genre theory posits that people categorize events and perceive them as recurring types, and that they generate recurring rhetorical responses to those perceived recurring situations. The theory assumes that people are socialized to have those perceptions, and that in business communication, the socialization usually takes place in an organization. That is, as Carolyn Miller (1994) says, genre is a form of social action.

Because the agency writers whom Pope-Ruark studied form temporary “bridge” communities with clients outside of, but related to, the agency, Winsor suggests that the research “stretches the theory of genre as a form of social action because [the] writers are never [completely] socialized into the community for which they ostensibly write” (personal communication, 2007).

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Reference

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CHALLENGING THE NECESSITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNITY FOR RHETORICAL GENRE USE: COMMUNITY AND GENRE IN THE WORK OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION AGENCY WRITERS

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SINCE PROPOSITORS OF the social perspective on writing acknowledged that “communication is inextricably bound up in the culture of a
particular society” (Faigley, 1985, p. 236), scholars have investigated ways in which writing in the workplace is connected to the community of that organization. North American genre theory, which defines genre rhetorically, as useful communicative patterns that rise, change, and decline as needed to accomplish the work of a community, has been used extensively in our scholarship to connect the use of written patterns to the communities and organizations that use them.

Drawing on this concept of genre as social action (Bitzer, 1968; Miller, 1994a, 1994b), scholars have studied how workplace writers draw on organizationally situated genres to address various internal and external communication situations and to participate in the organizational knowledge creation process (see Devitt, 1991; Smart, 1993; Winsor, 1990). Similarly, several studies have explored the connections between community or organizational genre usage and membership status in a workplace or industry (see Katz, 1998; Odell, 1985; Pare, 2000; Winsor, 1996). Many of these studies share three commonalities:

1. The studies examine professionals-who-write rather than professional writers.
2. The studies focus on writing done by these participants within accepted organizational genres and for audiences known or defined by the organization.
3. The studies assume most participants achieve full organizational membership only after mastering the organizations’ genres at some level.

Based on these commonalities, many scholars seem to accept that to use organizational genres rhetorically, one must be a member of an organizational community.

But not all writers who effectively wield organizational genres are members of that organization. For example, writers working in integrated marketing communications agencies—agencies that provide a combination of writing and design services in marketing, advertising, public relations, and strategic brand building—successfully write complex external, and even internal, messages for organizations that enlist their services. Much of what these writers do is only partially shaped by their own organizational community; their writing is also greatly affected by their outsider status with clients and their occupational writing and genre expertise.
Without the luxury of being immersed in client organizations, agency writers learn from afar how each client would like to be represented to its specifically segmented public, often while juggling multiple clients in different industries with vastly different brand strategies and organizational voices. These writers are, in theory, fulfilling objectives usually reserved for socialized members of the client organizations but are themselves removed from this traditional client community affiliation needed to use genre as social action as it is currently understood. This positioning raises important questions about rhetorical genre and community in current theory.

Research Questions

To explore the genre and community challenges faced by marketing communication agency writers, I focused on three research questions:

- To what extent might writing tasks undertaken by agency writers that fulfill clients’ business and rhetorical goals, tasks traditionally reserved for organizational community members, still constitute rhetorical genre in the sense of social action?
- How do professional agency writers come to understand their clients to successfully use genres for multiple clients and their audiences?
- What community membership is required for successful rhetorical genre use by agency writers for their clients, and how do agency writers negotiate these issues?

Approach

To address these questions, I conducted a 6-month ethnographic research study at a more than 20-year-old marketing, branding, advertising, strategic planning, and public relations agency located in a Midwestern city. The agency, PSA, serves a variety of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations of all sizes in a variety of industries and, at the time of the study, employed six full-time employees whose primary job duty was writing. Five writers at the agency agreed to participate in the study.

To conduct a sound study, I created data and methodological triangulation in my research design (Bishop, 1999; Doheny-Farina & Odell, 1985) by employing the following methods:
1. Regular observation of participants during writing and project-related activities as well as general agency business activities
2. Collection of selected document drafts and final products that participants were working on during observations
3. Discourse-based and open interviews with participants about observed behaviors and texts to explore community and genre issues in this setting

Through these methods, I was able to test emerging patterns in the data and ask activity-based questions during interviews (Doheny-Farina & Odell, 1985, p. 510). These research methods were approved by my university’s institutional review board in advance of data collection, and specific names and details were changed to protect the identities of the participants, the agency, and its clients.

Findings

To better understand the multiple communities that the agency writers were functioning within, I first drew from my literature review of professional and business communication, genre and community theories, organizational culture and socialization theories, and advertising agency-client relationship theory to create a working theoretical definition of a rhetorical community. Four major characteristics of communities seemed to be common across most of the literature reviewed: a shared purpose, shared repository of knowledge, shared sense of recurring situations, and shared goal of appropriate response to recurring situations.

Using these characteristics, I defined community throughout the research as a group of like-minded individuals who structure themselves around a shared subset of values, goals, practices, and norms that can be transferred to new members as needed and whose primary purpose is to work toward a common goal. Based on my qualitative study, I found that the PSA writers drew on multiple community memberships, both what we might consider traditional and temporarily constructed, to enact rhetorical communication strategies and genres for their clients.

Community Affiliations of Agency Writers

The three primary community affiliations the writers called on to complete their communication tasks successfully for each client were the occupational community of integrated marketing commu-
communication, the organizational community of the agency PSA, and the temporary intercommunity relationship with each client.

Integrated marketing communication occupational community. First, the agency writers are members of a larger occupational community of the integrated marketing communication industry. The idea of occupational community was originally introduced by Van Maanen and Barley (1984) as a means to explain the social and professional commonalities present among members of the same occupation in different sites. Within the integrated marketing communication community, members share the goal of providing community expertise to organizations, and members who are professional writers specifically strive to create superior communication vehicles and effective message strategies to reach target audiences. Essentially, the discursive work of members who are professional writers is to use community expertise and genres to achieve other communities’ communication goals, either internally as employees or externally as agency partners. Genres that are fostered by professionals in this community and shared with other communities include print and television advertisements, press releases, public relations newsletters, company and product briefs, and press and sales kits, among many others.

Four out of five of the study participants self-identified as members of the integrated marketing communication community. One participant noted the strongest identification, having multiple degrees in his field and dedicated work experience in marketing communication agencies. More so than any of the five participants, he considered his membership in the occupational community to supersede his agency community membership, explaining that his interest in the industry extended throughout his life through industry conferences, local industry professional organizations, personal creative projects conducted with friends in the same occupational community, and personal reading habits. His strong commitment to his occupational community allowed him, he believed, to bring new, different, and compelling ideas to his agency projects.

The agency organizational community. Although the aforementioned participant identified most strongly with the occupational community, the three more seasoned participants centered their
community membership in the agency community and loyalty to its members. These writers shared journalism backgrounds, but each had unique experience in different areas of public relations and marketing through work with various communication agencies.

With a combined total of nearly 50 years experience at PSA specifically, they had an extensive repository of organizational knowledge to draw on for their client work and felt comfortable that their past experience would serve them well in future client situations. They identified more with their positions and the people at the agency than with the larger occupational community with which the previously discussed participant identified, citing the fact that they had all, in different ways, helped to build the agency and its success with clients through their hard work.

Negotiated intercommunity relationships. Finally, to enact the rhetorical and social goals of both the occupational community and organizational community, each of the participants formed temporarily negotiated intercommunity relationships with their clients. I use the term *intercommunity relationships* to imply the agency and client communities working together for a common purpose rather than two communities forming a new hybrid community. Strong agency-client relationships share a common purpose and goal temporarily, but the individual people in these relationships have responsibilities to their organizations that are often more powerful than the agency-client bond and can undermine the agency-client relationship. When working with clients, the agency writers’ goal is to fulfill the rhetorical imperatives of their occupational and organizational communities—to produce audience-centered, rhetorically appropriate, and successful marketing communications—by building and sustaining client relationships. To do so, writers strive to form joint goals with their clients through building intercommunity relationships while remaining loyal to their occupational and agency communities.

**Negotiating Communities—Case Studies and Discussion**

The case studies presented in this article show the PSA agency writers drawing on occupational community genres as well as their knowledge of the client’s organizational community to craft rhetorically
effective documents. For example, in the early stages of the relationship with a new client, three of the participant writers drew on their understanding of the rhetorical situations facing the client given their experience with its sister organization (a longtime client), their knowledge of effective genres given the client’s market position, and their own assessment of the client’s needs and goals to craft a valuable strategic plan. Based on this mutually approved plan, the writers used the occupational community genres of the print and Web advertisement, press release, and email newsletter, among others, to help the new client achieve its goals. To use the genres rhetorically, the writers adapted their knowledge of community genres and practical agency experience, combined with information about the clients and their goals.

In the case of one long-term client, the agency writers enacted the rhetorical goals of their occupational and organizational community directly through previously negotiated goals for the agency-client relationship. Having worked with the client for years, the lead project writer was extremely familiar with the client’s message, positioning, and goals, largely because he had been integral in creating those for the client. His extensive knowledge and personal identification with the client allowed him to use his occupational genre expertise to craft numerous documents with limited client input and negotiation. During my observation period, he wrote and managed the entire client annual report after only two meetings with the client to determine the overarching message of the report. The client’s trust in him was so explicit that he not only wrote the entire report with minimal revision from the client but also wrote the letter from the president without client revision. This relationship was so strong that genre use served the rhetorical functions of the two individual communities and the intercommunity relationship implicitly.

Current genre theory assumes that to undertake the discursive “work” of a community, one must be a socialized community member with an understanding of common recurring situations and community-sanctioned responses to those situations (Miller, 1994a, 1994b). Yet as Devitt (2004) reminded us, groups of people who spend much time working toward common goals can be considered communities, but individuals belong to many communities for which they “shift identity and motives” as necessary to accomplish goals (p. 42). Although the
agency-client relationships were not fully formed communities, each relationship in the study exhibited characteristics of community that allowed the agency professionals to write rhetorically for their clients. The agency writers thought about the clients’ businesses, audiences, industries, cultures, and conventions while collecting additional information from clients to develop a shared sense of purpose and base of knowledge. They also used their occupational community knowledge and agency experience with other clients to assess recurring situations and appropriate responses for each client. With this community-like knowledge to build on, marketing communication agency writers at PSA used occupational genres for rhetorical purposes in their intercommunity relationships with clients.

My conclusions suggest that, at PSA, agency writers use genres rhetorically for the clients they serve because in doing so they fulfill the goals of both their integrated marketing communication occupational community and the PSA organizational community. As members of these communities through education or agency work, the PSA writers negotiate intercommunity relationships with clients to achieve the rhetorical goals of their occupational community, organizational community, and intercommunity client relationships, making genre use negotiated and based in multiple communities.

**Significance**

My study adds a new layer of understanding to community theory and genre practices by exploring how professional writers draw on multilayered community membership to achieve communication goals in complex situations. Scholars have often discussed the ways our community memberships overlap and affect our rhetorical responses, and this practical look at a relatively unstudied population of writers helps to clarify ways our community memberships inform each other and our communicative actions.

My findings enhance our understanding of genre as rhetorical action by expanding our view of community to include the intersections where individuals negotiate useful intercommunity relationships that allow the communities to share, for a time, rhetorical goals and genres. Community in this sense is a temporary, negotiated achievement that may or may not persist but that does provide agency writers with a
context-for-now for rhetorical actions. This idea of layered community membership expands our perception of where community membership is centered and, thus, where rhetorical action is centered as well, especially given existing workplace genre and organizational socialization theories.

By identifying possible communities, such as the occupational community, that contribute to the expertise and perspective of professional writers, I encourage other workplace communication researchers to explore the intersections of community memberships and the necessity of socialization into a single community in the work of writers in organizations.

References


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