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PROFESSIONAL SPEAKERS IN THE BUSINESS WRITING CLASSROOM

Marguerite H. Helmers

It is often said that college writing courses have no relation to "the real world." Yet business and technical writing courses, with their practical writing assignments and emphasis on audiences beyond the school, have been able to make strong claims that they bridge the gap between academic and professional writing. As an instructor of business writing, I look for ways to strengthen the connection between the classroom and the business community. At my institution, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the business writing course relies on the case-study method, and its curricula is comprised of letter-writing, memo-writing, and a researched term paper that uses resources from professional business publications. Although the case-studies are valuable for providing students at both the high school and college levels with a feel for the variables of audience, subject, tone, and purpose that directly affect all letters written on the job, they do not extend students beyond the basic limitation of academic writing: the students ultimately write for their instructor rather than the audience specified in the case-studies.

In order to counteract this limitation, I recently devised an alternative project for my business writing course that would allow the students to extend their communications skills beyond the boundaries of the classroom: I asked the students to invite to our classroom professionals from the fields they planned to enter after graduation, professionals who could speak about business communications. The project supplemented the regular readings and writings from the textbook, but it had a clear advantage over the text because it placed the students directly into that "real world" that we hear so much about, requiring them to analyze audience, subject, tone, and purpose in order to secure a speaker.

For many semesters I had arranged for speakers to attend my classes, using my contacts in the community to invite advertising executives, illustrators, musicians, and lawyers. These guests were always appreciated by the students, who liked their practical advice on writing as well as their anecdotes. They also provided a name and a face to remember when the students looked for employment. My contacts, however, were running thin when I initiated this project, and I felt that the students would benefit more from the experience of choosing and inviting their own guests to the class.

The project makes immediate the rhetorical considerations that our business communications textbook discusses. When writing, the students must consider whether the intended speakers are young, old, senior partners, junior staff, friends, strangers; they must persuade these people to give up their time for the class; and they must write concise and direct prose that reflects well upon themselves as future professionals in that field. Their communication, written or spoken, is also truly transactional— they need to arrive at a business arrangement.

Another advantage is that the project requires the students to work collaboratively in groups in order to insure a successful presentation. At times, a small group can draw attention to itself as an artificial means of introducing the concept of audience to an insular classroom; however, in a business writing course, small group projects reflect the type of team efforts that characterize so much of modern business activity. Collaborative activity of this kind can also be the most difficult part of any assignment, for it involves different working styles and various personalities.

When I initiated this project during a summer session, I placed the students into groups on the basis of a survey that they filled out during the first week of class. They responded to questions about their majors in school, their current jobs, and their career plans. It was essential that they write as much as they could about their aspirations, not only about the career they intended to pursue, but about the career they dreamed about when they saw themselves as someone adventurous or glamorous. This information about their fantasy careers provided me with a broader base of common interests from which to form groups. The groups that resulted contained three to four people. While there was some overlap of interests— such as three groups focusing on accounting— there was also a group formed of people whose career plans were very specific and rigid (for example, one member wrote that he wanted "to become an operations manager for an air

freight company such as Federal Express"). I put those students together, hoping they would explore more adventurous possibilities, and although I called their group "the administrators," wishing to suggest unification, they were quick to see why they were together and called themselves "the misfits"— and then went on to be one of the most productive groups in class.

While the students worked in groups, I limited my role to that of an observer and occasional commentator, but I initiated the project by suggesting general sources to consult in order to locate a speaker. Among the sources were: *Consultants and Consulting Organizations Directory, Martindale Hubbell Law Directory, Reference Book of Corporate Managements 1990, the US Manufacturers Directory,* the business pages of the local newspapers, and the yellow pages. I ruled out family members as speakers, even if they were interesting and influential— such as senators, mayors, or high-level business partners— because the informal communications of home life would make writing the series of letters only a formality, little more than completing the practice assignments from the textbook. However, the best *sources* for references proved to be family members and friends, for they were able to provide the students with names to use when making the first contact on the phone. For better or for worse, it did illustrate that old business adage "it's not what you know, it's who you know."

I made one more suggestion to my students regarding whom to invite: Since there still might be lingering perceptions among them that all professionals are men, I suggest to the students that they consider inviting women to the class. Recent studies have shown that women and men differ in their styles of communication on the job, and women professionals often find the need to creatively coordinate work and home life. Since a primary advantage to this project is that students learn about the options open to them in their fields, a broader representation of experience from the business community, including that of women professionals, can only help them discover more about their interests and needs.

Once speakers were decided upon, the groups still needed to discuss the topics for the speeches. The content of the speaker's talk was to be determined by each group and its speaker. I suggested that the talk be of general interest to everyone in the class and that it deal, in part, with the type of business communication that the speaker encounters on his or her job. Beyond that, each group was free to determine the agenda based on what they were interested in learning.

The next components of the project were contacting the speaker, publicizing the speech, preparing a profile of the speaker, and writing a letter of thanks. Mainly, I offered guidelines for making contacts, knowing that this was the least familiar aspect of the project for the audience.

The first consideration for groups, when contacting speakers, was whether the members felt more comfortable using the phone or writing letters. Many students found it difficult to make requests of strangers, and letter-writing placed some distance between them and their contact. If a group chose to make the contact by phone, I recommended that one person from each group assume the responsibility for making phone calls; however, I also felt that in the interest of organization *all* group members should suggest names of potential speakers. Once a speaker agreed to the offer, the group, working collaboratively, wrote a letter of confirmation, specifying the date, time, room number, and subject matter of the speech.

Things worked differently if the groups chose to initiate their contacts by letter. At group meetings, which took place weekly during class time, the group collaboratively wrote letters of invitation, and they assigned one member to type them. Letters were followed by phone calls, and then, when the group received an affirmative answer, they collaboratively wrote a letter of confirmation.

I felt it was essential for the students to mention all the names of their group members in the confirmation or invitation letters so that one person did not claim all of the benefits of meeting the speaker. It was also important that the groups appoint representatives from their midst to call speakers the day before the talk in order to gently remind them of the upcoming event, the room number, and the time.

In order to publicize the speech to the rest of the class, each group was required to create posters, fliers, or advance programs. I provided as examples advertisements gathered from the Department of English, which frequently sponsors colloquia and guest lectures, but the students had the freedom to decide on the best format for their advertisement and the best strategy for publicizing the event. Many groups chose to combine the profile of their speaker with the advertisement. These profiles contained each speaker's title and place of work, a brief job description, and a mention of the speaker's education. They appeared on posters, some accompanied by photographs, and in programs distributed on the day of the talk.

Preparing the advertisements proved to be the part of the project with which the students had the most fun; finding the speaker was the part of the project that was the most difficult. Locating a speaker required research, the ability to reach consensus, and the stamina to cope with dead ends and refusals. Many in the class confessed at the end of the project that they had been "intimidated" by the very thought of phoning a stranger, and it was true that those groups with personal contacts had an easier time recruiting someone to speak. Out of seven groups, five confirmed arrangements with a speaker in two weeks; two groups had so many difficulties that it took four weeks to even have the name of a suitable speaker in hand. One group learned much about less-than-ideal business communications when they left messages with secretaries for people they didn't know— messages that were, of course, never returned. Another group learned about the ways groups function when a dominant member usurped the contacting role, insisting that it was "the easiest job," and never called anyone until the last moment.

When working with the publicity, though, things ran smoothly and joyfully. The posters ranged from large, hand-lettered, poster-board announcements to leaflets photocopied onto colored paper to full-color posters printed on a computer. Some groups obtained pictures of their speakers and printed these with an advance "program" complete with picture, biography, and outline of the talk. Most announcements were handed personally by group members to every person in the class.

To evaluate the students at the end of the project, I collected one portfolio containing all printed material from each group. Portfolios contained not only the outgoing correspondence written by the group members, but responses written by speaker contacts. Some groups decided to include a memorandum that detailed the successes and the pitfalls of their project. I, in turn, returned the portfolios to the groups with a memorandum addressed to all of them. In it I recounted what I perceived to be their strengths and weaknesses in preparing this project. I tried to keep the speaker's presentation separate from my assessment of how the group performed, for the successes or failures of the speakers were their own matters. Instead, I graded the project on the efficiency with which the group secured a speaker, the timeliness with which they confirmed the arrangements and thanked the speaker, the effectiveness of their demeanor when introducing the speaker to the rest of the class, their appearance and conduct

when the speaker was present, and their ability to work together and solve problems as a group.

We devoted five class sessions to the talks, and they were well worth the investment of time and energy. I myself, as a listener in the back row, learned quite a bit about different professionals' attitudes toward business communications, and, more importantly, the day-to-day activities of their business life, which would enable me to be more responsive to my students' aspirations. Invited to the class were three accountants, one lawyer, a professor of management information systems, a health care administrator, and an insurance executive. These brief titles don't, however, do justice to the varied—and often unexpected—nature of their careers, for all of the speakers demonstrated creative possibilities for work within their fields. For example, the insurance representative related that he had spent his last ten years as the marketing director for his company and was responsible for designing brochures to sell insurance and for publishing a newsletter for the sales staff. One of the visiting accountants had also moved from solving tax problems for clients into marketing the small firm for which he worked.

As with any new project, there were problems. The main one was that, in one or two cases, the student who had assumed responsibility for contacting the speaker reaped all the benefits from being associated with that speaker. Although I had warned against this early in the project, when recommending that all the students' names appear somewhere in the confirmation letter, perhaps through natural shyness or perhaps through tacit agreement, not everyone had the opportunity to speak with his or her own guest. In one case two group members sat in the back of the room while the third conversed with the speaker over coffee in the front. This, however, was more the exception than the rule, and, as with any group of presentations, later groups learned what was effective from the initial attempts.

A second problem was the professional appearance and conduct of the group members. Because this project was part of a summer-long focus on professionalism and career planning, I was surprised when some group members greeted their speakers in denim clam-diggers, extra-large T-shirts, and scuffed tennis shoes. In addition, a few of the people responsible for introductions stood at desk-side and mumbled only a few words. And, at times, the professional conduct of the class members who were not involved directly with the speaker was less than ideal, especially when some wandered into class late, up to ten minutes after the presentation began, which

disrupted the speaker and negatively represented the maturity of the entire class. I had also anticipated a greater response with questions and a greater desire to speak with the guest individually at the end of the presentation.

Finally, a small but not insignificant oversight was that we forgot to provide water to the speakers, most of whom suffered from dry throats. To counteract these problems and to increase the potential for this project to move away from classroom boundaries, I would revise the project in these ways:

1) I would allow family members of classmates who might be appropriate speakers to be invited by groups other than those that contained the relation. This would help the groups without personal contacts while still maintaining a formal distance, and it would foster a feeling of common purpose in the entire class.

2) I would require every group member to make at least one contact by phone or by mail with a potential speaker and then report on his or her findings in a "memo to the file" that would become part of the final portfolio.

3) I would devote class sessions to discussing ways to introduce speakers, involve the audience in the presentation, and field questions.

4) I would see that questions for the speaker be prepared in advance of the talk and given to a member of the presenting group, who would be responsible for drawing out the students' questions at the end of the talk. This suggestion came from the students themselves, the result of their own dissatisfaction with the moments of silence at the end of each talk.

5) I would schedule events so that each presentation would be followed by an activity that would ask students to indicate what they had heard. This idea was also suggested by the students themselves, since they were sorry when they forgot what some of the speakers said and thought some external motivation to prompt them to take notes was needed. Instead of a quiz, however, I would advocate a one-page written response to parts of the speech which students found most inter-

interesting. These responses would be ungraded and could be given to the presenting group or to the instructor for review.

It is also possible for this project to extend even further beyond the walls of the classroom. For example, the students could compile a list of speakers which could be made available to future sections of business writing. The names, addresses, phone numbers, and occupations— even assessments— of speakers who attended class, and those of potential speakers, would be included. An introduction to the volume, written by the students, could detail what the students discovered about the speakers' incentives to attend the class, since they are not paid for such visits. Since community volunteer work is required for promotion at many businesses, the students could also write a letter of thanks to the speaker's employer. These projects involve additional business writing skills and would also be beneficial to future classes.

After the last speaker caught the elevator to the first floor, our class sat back to assess what had happened over the last few weeks. The project, the students said, made class interesting and unusual, because, although they had practiced writing letters and memos from the textbook assignments, they didn't feel that much was at stake with those assignments. They liked meeting new people. They also mentioned that they came to understand my comments on their assignments and the textbook's guidelines in a new way, for, although I had always urged them to consider form and appearance as well as content, I was, they assumed, merely being teacherly. It wasn't until every speaker brought in examples of unacceptable business letters— one dramatically retrieved from a wastebasket, most hoarded in "bad example" files just for such occasions— that they began to see that appearances are important.

In the end, though, lists of benefits and learning experiences aside, the finest result of the class's experience may have been something more intangible. A good presentation by a guest reflected well on the judgment of the group that issued the invitation. It seems that, when successful, invitations to speakers also served as invitations to my students to feel proud— invitations that they accepted.

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