particular objectives and values. However, these particular objectives and values derive from organizations, such as an automobile manufacturer and a parts supplier, share mutual objectives and values which provide the same bridges for communication. The organizational context therefore differs from the social systems context in this important way. An organization is a closed system; a social system is an open system within which mutual objectives and values must be established and among which tradeoffs must be made. Organizational issues predicate the roles and relationships; societal issues involve voluntary as well as known roles, and the relevant relationships emerge during the decision making process. Organizational communication - the technical report and the business letter - perhaps is the most pervasive type of communication act today.

3. The Design of Advanced Writing Courses

Public discourse, organizational communication, and social systems communication will play increasingly important roles in our society. We must train our students not only to communicate as citizens, but within organizations and among diverse organizations and institutions and among persons in diverse roles. Advanced writing courses should distinguish between these three types of communication needs, and address them separately. When viewed in terms of the taxonomy I have introduced, these courses will distinct types of courses because they will have differing objectives. They can be designed for different fields, specializations, and professions, or for combinations among them. But to be effective, they should be designed in terms of advanced skills the students must master rather than in terms of the subject matter of those various fields and disciplines.

Courses in public discourse can be designed for students entering public life or for students who will be active as citizens in various political and civic activities. These courses require writers to define and discuss issues in terms of
premises, objectives, and values that can be assumed as well as established in common among participants in some public domain. These courses will teach skills of rational persuasion and presentation of information, which in turn will require students to master skills of deductive and inductive logic, analysis of empirical data, formulation of concepts, etc. These courses also will have an ethical dimension whereby the writer establishes a responsible public self and a reasonable purpose for communication. They will have affective objectives appropriate for maintaining a sense of community. A course in public discourse could be oriented either toward argumentation and persuasion or toward the presentation of information, and would be designed for history, political science, economics, environmental resources, and similar majors not going on to graduate or professional school.

Courses in social systems communication can be designed for those students entering service sector institutions and agencies as well as business and professional roles requiring them to interact with persons in other industrial and governmental organizations on social and public policy issues. These courses require writers to define issues in terms of different perspectives, and to determine the grounds upon which they can be discussed. The courses should teach mediation, bargaining, and optimizing skills as well as the persuasive skills relevant to various categories of issues. They should sensitize students to differences in cognitive styles, values, and paradigms among diverse audiences, and accustom students to the probabilities and uncertainties associated with open-ended problematic situations. They should teach skill appropriate for analysis of contingent contexts and diverse audiences. A course in social systems communication probably would be oriented toward societal problem solving more than traditional cognitive processes, and would be designed for social science, social work, natural resource, public system engineering, public health and similar majors entering relevant careers or going on to graduate or professional school.

Courses in organizational communication can be designed for the students entering business, industry, and other private and public institutions to assume professional roles that will require them to work primarily within intra-organizational contexts. These courses require writers to define issues in organizational terms, and to analyze and evaluate the results of their technical activities according to organizational problems and needs. The courses should teach management skills of audience analysis, sensitivity to different roles and responsibilities, and making judgements and assuming responsibility for one's activities. They should teach students how to determine the communication implications of their design and problem-solving activities, and how to write for instrumental purposes, that is, how to write to ensure that others take appropriate actions. A course in organizational communication would be a business, technical or professional writing course specifically designed for students in various career, vocational, and professional fields such as business and management, engineering, educational administration, public administration and nursing. These courses should be for students finishing undergraduate, graduate, or professional programs and embarking on careers in business, government, or industry.

In sum, different types of advanced writing courses should be designed for different types of upper-level, graduate, and professional students. Although these courses may have objectives in common and require students to master some similar skills, they will have important objectives unique to each type of course. All courses will assume certain basic cognitive skills and literacy and strive to improve cognitive skills of analysis and synthesis relevant to all communication and sensitize students to the ethical and affective dimensions of any communication act.

A taxonomy of communication acts, however, indicates that advanced writing
courses also should be designed to meet fundamentally different needs that different types of students will meet after college. Some students will have to help us strive for consensus on important public issues rationally and democratically. Other students will have to help the various groups and institutions in our society pursue diverse goals while at the same time mutually resolving social issues. And still other students will have to help diverse organizations achieve objectives these organizations have established for themselves and that have been sanctioned by our society. The advanced writing course should be a primary means by which a college directly serves society. In meeting public, societal, and organizational needs, advanced writing courses will serve students as well.

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Table 1. A Taxonomy of Communication Acts Matrix

**COMPOSITION**

- **Role of Writer**: Personal Self
- **Occasion**: Existential
- **Context**: Private Life
- **Audiences**: Individuals
- **Purpose**: Self-Actualization
- **Typical Form**: Personal Essay

Table 2. The Characteristics of Composition

**PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

- **Role of Writer**: Public Self
- **Occasion**: Public Issue
- **Context**: Community
- **Audiences**: Public
- **Purpose**: Influence Public Values and Action
- **Typical Form**: Persuasive Essay

Table 3. The Characteristics of Public Discourse
SOCIAL SYSTEMS COMMUNICATION

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Table 4. The Characteristics of Social Systems Communication

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Table 5. The Characteristics of Organisational Communication