Know Thy Audience: Helping Students Engage a Threshold Concept Using Audience-Based Pedagogy

Rebecca Pope-Ruark
Elon University, rruark@elon.edu

Know Thy Audience: Helping Students Engage a Threshold Concept Using Audience-Based Pedagogy

Abstract

Students are experts at sizing up instructors, but many do not extend this analysis to non-instructor audiences, which can reduce their effectiveness in new communication situations. Audience, therefore, is a crucial threshold concept not only in Rhetoric and Composition, but in any discipline that values communication skills. How can instructors help students develop a deeper understanding of audience in the disciplines and begin to cross the threshold? In this article, I describe how a group of Professional Writing and Rhetoric students engaged the audience threshold through a semester-long, client-based project. Drawing on data collected via reflections and portfolios, written deliverables, client feedback, and instructor notes, analysis shows the students were initially overconfident in their ability to assess audiences, worked through valid emotional responses to substantive client feedback, and learned to negotiate the dynamics of multiple audiences more carefully over the course of the semester.

Know Thy Audience:
Helping Students Engage a Threshold Concept Using Audience-Based Pedagogy

Rebecca Pope-Ruark
Elon University
Elon, North Carolina, USA
rruark@elon.edu

Students are experts at sizing up instructors, but many do not extend this analysis to non-instructor audiences, which can reduce their effectiveness in new communication situations. Audience, therefore, is a crucial threshold concept not only in Rhetoric and Composition, but in any discipline that values communication skills. How can instructors help students develop a deeper understanding of audience in the disciplines and begin to cross the threshold? In this article, I describe how a group of Professional Writing and Rhetoric students engaged the audience threshold through a semester-long, client-based project. Drawing on data collected via reflections and portfolios, written deliverables, client feedback, and instructor notes, analysis shows the students were initially overconfident in their ability to assess audiences, worked through valid emotional responses to substantive client feedback, and learned to negotiate the dynamics of multiple audiences more carefully over the course of the semester.

Keywords: writing, audience, threshold concepts, disjunction, client- based (or audience-based) pedagogy

Introduction

Our students are experts when it comes to us, their instructors, because they've spent their entire educational careers learning how to read us, how to figure out "what we want," and how to get what they want from us, usually specific grades. To do so they glean clues from our syllabi and assignment sheets, they discuss strategies with students who have been in our classes, and, sometimes, they talk to us. This type of careful assessment of an audience is an excellent illustration of the rhetorical strategy of audience analysis. As the teachings of Aristotle, Cicero, and St. Augustine have shown, knowing your audience is crucial to developing and delivering effective communication that achieves defined goals, builds credibility, and moves society forward.

Yet while students are adept at assessing the instructor-audience, many are often less adept in assessing complex, non-instructor audiences, which therefore limits their effectiveness as communicators in new situations. In fact, when students only write for the instructor-audience throughout their education, with its inherent teacher-student power differential and grade-based evaluation, their transitions to other writing environments that value collaboration and that judge success on effectiveness rather than grades can be hindered (Dias et al, 1999). Based on a seven-year study of writing at multiple workplace and academic sites, Patrick Dias and colleagues argue that the dynamic and transactional context of the workplace is "worlds apart" from the often "routinized," teacher-focused context of academic writing (pp. 72-74). The very nature of the traditional teacher-audience leads to pseudotransactional writing in many cases, writing that serves an epistemic

function for the student and evaluative function for the teacher, but that serves no purpose for an external audience (Dias et al, 1999; Forsberg, 1989; Petraglia, 1995).

We all want our students, in every discipline, to be effective writers well-prepared for the complexities of the workplace and community, but this requires a richer understanding of audience than we reinforce in the traditional classroom. Audience is a troublesome concept for students to understand, whether in a first year composition (FYC) course, an advanced professional writing course, or any disciplinary course that might require students to consider how to communicate with a non-instructor audience. Students often struggle to write for an audience other than the instructor, and even students majoring in Professional Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) might understand the theoretical dynamics of audience but can find it difficult to apply that understanding in their non-academic lives when writing in their internships or communities. Audience, then, is a fundamental *threshold concept* that crosses disciplines – a concept that once learned can redefine the way a student views writing, the discipline, and possibly the world (Meyer & Land, 2006, p.3).

How can we help students develop habits of mind that build on their uncanny ability to size up a professor and apply that rhetorical ability to disciplinary, professional, and community audiences? One way is to design courses that enable engagement with real audiences, require students to interact with those audiences and integrate audience feedback into final products, and provoke students (and faculty) to deal with the professional and sometimes emotional consequences of these interactions. In this article, I share my experience with such pedagogy to examine what happens when students are faced with an audience with real power over their writing projects rather than an instructor simulating an authentic audience. I first briefly review relevant literature to establish audience as a threshold concept that is crucial to students in all fields. I then present a case study of my experience running a full-semester client project in an upper-level PWR course in Fall 2009. Students struggled, were challenged, and eventually thrived in this audience-centric, problem-based learning environment, and more importantly, many began to cross the threshold in their understanding of audience.

Audience as a Threshold Concept

We all want our students to be better writers, regardless of discipline. Theorists and educators in the rhetorical tradition have long argued that understanding one's audience, or more importantly developing the ability to assess multifaceted audiences on the fly and adapt messages accordingly, is crucial to success as an effective communicator. Audience, as such, is a threshold concept for anyone who hopes to be an effective writer or speaker.

In the literature of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), threshold concepts are defined as "concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to ways of thinking and practicing in that discipline," and internalizing such a concept can be "transformative," "irreversible," "integrative," and also "troublesome" (Land et al, 2005, p. 53-54). Threshold concepts differ from core concepts, the "conceptual building blocks" of disciplinary knowledge, in that understanding a threshold concept can fundamentally change one's understanding of a subject in ways that understanding a core concept does not (Meyer and Land, 2006, p. 6).

Threshold concepts like audience are fundamental ways of thinking that can be difficult to acquire because acquisition requires learners to integrate ideas and transform their own understanding of a field and themselves (Savin-Baden, 2005, cited in Land et al., 2005,

p. 54). Meyer and Land (2006) argue that students who have difficulty understanding particular threshold concepts find themselves in a "state of liminality (latin *limen* – 'threshold'), a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity" (p. 16). When learners in this state encounter threshold concepts they are not yet prepared to cross, they experience *disjunction*; this disjunction is exactly the place where engaged pedagogical interventions can be transformative, as is true in the case of helping students understand the complexities of audience analysis (Cousin, 2007).

When students encounter the threshold concept of audience, they are encountering a rhetorical concept with a long, rich history and a complex interrelationship with all other important concepts in the discipline. The discipline of rhetoric, and by extension professional communication, is strongly influenced by Aristotle's careful attention to assessing audiences in order to effectively determine "the available means of persuasion" in any given case. Aristotle's concept of audience is psychological and humanistic at its core and, therefore, complicated today by the vast complexities of mass media, multinational corporations, and networked writing technologies. Rhetorical theorists in the last 50 years have debated whether writers think about "audience" as

- a "real" reader one can create through demographic and psychographic research (Schriver, 1997, p. 155)
- a convenient or idealized fiction in writer's mind to help shape the writer's argument (Ong 1975)
- a structure embodied in the texts of a discourse community, as the social constructionist believe (Porter, 1992; Reiff, 2004)
- or something in between (Ede & Lunsford, 1985; Blakeslee, 2001).

Students are also assaulted daily by media and advertising's attention to stereotypical mass audiences, making it difficult to move students beyond the oversimplified idea of "target audience."

Regardless of the theoretical underpinning and obvious "troublesome" nature of the concept, every major textbook in business communication, technical communication, professional communication, and first year composition includes chapters and discussions about understanding audience in order to write effectively. In order to effectively target a piece to a person or group, writers must not only think about who they are writing to but how the situation and context in which the audience participates will affect the message. And as Karen Schriver (1997) reminds us, an audience does not simply consist of people (real or imagined) who will read and use documents, but also "the people who sponsor the documents (e.g., the boss, the client, the manager) or those who distribute the document (e.g., gatekeepers, marketing groups, teachers, sales personnel)" (p. 167). Our students may underestimate how challenging it is to navigate these multiple audiences in a workplace, if they recognize it at all. LeeAnn Kastman-Breuch (2001) argues that even in well-constructed client-projects, students are typically unsure of how to assess complex audience situations, how to engage clients in professional discussions, and how to listen to and incorporate necessary feedback into their work. Our academic writing assignments rarely reflect the actual complexity of these situations and the multiple audiences students will engage (Huettman, 1996; Melzer, 2009), an oversight that must be addressed for our students to help move them through the liminal state into understanding.

Crashing the Threshold: Authentic Audiences in the Classroom

Standard classroom writing tasks and assignments can often be *pseudotransactional* (Petraglia, 1995). Because instructors always play an evaluative role, the writing produced in response to these assignments is an end unto itself; it serves the purpose of helping students learn, so it is focused on the student, is evaluated by instructor-defined qualities of good writing, and rarely serves any function outside of the class (Freedman et al, 1994, p. 301). In contrast, workplace or community writing is a means to and end and, therefore, part of an ongoing communication chain that serves a defined purpose, focuses on the needs of the reader rather than writer, and is the product of collaboration (p. 301). The problem is not, Petraglia argues, assigning exercises that ask students to imagine themselves writing to a variety of audience in different situations, which can be very effective. The problem lies in *only* assigning these activities which might simply teach students how to please the teacher rather than how to communicate effectively with complex audiences who have actual needs and preferences, as Huettman (1996) and Melzer (2009) argue as well.

On the other hand, transactional writing, or authentic writing, "is inherently interesting or important to the writer, rather than writing done only for extrinsic reward" (Sands, 2002, p. 1), and pedagogies based in transactional writing can "encourage a greater sense of audience, bring more feedback, remove the teacher as a final authority, and increase productive anxiety" (p. 2). Pedagogies that introduce students to authentic audiences in real contexts, such as client-based and service learning pedagogies, have the potential to be transformative in recreating the purpose and audience of classroom writing and overcoming threshold concepts such as audience. These pedagogies can assist students who are more comfortable with a simple, static view of the audience-as-evaluator to develop a more dynamic, professional, and rhetorical view of audience-as-collaborator, which may help make their transition to workplace and community writing less jarring (Blakeslee, 2001; Mara, 2006; Taylor, 2006). One reason for attention to engaged pedagogies like client-based learning is the underlying idea that writing is a valuable transaction between a writer and a reader who jointly construct meaning, sometimes in an instrumental context in which work must be accomplished (Britton et al., 1975; Rosenblatt, 1978), and it is in understanding this interactive construction of meaning that students can move beyond audience as a simple concept.

So how can instructors who want to improve their students' writing competencies construct transactional classroom experiences to address audience? In my own case, I created a client-based pedagogy for my advanced PWR courses to help students cross this threshold. In the following sections, I present a case study of one particular course, formally entitled Project and Publication Management but known to students as CUPID Consulting, to address course design, student learning, and instructor challenges.

CUPID Consulting Overview

In Fall 2009, I implemented a pedagogy designed to break students out of their liminal audience state through a semester-long transactional client-project experience. This 300-level course, designed to simulate my own professional and research experiences in integrated marketing communication agencies, was offered as an advanced topics elective in the PWR curriculum in the Department of English at Elon University, a medium-sized liberal arts and sciences university in the Southeastern United States. The learning goals of this course were that students should be able to

1. Employ a repertoire of strategies and tools to assess complex rhetorical writing/design situations in order to write/design/manage writing projects
2. Effectively engage research, interviewing, and writing skills and draw on concepts of visual and digital rhetoric in response to complex communication situations
3. Write/design/manage projects for real clients who will use their work after the course is finished
4. Strategically and successfully collaborate with various people with differing skills in order to get the best out of all group members and meet clients' rhetorical needs

These goals were directly in line with our programmatic goals to help students develop a rhetorical worldview and engage in rhetorical communication as an ethical and critical social practice.

Beginning in our first meeting, I referred to the course as CUPID Consulting, named for our Center for Undergraduate Publishing and Information Design (CUPID), and informed students that they would spend the semester working with a client on real deliverables while I served as project manager. Students were invited to create their organization's identity before their first client meeting. Students read through the "CUPID Consulting Employee Handbook," and they then spent about 90 minutes of class time during the first week competitively crafting a mission statement, graphic identity, and participation policy to guide their semester. These early activities encouraged students to actively engage the non-traditional approach of the course and to integrate their existing knowledge about rhetoric and audience to complete the activities. Once they had successfully agreed on an identity, representatives from our client were invited to introduce our project.

The Elon University's Belk Library served as our semester-long client. As chair of the faculty Library committee, I helped develop the idea for this project based on a suggestion brought to us by a student committee member. He suggested that students frequently don't find out about valuable library resources until late in their academic careers and that YouTube videos about library services might be a useful tool to mitigate this problem. In conjunction with the committee and the Dean of the Library, we decided to explore an ongoing series of brief instructional videos to assist in library orientation and instruction and to help overcome students' general reticence in asking questions of the librarians. Seeing that student voices were absolutely necessary to the potential success of this project, three librarians supported by the Dean of the Library agreed to work with my class to develop the pilot series of videos.

The library proved to be an excellent client for this type of project because students felt knowledgeable about the client but had rarely interacted with the librarians or thought about the functions of the library beyond their own limited student use. Additionally this project mirrored more dynamic audience situations faced outside of the academy because the students had to be constantly cognizant of both the library-client audience and the ultimate student-audience for the video project, a complexity that would prove troublesome and valuable.

Participants, Data Collection Methods, and Coding

Enrollment in the writing-intensive CUPID Consulting elective course was open to all students who had completed the first year writing requirement. Twelve students participated in the study, the majority of whom were English majors with a focus in PWR. Of nine PWR majors enrolled, six were female and three male; four were seniors, four juniors, and one sophomore. Data reported in this analysis is drawn specifically from the students

majoring in PWR as a simple measure of control since all of these students had been introduced to rhetorical audience analysis through their major coursework.

I collected data[i] from regularly scheduled coursework throughout the semester:

- Reflective Journals – students were asked to compose written reflections on their experiences, attitudes, and learning throughout the semester in a variety of ways, including pre-discussion freewrites, out-of-class prompted reflections, personal assessments, and team assessments.
- Written Deliverables – I collected all draft and final documents created by the students via their group spaces on Blackboard.
- Client Feedback – the librarians also signed Informed Consent forms which enabled me to add their feedback on the student work to the data pool.
- Final Comprehensive Portfolio – each student created a personal reflective portfolio that included a final reflective learning paper and samples of their project deliverables and project management work throughout the semester.

I also kept instructor notes about our group discussion sessions and important milestones during the project. This data set gave me a comprehensive view of student learning as they grappled with the seemingly familiar but deceptively complex audience territory they had to navigate while working with Belk Library as a client.

Given that composition studies values instructor-researcher interpretation of data in studies like this, I used a pattern-making coding system common to qualitative research in rhetoric and composition to analyze the data (Lauer & Asher, 1988; Grant-Davie, 1992). I first examined the narrative data for comments that 1) mentioned the client, 2) discussed audience, and 3) stated student feelings using sense words such as "disappointed," "upset," and "happy." I pulled these quotes or paragraph units out separately and sorted them into two chronological categories: before Reconciliation Day and after Reconciliation, a turning point in the semester which I discuss below. I then further sorted the units into groups based on discussion of the two primary audiences: students who would view the pilot videos and the Library client. Next I examined student deliverables, including my own comments and client comments on the deliverables, to compare how students approached their audience before and after Reconciliation Day in their writing by examining sentence-level features such as you-attitude as well as organizational patterns and the structure of argument. These analysis methods allowed me to identify patterns and pull representative comments to support the discussion.

The next section describes the course project in more detail and explores the results of the pedagogy.

Client Project as Threshold Concept Bridge

As noted earlier, the client project for CUPID Consulting was designed to help students experience disjunction in their understanding of audience and helps students to cross that threshold. To initiate disjunction and productive anxiety, I provided the following project overview in the first of a series of "Project Briefs," essentially student assignment sheets:

> Project objective is to create a **program** based on short, effective, audience-driven instructional videos that cover research-determined topics. Creating the program includes needs assessment and research, recommendations, video creation, and written instructions for continuing program. Client positioning with its audience is

currently undergoing a transition and needs some direction. Client goal is to develop new ways to help students use library resources more effectively to better their education.

Client expects YouTube-style videos at the end of the semester and instructions that other student groups can follow to continue to build the video library. Client expects comprehensive research to be done with the student (and possibly instructor) population to determine what the first few most important videos should be for the series. Client expects recommendations from 3-4 CUPID Consultant teams; they will choose from these competitive recommendations which to move forward with.

In addition to this overview, the Brief included background information about the client, an initial project timeline, a discussion of their collaborative work expectations, and an overview of evaluation criteria. The students were told they were expected to complete deliverables including data collection reports, competitive client proposals, and video production documents in addition to the videos themselves. They could complete these projects any way they chose as long as they met the stated deadlines.

The students met with two librarian contacts on the second day of class to discuss the project. The librarians spent about 30 minutes with the students brainstorming possible topics, answering questions about the library's purpose for the project, and getting to know each other. At the end of this first meeting, students were encouraged to ask questions of the librarian-clients throughout the project but to bring the questions through me in order to simplify contact and not overwhelm the clients. Despite this encouragement, which was reinforced throughout the first part of the semester, students chose to have little further contact with the librarians about the project until midterm when they presented their team proposals to the entire library staff.

The impetus for client contact would change dramatically for the students, though, immediately after they presented their video pilot series proposals to the library, when they received transactional feedback that they had to integrate into their writing. Despite talking about audience and even completing audience role play exercises, the students had spent more of their energies thinking and writing about the ultimate student audience for the videos rather than thinking about the real needs of the client audience. For most, the client feedback was a shock that created intellectual and emotional disjunction, shaking them out of their state of liminality, as they were faced with the threshold of their audience understanding.

Audience Perceptions while Creating the Client Proposals
In this course, a series of authentic, transactional encounters with a client audience about meaningful work caused students not only to apply what they knew about audience academically but to engage the threshold concept by dramatically rethinking that knowledge as well. Students' perceptions about their ability to assess audiences would change significantly after Reconciliation Day, after the disjunction created by presenting their proposals to the Library staff.

Academic Audience Analysis as Status Quo
Throughout the first part of the project, each student reflection shows a confidence that their proposals for pilot video content would be well received by the librarians. This confidence stemmed from an abiding assumption that they were, in fact, the audience. One student, Maggie[ii], initially asserted, "I think our perspective and experiences as students, the primary users of Belk Library, will help us establish credibility with the Library staff." Similarly, student Jessica added, "I think the librarians, our client, will find our ideas and

recommendations very trustworthy and worthwhile because of our student perspective." Other initial comments from the students mimicked this confidence that their student status as users of Belk Library gave them a uniquely qualified position from which to propose videos for other students.

While the students felt comfortable thinking about the peer audience, eight out of nine students studied also expressed confidence they could win over the librarian audience. Perhaps unsure about the gatekeeping impact the client-audience would have on their work, they expressed truisms about professionalism and "knowing your audience" when asked how the librarians might react to their proposals. Student Tim acknowledges his PWR education by noting the importance of audience to their larger tasks:

> The library is excited about this project, so they should at least listen to all the recommendations if not utilize them…of course the library won't simply listen to these ideas because we ask them too, so…understanding our audience and who specifically will be listening to our recommendations and watching our videos is pivotal…

Similarly, student Samantha commented

> I think if the library wants these videos created, they should listen to our opinion, but I am not saying they will easily give us their respect the moment we meet. I think it is very important that we make a great impression on the library leaders if we want to accomplish anything.

Tim and Samantha acknowledge what they have been taught about audience and professional ethos, or credibility, by simply restating what they have been taught in past courses about the importance of understanding your audience. Neither discussed how exactly they could strategically "make a great impression" on their client.

Both Tim and Samantha, and most of the others, seemed to function in a liminal state immediately preceding disjunction; they make nods to their existing and fundamentally academic view of audience (as a core concept rather than a threshold concept), essentially mimicking a sense of audience awareness that they know they must be aware of and that I as their instructor will be looking for in their work (Meyer and Land, 2006, p. 16). Michaela, a student new to the major but taking three PWR courses that semester, held a similar position on the client-audience, arguing like Samantha the need for essentially "getting on the client's good side":

> I think that the librarians will realize that we are students, so we can relate well to the 'ultimate' client – the student body. I also think that, in addition to other students, the librarians will be one of the best resources we have available…I think that by simply interviewing the librarians thoroughly and by showing genuine interest in this project, we will gain their trust, and they will be willing to listen to our suggestions as professionals.

Unlike Tim and Samantha, Michaela does take the next logical step beyond restating the need to know their audience by actively suggesting some basic ways they can accomplish their goal, showing a stronger sense of the client as an authentic audience. But Michaela's insight was unusual at this stage of the project based on the comments in my instructor notes which address my concern that the students were not moving beyond the simple assessment of audience to really think about how it affected their project work.

On an academic and personal level, students appreciated that understanding their client-audience was crucial for various preconceived and unexamined reasons, but they did little in their early project work to extend their basic assumptions. For example, in creating a survey instrument to poll the student population about potential video use and topics, they included a list of possible video topics to gauge student interest. The list was comprised of only the video topics the two librarians had mentioned in the initial meeting and a set of services housed in the Library that the students thought were "cool" like Media Services (which provides poster printing and computer equipment checkouts but is operated a different University office). When I pointed out the potential bias of the list, each shrugged it off in their reflections. Samantha took the time to reflect on the potential bias but still used the data in her team's report:

> After looking through the surveys again, I see that we may have brought our own biases to the survey without intent… we provided [in the list] services and aspects of the library that WE thought would be most helpful, and maybe did not include things that were so familiar to us.

Even here, the focus is on the student perspective, the student audience, not the library-client audience. Could I, in my role as professor, have stepped in to "fix" the students' error before they distributed their surveys? Yes, and my own instructor notes reflect my struggle to determine whether or not I should step in:

> I'm concerned that their surveys are only focusing on what they think students, and really they themselves, think might be video-worthy at the library. I've mentioned twice over the week that their surveys might be biased and asked them to look more closely at their questions and assumptions. If I do more than that, I'm afraid they won't learn from it.

I ultimately decided that part of my role as project manager in this pedagogy is to let students manage their own work, provide advice when asked, and allow them to make their own mistakes, which would become teaching moments later in the course.

Three Assumptions Causing Disjunction

After analyzing my instructor notes and the students' reflections, I posit that the students' approach to audience at this stage in the process was limited for three reasons:

1. Because the librarians had asked them to conduct the work, students assumed their recommendations would be trusted by this audience.
2. Students misconstrued the purpose of the introductory brainstorming session with the two librarians, assuming that the ideas about video content were actually what the librarians "wanted" rather than what was "possible."
3. Students believed their perceived connection to the student-audience for the videos would transcend their client-audience's gatekeeping function.

These three student assumptions informed the pilot video proposals the students competitively developed for the librarians. Student Nate, who has a straight-shooter personality in and out of class, summed this bias up well:

> Honestly, I felt the [research phase I participated in] was kind of pointless. The whole class, and the librarians, already had an idea of what we wanted to produce, and the input didn't affect our decisions much at all.

Because they overprioritized their role as members of the student audience over the needs of the client audience, the four proposals the students created competitively in teams were almost identical, each recommending nearly the exact set of videos in the same production style, only differentiated on minor points such as recommended in-video captions and accompanying PDF handouts. Their proposals focused heavily on what they determined students "wanted" based on data they collected with their potentially biased instruments (reports contained language like "Students want X" or "The Library should do X because surveyed students want X") rather than what the librarians would argue in their comments that students "needed." Organization patterns of the reports followed provided samples rather than questions the client-audience might want to see answered by their teams, which is a more rhetorical organization strategy to which students have been introduced.

When students later received direct feedback about these reports from the librarians, they were pushed, intellectually and emotionally, to rethink their understanding of audience for the project and as a disciplinary threshold concept.

Audience Perceptions after Client Feedback on Proposals
Students' perceptions of their own understanding of audience radically shifted in the second half of the project when they were faced with the powerful reality of understanding, accepting, and using transactional feedback from their client-audience. This shift began, emotionally and intellectually, during the class period after their client presentations, a day I have come to call "Reconciliation Day" in this pedagogy.

After reading/hearing the student proposals, I met with the library project representatives to discuss the future of the project. The librarians were pleased with the work the students presented overall but were disappointed by the lack of variety. They commented on the quality and professionalism of each team's work and offered suggestions for specific students on their writing and presenting skills. But the librarians expressed confusion as to why each group had stridently recommended videos on services like Media Services. One librarian commented:

> I really don't think we need a video on Media Services for the pilot series because although they are in our building and we like them, they are not really a library service. I think the pilot videos should really be about library services that students need to use. I wish they'd have asked us about that.

While the students had interpreted "library services" to mean anything housed physically under the library's roof, the librarians viewed "services" as those they themselves could offer students, a misunderstanding of the client-audience on the part of the students that could have been clarified earlier.

Ultimately, the librarians decided that the features recommended in the proposals were too similar to choose just one "winner" and decided to compile the most innovative features from each team to create an amalgamated pilot video series for the students to create. The librarians requested videos on the library layout, common copy and print services, off-campus database access, and entertainment options available to students as well as a "how to make a video" video. The entertainment video was not proposed by students, and the librarians decided against the recommended videos on research databases, which they had originally discussed with the students as a preferred option, saying specifically that the subject was "way too complicated" for the pilot series.

After this meeting, I drafted a new Project Brief for the videos to be completed during the second half of the semester and presented it to the class. To start this class period, students

completed a freewrite explaining how they felt about the quality of their team's presentation and what they each thought the librarians had decided for the pilot video series. I then asked the students to join me in a circle and explained the librarians' decisions, including both positive and constructive feedback for each team. I then opened the floor with the question, "So, how do you *feel* about your client's decision?"

Emotional Reactions to Client Feedback
Seven out of nine PWR students participating in the study expressed disjunction through feelings of confusion, frustration, disbelief, and, for some, anger, in response to the librarians' feedback on Reconciliation Day, as noted in their reflections and my instructor notes, because they felt the choices went against both what the librarians had told them initially and their sense of what "students wanted." The feedback caused them to question the transactional nature of the relationship they thought they had attempted to establish with their client and led them to lash out initially in confusion. Student Amy questioned why the librarians had asked them to conduct research on the project in the first place, saying

> After first having heard the librarian's feedback and how they would wish us to progress, I think that it was a little frustrating…It felt like they were just making us do research for the experience and knew what they were going to ask for all along.

Similarly, Michaela, the student new to the discipline, expressed anger on Reconciliation Day, which she reflected in her final portfolio:

> My excitement about completing this project motivated me to work hard throughout the semester, but also contributed to my disappointment in the librarians' recommendations… Overall I feel that we put more work into making our recommendations than they did into considering them. I felt very much like a patronized student, when all we did [in our proposals] was give them what they asked for…

The two students who did not express negative emotions had very laid back personalities in general. Nate, the straight shooter, had mixed feelings despite his earlier statements that the part of the research he had conducted was ineffective:

> Knowing myself and how often I tend to change my mind at the last minute, I had not expected the librarians to know exactly what they wanted right from the get-go, so the fact that their plans differ from what they said at the beginning is not a surprise. The only issue this raises with me is … the librarians almost disregarded all of [our research] in choosing what they wanted the pilot series to focus on… we simply have to roll with anything they throw at us, knowing that technically this is their project, not ours.

Nate begins to show reconciliation here between the student and client audiences and his own role as mediator that would ground the rest of his work in particular. The one student who was not upset at all by the library's decisions was Jessica who, in her usual zen-like way, said she genuinely thought the decisions represented a good compromise for all the audiences involved.

The Reconciliation Day disjunction was emotional but also created an opportunity to work through those initial emotions with each other, to allow those emotions to be voiced and acknowledged, and to help them understand the roots of those emotions and how to approach their client's decisions. While Michaela would remain unhappy with the direction throughout the rest of the project, the other six unhappy students concluded they had not

understood their client-audience as well as they should have, as Maggie notes in her reflection:

> My initial reaction to the videos the librarians asked us to produce was that the selected videos did not encompass/reflect the original issue we were asked to address…While this is slightly frustrating, I had to realize that we presented our supported ideas to the client, and ultimately our responsibility is to create the product that the librarians want and think will be successful…"

My instructor notes from this day highlight the internal struggles of the students when faced with real disjunction:

> It was good to see them get so emotional about the client feedback because it meant to me that they were engaged and that they really had to think about the process that got them to this point, articulate their choices to each other, and discuss how to move on productively since the project must go on. Some realized they were holding on to unrealistic assumptions about their role in the process and that the librarians could have been resources earlier if they'd just asked them. I'm really interested to see if their seemingly new found appreciation for the client is more lip service or if it will really change their approach to the rest of the project.

From Status Quo to Transactional Writing
After Reconciliation Day, the students' collective approach to the project and to their client did change. They had been confronted with the fact that the client was not required to trust their perspective or their work just because they were members of the student-audience for the videos, thus debunking an assumption that had guided their earlier work. Despite believing they had given the client "what they wanted," they had to face the fact that what might have been adequate for an instructor-audience was not effective for their client's real needs. Michaela would later reflect:

> I realize I had lost perspective on the project. I wanted to see my ideas implemented and had forgotten that we were working for a client, which meant we had to keep their interests at the forefront.

This awareness challenged their sense of authority and identity because they had not effectively considered how the needs of the client-audience might affect their work and how it would be received. Yes, they had paid lip service to this fact as discussed earlier, akin to the mimicry Meyer and Land say is part of a liminal state, but the client-audience's rhetorical power was not real to them until this point in the project.

Realizing that the librarians had a more contextualized understanding of their own needs and the needs of the students they serve, the CUPID Consulting students began to begrudgingly move out of liminal state to one truly conscious of more complex audiences. They consciously attempted to improve their knowledge by initiating more give-and-take client and student audience interactions during the final phase of the video project. For example, they shared each video storyboard with the librarians and integrated their feedback carefully. They conducted video usability tests with other students and then reported their findings back to the librarians to justify their production decisions. And they relied on Nate to keep an open dialogue with the librarians since he worked in the library and had ready access to librarians.

The librarians were actively engaged with the students at this stage and pleased with the results of the final project, including the unexpected comprehensive final report the

students submitted detailing their ideas for project continuation, marketing, and future video topics. This report had been Michaela's idea, a way to reconcile her feelings about the project with the needs of the librarians who would continue the work. Whereas the initial proposals had simply followed sample texts they had seen, the students organized the final report according to questions they had been discussing with the librarians and directly addressed concerns for how the librarians could continue the video series after the course was over while still meeting student-audience needs. The report showed a much more mature blending of client-audience needs with student-audience "wants" than could have been created before Reconciliation Day at both the content and sentence levels.

In pedagogy such as this, instructors must create a space for disjunction that allows students to engage in real transactional writing with an authentic audience, allowing them to make their own plans and mistakes and acknowledging their emotions during the process in order to encourage transformative learning and threshold crossing. Students engaged in their usual academic processes for assessing audience in the beginning only to receive honest feedback from a client highly invested in their work, feedback that they had to integrate into their work for the rest of the semester and could not ignore as they often ignore faculty feedback on graded assignments. By genuinely confronting their reactions to the librarians' feedback rather than avoiding them, students also confronted their preconceived notions about audience which led them to adapt their thinking and activities in order to successfully fulfill their commitment to the client.

And though it was emotional and challenging for some, they did adapt: they thought more consciously about their multiple audiences, they spoke more iteratively with those audiences, and they began to cross the threshold of a complex concept in doing so. As Samantha commented to me personally at a semester wrap-up event, "I think about audience differently now, even just n collaborating with other students" a fact I have seen to be true in her work in other classes and collaborative projects since.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

The concept of audience represents a threshold that all writers must learn to cross in order to be successful interpreters of communication situations. Based on these findings, I argue that having students write for a real audience and receive authentic transactional feedback on their work from that audience is a powerful learning experience that encourages students to grow as writers and begin to cross the threshold of the audience concept in meaningful ways.

In my case, helping students cross the audience threshold is core to my discipline and my pedagogy. Initially my students were overconfident in their understanding of audience, which colored their initial approach to the client and project. By completing the proposal process in this fashion, the students set themselves up to learn an important lesson – a limited theoretical analysis is not sufficient when addressing authentic rhetorical audiences, situations, and problems. The ramifications of this liminality came in the form of direct critical feedback from the client that did not align with the students' early views and, thus, caused disjunction.

This substantive encounter with an authentic client-audience challenged students to distinguish between an unsubstantiated view of audience based on familiarity and a grounded understanding based on critical thinking, critical listening, and solid rhetorical assessment. Students are not used to having people critique their work in this way nor having to carefully integrate that feedback into the next stage of the project. It challenged

what they thought they knew about writing, feedback, audience, and even themselves as writers, which is crucial to helping students overcome disjunction and move to cross a threshold. As such, Reconciliation Day was a key teaching moment in this pedagogy.

The disjunction this feedback presented was not only intellectually challenging but emotionally challenging as well. When so challenged, students can be expected to experience valid emotional reactions. As faculty, we often avoid student emotion; we get frustrated when an angry student argues a grade or uncomfortable when a student cries. But when engaging in pedagogy such as this with the goal of crossing thresholds, we must remove the emotional blockades we typically erect in the classroom in favor of the realities of an authentic audience experience. Validating emotional disjunction that can occur at complex concept thresholds and helping students move beyond it to intellectually understand the underlying source of the disjunction is where real learning happens.

Creating Transactional Spaces

Based on this case study, how might instructors in any field better prepare students to be stronger writers who can more effectively assess the audiences with whom they must communicate? How might instructors draw on authentic audiences to help students develop a deeper understanding of related disciplinary threshold concepts? The answer to shepherding students over similar thresholds may lie in creating transactional spaces in our courses that "let the outside in": spaces that invite other voices to interact with students and provide feedback that must be implemented in useable ways. These spaces should encourage students to set up their own inquiry by creating practical plans and learning from the consequences of implementing those plans. We must hold students accountable for acknowledging both success and failure by pushing them to adapt behaviors based on that experience. And we must allow students to feel their emotional reactions are acknowledged, valued, and built on to encourage deeper learning.

Pedagogies that invite authentic audiences into the classroom such as the one described above have great potential for creating these spaces. In terms of audience as a threshold concept, these spaces can help students authentically transition between that uncanny ability to size up an instructor and a more mature, rhetorical, and dynamic approach to communicating with real audiences in their disciplines, workplaces, and communities. Transactional spaces may be valuable in other fields to complement disciplinary signature pedagogies and help students develop a deeper, richer understanding of core threshold concepts important to disciplinary ways of thinking and acting.

References

Aristotle. (2004). *On Rhetoric*. W. Rhys Roberts (Trans.). Retrieved June 2, 2010, from http://www2.iastate.edu/~honeyl/Rhetoric/rhet2-1.html

Blakeslee, A.M. (2001, Spring). Bridging the workplace and the academy: Teaching professional genres through classroom-workplace collaborations. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 10*(2), 169-192.

Britton, J., et al. (1975). *The Development of Writing Abilities.* London: Macmillan Education.

Cousin, G. (2007). Exploring threshold concepts for linking teaching and learning. Paper presented at the *International Colloquium: International Policies and Practices for Academic Enquiry*, Winchester, April. Retrieved June 2, 2010, from http://portal-live.solent.ac.uk/university/rtconference/2007/resources/gylnis_cousins.pdf

Dias, P., Freedman, A., Medway, P., & Pare, A. (1999). *Worlds apart: Acting and writing in academic and workplace contexts*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Ede, L., & Lundsford, A. (1984, May). Audience addressed/audience invoked: The role of audience in composition theory and pedagogy. *College Composition and Communication, 35*(2), 155-171.

Forsberg, L.L. (1987). Who's out there anyway?: Bringing awareness of multiple audiences to the business-writing classroom. *Iowa State Journal of Business and Technical Communication 1,* 45-69.

Freedman A., Adam, C., & Smart, G. (1994). Wearing suits to class: Simulating genre and simulations as genre. *Written Communication, 11*(2), 193-226.

Grant-Davies, K. (1992). Coding data: Issues of validity, reliability, and interpretation. In G. Kirsch & P.A. Sullivan (Eds.), *Methods and methodology in composition research* (pp. 270-286). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Huettman, E. (1996, Jul.) Writing for multiple audiences: An examination of audience concerns in a hospitality consulting firm. *Journal of Business Communication, 33*(3), 257-273

Kastman-Breuch, L.M. (2001, Spr.). The overruled dust mite: Preparing technical communication students to interact with clients. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 10*(2), 193-211.

Land, R., Cousin, G., Meyer, J.H.F., & Davies, P. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (3): Implications for course design and evaluation. In C. Rust, (Ed.), *Improving student learning diversity and inclusivity* (pp. 53-64). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Lauer, J.M., & J.W. Asher. (1988). *Composition research: Empirical designs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mara, A. (2006, Spring). Using charettes to perform civic engagement in technical communication classrooms and workplaces. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 15*(2), 215–236.

Melzer, D. (2009, Dec.). Writing assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing. *CCC 61*(2), 240-261.

Meyer, J.H.F. & Land, R. (2006). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: an introduction. In J.H.F. Meyer and R. Land (Eds), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp. 3-18). London: Routledge Falmer.

Ong, W.J. (1975, Jan.). The writer's audience is always a fiction. *PMLA*, 90(1), 9-21.

Petraglia, J. (1995). Spinning like a kite: A closer look at the pseudotransactional function of writing. *JAC, 15*(1). Retrieved June 2, 2010, from http://www.jacweb.org/Archived_volumes/Text_articles/V15_I1_Petraglia.htm

Porter, J. E. (1992). *Audience and rhetoric: An archaeological composition of the discourse community.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Reiff, M.J. (2004). *Approaches to audience: An overview of the major perspectives*. Superior, WI: Parlay Press.

Rosenblatt, L.M. (1978). *The Reader, the text, the poem*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Savin-Baden, M. (2005). Disjunction as a form of troublesome knowledge in problem-based learning. In J.H.F. Meyer & R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Taylor, S.S. (2006, Spring). Assessment in client-based technical writing classes: Evolution of teacher and client standards. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 15*(2), 111–139.

Sands, P. (2002). World wide words: A rationale and preliminary report on a publishing project for an advanced writing workshop. *Academic Writing*. Retrieved June 2, 2010, from http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/articles/sands_2002.htm

Schriver, K.A. (1997). *Dynamics in document design*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Taylor, S.S. (2006, Apr.). Assessment in client-based technical writing classes: Evolution of teacher and client standards. *Technical Communication Quarterly, (15)*2, 111-139.

---

[i] This project was approved by Elon's Institutional Review Board and supported by the Elon Teaching and Learning Partnership program sponsored by our Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. All participants signed an Informed Consent firm which was presented and held by a faculty colleague to ensure I had no indication of which students agreed to participate in the study. No student work was analyzed as data until grades has been submitted for the semester.

[ii] All student names are pseudonyms to protect identity. Gender has been preserved.