

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION FOR THE TECHNICAL WORKPLACE:
A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS AND PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

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By

Burton Leander Urquhart

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D. K. Seaman Chair in Professional and Technical Communication
College of Engineering, University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A9

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the ways in which theoretical models based in rhetorical studies can be used to enhance both the understanding and the practice of communication. In particular, my project shows that rhetoric and communication theory can provide a foundation for improving communication practice.

Every communicative act takes place within a context, as Lloyd F. Bitzer established.¹ This same understanding of the centrality of situation to communicative effectiveness permeates the work of several other theorists whose work is discussed in this thesis, among them Wayne C. Booth, Kenneth Burke, George L. Dillon, Barnett Baskerville, and Donald Schon.

Using Bitzer's conception of the rhetorical situation as the theoretical focus, two main concerns are addressed in the thesis: the relationship between rhetoric and the practice of technical communication, and the integration of theory and practice as the foundation of rhetorical understanding. The first three chapters present a series of theoretical models, and the practical use of this theory is tested by an exercise in writing a public speaking handbook for engineering undergraduates (presented as Chapter Four of the thesis). The audience for this handbook is specific and the purpose is narrow – to give advice on preparing, practising, and presenting design presentations to professors and clients. This experiment is then followed by a reflection on the writing process and some conclusions about the relationship between rhetorical theory and communicative practice.

¹ Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968) 1-14.

The key result of this research and case study is a deepened understanding of how rhetoric operates – or how it should be studied. As a rhetorician, I found it discouraging – even at times humiliating – to discover how much difficulty I had in adapting my discourse to a specific audience. This research makes clear that an understanding of theory without a solid grounding in practice is insufficient for rhetorical mastery. While my original goal was to demonstrate the usefulness of theory to improving practice, this thesis shows as well the extent to which rhetorical theory also depends on an understanding of the demands and constraints of actual practice.

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For Jeff,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permission to Use	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction: The Rhetoric of Technical Communication	1
Chapter One: Situation in the Tradition of Rhetorical Study	9
Chapter Two: Context as Writing Strategy: Burke's Dramatistic Pentad in Action	29
Chapter Three: Footing and the Notion of Rhetorical Balance	44
Chapter Four: Better Design Presentations: A Student Guide	62
Chapter Five: Theory into Action: A Reflective Analysis	84
Conclusion: Reflective Practice and the Art of Rhetoric	105
Bibliography	113

Introduction: The Rhetoric of Technical Communication

Rhetoric is a discipline that understands communication as a human interaction. Acts of communication form a relationship between speaker and audience, frequently with influence as the goal. Communication is always complex, arising in a “natural context of persons, events, objects and relations”² that exerts a shaping influence on what is, or may be, uttered. Communication is also a means through which we solve problems in the world, by persuading others to take action or alter their beliefs.³

The study of rhetoric as an academic discipline examines the effectiveness of communication, not for the sake of producing criticism alone, but in order to improve practice. This practical and instrumental focus has been in place at least since Aristotle wrote his treatise on rhetoric in 330 BCE.⁴ His book, like many treatises that followed, is meant not only to improve our understanding of how to communicate more effectively, but also to make us better communicators.

Technical communication, in both theory and practice, is a rhetorical discipline. While the formal study of technical communication has evolved over the past half-

² Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968) 5.

³ Bitzer, “Situation” 4.

⁴ Aristotle, The Rhetoric in Richard McKeon, ed., The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941).

century to include many different approaches, it is the discipline of rhetoric that has influenced technical communication the most. However, in this regard practice has lagged behind theory. Cezar Ornatowski, both a rhetorical and technical communication theorist, notes that practitioners of technical communication have only recently begun to acknowledge that they not only make a functional use of words, but also a rhetorical use of words or language as well.⁵ They are now beginning to recognize that language is not simply a container for information that is passed on intact to an audience.

An understanding of the rhetorical implications of their communication means that many practitioners of technical communication have begun to see the contextual, relational, human, and ethical implications of their message-making. It is a realization that messages do not mean one thing and one thing only, or that they are not merely a matter of stuffing information into a standardized format. Drawing on these recent developments, I will argue that engineering communication, to be effective, actually needs the influence of rhetorical principles and theory.

This thesis, which is unusual in that it combines rhetorical theory and practice, has several different sections. Chapters One through Three are theoretical in nature, while Chapter Four offers a practical application of the theory in the form of a handbook written for undergraduate engineering students. This chapter is presented more or less in the form that the self-contained handbook will appear to its student users. Chapter Five

⁵ Cezar Ornatowski, "Technical Communication and Rhetoric," Foundations for Teaching Technical Communication: Theory, Practice, and Program Design, eds. Katherine Staples and Cezar Ornatowski (Greenwich, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing, 1997) 31.

offers a reflective analysis of the process involved in adapting theory to practice, and the Conclusion brings together theory and practice in a final summation.

The purpose of the handbook presented as Chapter Four is to test the efficacy of the theory. It will do this in several ways. First, the handbook is not simply a mock-up of a guide for students; it's the real thing. It was written for actual use by undergraduate engineering students who are faced with the task of giving design presentations.

Second, because the handbook is aimed at an audience of student engineers, writing it will help me to assess the extent to which the theory discussed in the preceding chapters can be applied to a practical situation. Can it be adapted successfully to the needs of these students without overwhelming them with theory?

Third, the manual will test the practical value of the theory I've chosen to work with in yet another way: how useful is my own understanding and command of this theory in writing the public speaking manual itself? Can I, as a rhetorician, actually prove out my theory that a knowledge of rhetoric makes one a more effective writer and communicator? It is, therefore, a test of my ability to put the theory into practice.

Finally, the manual is a demonstration of mastery intended not only for its student audience but for the committee that will read the thesis as a whole. It will need to show them that I can not only talk about rhetoric in the abstract, but also communicate effectively with my intended audience.

At the same time that the manual I produce will have to adhere to the principles I've advocated in the rest of the thesis, it will also have to submerge its theoretical foundations so that the students will find its advice immediately practical and applicable to their needs. In writing the manual, I won't be able to rely on theoretical discussions or

quoting theorists to help make my arguments. I will be forced to put myself on the line and actually demonstrate that I can do in practice what I claim to understand in principle. It will be a sure and transparent indicator of my knowledge of the theory, but even more so, of my ability to apply that theory in my own writing.

There are two controlling concerns in this thesis. The first is the attempt to bring together rhetorical principles and engineering or technical communication. My experience in teaching the required Oral and Written Communication course in the College of Engineering, combined with my years of studying rhetoric,⁶ has convinced me of the value of incorporating an explicitly rhetorical foundation into the education of engineering students. Part of the purpose of this thesis is to explore more fully the possibilities for practical application offered by the theory that underpins that course. I speak specifically of the theories of situation and footing, as well as the relationship between rhetorical reasoning and ethics, professionalism, and reflective practice.

The second concern has to do with the relationship between theory and practice, which is necessarily a close one in a practical discipline like rhetoric. Rhetoric studies not just theories of how communication might work; it is – or should be – intimately involved with understanding how real people actually communicate in real situations. As Barnett Baskerville and others have pointed out, rhetoric cannot be fully understood even in theory if it is not connected to a full understanding of the challenges facing actual communicators. According to Baskerville, the application and the theory are interdependent, and “the speaker before an audience, the pamphleteer, any[one] who

⁶ I began my study of rhetoric as an undergraduate, in 1995.

seeks to influence others with words, stands at the center of the real world.”⁷ For this reason, theories involving the dynamics of rhetorical response cannot be studied exclusive of pragmatic application, since even when we are at our most theoretically arcane, we are ultimately concerned with the means, motives, and methods of shaping action through symbolic appeals.

In order to accomplish the integration of these two central concerns, I will draw upon rhetorical theory that will similarly apply to both goals. Central to this study will be the conception of the rhetorical situation as articulated by Lloyd Bitzer.⁸ While Bitzer’s is primarily a critical construct, I will demonstrate how it can be used inventively, or as a tool to aid in message creation. I believe that Bitzer’s theory can be made practical or helpful in creating technical communication by turning the three constituents of the situation into a kind of guide for document planning: identify the problem, consider your audience and their needs, expectations, and limitations, and then negotiate the constraints of the situation you’re in. This inventional pattern will be important in the manual, even if under the surface, and it will also help to explain why rhetorical principles are useful in technical communication.

I will also explore the theories of the great twentieth-century rhetorician Kenneth Burke, whose densely critical and philosophical theories of rhetoric have nevertheless

⁷ Barnet Baskerville, “Rhetorical Criticism, 1971: Retrospect, Prospect, Introspect,” Southern Speech Journal 37 (1971).

⁸ Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968).

yielded the method of dramatism, an analytical method that I will show can also be used to guide the creation of discourse.⁹

Dramatism involves a “pentad” of five terms – act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose – that are used to examine a message to uncover its underlying motivations, some of which may not even be clear to the rhetor. While the pentad is obviously a critical model, I will show that it too can be used to help technical communicators become more effective by enabling them to fully analyse their situation and uncover many different perspectives of the contexts in which they communicate. The pentad is particularly useful for ensuring that a technical communicator doesn’t get locked into one perspective. This understanding of the dramatistic pentad not only demonstrates that theory can be used in practice, but also unites rhetorical theories with the practice of technical communication.

The work of two additional theorists also extensively informs this study: that of George Dillon and Donald Schon. Dillon’s concept of footing, an elaboration of Wayne C. Booth’s rhetorical balance,¹⁰ and his system of “plotting” or mapping out the interpersonal relationship built through a text provide an additional example of putting theory into practice.¹¹ Chapter Three details the challenges of establishing an appropriate footing for the public speaking manual so as to effectively engage and inform my student

⁹ Kenneth Burke, “Interaction: Dramatism,” International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences , vol. 6 (New York: MacMillan Co and The Free Press, 1968) 445-452; and “The Five Key Terms of Dramatism,” A Grammar of Motives [1945] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

¹⁰Wayne C. Booth, “The Rhetorical Stance,” College Composition and Communication 14 (1963) 139-45.

¹¹George L. Dillon, Rhetoric as Social Imagination: Explorations in the Interpersonal Function of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

audience. This analysis of footing and its challenges, in turn, informed how I positioned myself in the handbook. Once again theory informs practice, and rhetorical principles can assist in the creation of advice on technical communication.

The handbook, which is Chapter Four, is a good example of how the thesis brings together rhetoric and engineering communication on the one hand, and on the other, rhetorical theory and practice. While it is somewhat unusual for a thesis in a humanities discipline to contain a practical application of its theoretical material, for this thesis it is indispensable. I will argue throughout for the value of rhetoric to technical communication, and insist on the relationship between rhetorical theory and practice; it seems reasonable – perhaps inevitable – that I should demonstrate my own concrete attempt to put theory into practice.

The final chapter of the thesis draws upon Donald Schon's theory of the reflective practitioner as a method for analysing the experience of writing the handbook.¹² It explicates not only what I learned from the process, but also demonstrates further the importance of being able to actually practice what I know theoretically. Schon's process of reflection-in-action explains how practitioners are able to gain insight into their own professional practice by "listening" to the situation's "back-talk."¹³ This theory is all about how a practitioner applies his or her theoretical knowledge in practice. Schon's work is also useful in understanding how rhetoricians apply their knowledge to practical situations, such as creating effective discourse themselves.

¹² Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

¹³ Schon 79.

For rhetoricians, being able to apply the theory we know to a practical setting is essential because rhetoric is a practical art – an art whose purpose is not only to explain but also to improve human communication. Although I really struggled with writing the handbook and had to have assistance with it, writing it has been one of the most useful exercises in the thesis project. The insights I have gained into audience adaptation, into how difficult it really is to apply what you know theoretically, and into the importance of a rhetorical understanding in technical communication would have been impossible to gain otherwise.

Chapter One: Situation in the Tradition of Rhetorical Study

Communication is often thought of as the method, or the vehicle, of transferring information to other people. This definition is in part based upon a common model of communication predominantly used in the social sciences: the Shannon-Weaver “bullet” or radio transmission metaphor.¹ According to this model, a “sender” transmits a message to a “receiver” through a “channel.” In this channel, the message may encounter “noise” or interference, which may distort the message. There is also a feedback loop from the receiver back to the sender, which allows the sender to receive confirmation and inquiries from the receiver.

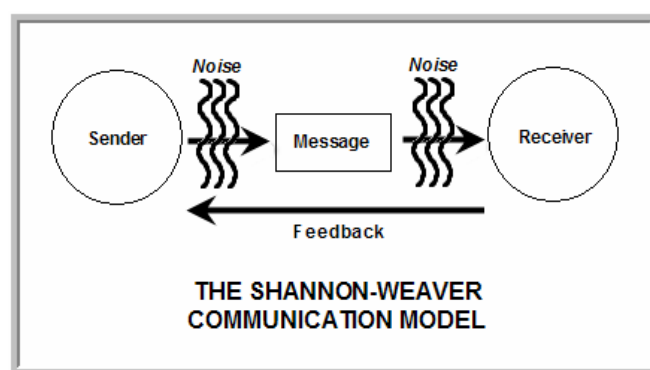


Figure 1: Shannon-Weaver Communication Model

This model of the communication process is quite obviously influenced by information systems theory. However, from a rhetorical standpoint, such a simplistic

¹ Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, The Mathematical Theory of Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

understanding of what happens when two people communicate is not complete; it may even mislead more than it enlightens, since it ignores that “communication is a dynamic process of observation, judgement, and adaptation ... It is an interaction, a process, rather than a simple transaction or exchange of static information.”² What is needed instead is a model that recognizes the complex and unpredictable nature of human communication.

Wayne C. Booth’s concept of rhetorical stance offers one such understanding. In his 1963 article “The Rhetorical Stance,” Booth, like Shannon and Weaver, begins with the three elements of a communication interaction, the speaker, the message, and the audience, which form what has become known as the rhetorical triangle.³ However, for Booth, communication is an interaction rather than the transaction posited by Shannon and Weaver.

Booth’s focus is not so much on the nature of the three constituent elements as on the tricky question of how, and what, they contribute to an effective interaction. He is particularly concerned with the issue of appropriateness, and with how to find a suitable emphasis for a given message: should the rhetor focus on the facts of the case, on satisfying the idiosyncrasies of the audience, or on making a good showing for himself? These questions lead to his focus on appropriate rhetorical stance, which he says

depends on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements at work in any communicative effort: the available

² Jennifer MacLennan, Effective Communication for the Technical Professions (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2003) 5.

³ Wayne C. Booth, “The Rhetorical Stance,” College Composition and Communication 14 (October 1963) 139-145.

arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker.⁴

To achieve an appropriate balance, a speaker needs to focus not only on preparing a logical and complete message, but also on adapting that message appropriately for the audience and their needs, while remembering his responsibilities to both the audience and the subject matter, and his need to demonstrate credibility. Because the ideal balance differs for every situation and is thus difficult to define in general terms, Booth suggests it can “best be seen by contrasting it with two or three corruptions, unbalanced stances often assumed by people who think they are practicing the arts of persuasion.”⁵ He catalogues three such corruptions, each of which results from a misplaced emphasis on one of the three elements of the communication. These he names the pedant’s stance, which emphasizes the message over other elements of the interaction; the entertainer’s stance, which is more a display of the speaker’s prowess or personality than an attempt to communicate with an audience; and the advertiser’s stance, which attempts to manipulate the audience into responding in the way the speaker desires.⁶

Booth’s discussion offers a basis for understanding any communication interaction and the discursive responses created in the situations we face as communicators. He demonstrates the challenge involved in managing speaker, message, and audience, since these elements do not have to be attended to in equal proportions for

⁴ Booth 141.

⁵ Booth 141.

⁶ Booth 141-143.

each communication situation. Instead, achieving a balance among these elements (and thus creating an appropriate rhetorical stance) is a matter of careful assessment of the situation, and of considered judgement. It is, in short, much like the reflective process described by Donald Schon in his discussion of how professionals employ their experience and understanding to assess and respond to each new problem or case presented to them.⁷

Because rhetorical effectiveness demands such skilled judgement, it is clear that a purely transmission-based explanation of communication is inadequate. If communication is to be understood as more than simply a container for transmitting pre-packaged information, a more comprehensive conception of communicative acts is needed. Booth's conception, anchored in Aristotle's Rhetoric, is a beginning, but a full consideration of the art is still more complex even than this.

One of the richest definitions of rhetoric is offered by Donald C. Bryant. On a theoretical level, Bryant characterizes rhetoric as "the rationale of informative and suasive discourse,"⁸ but he also offers a more practical characterization of rhetoric as the art of "adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas,"⁹ a definition that captures the shifting dynamic in the relationship among the elements of the rhetorical triangle. Like Bryant, Lloyd F. Bitzer recognizes rhetoric's power as "a mode of altering reality,"¹⁰

⁷ Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 62.

⁸ Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech 39 (1953) 404.

⁹ Bryant 413.

¹⁰ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968) 4.

something it accomplishes “not by the direct application of energy to objects,” but by its ability to alter its audience’s beliefs and actions.¹¹ It is in this sense, according to Bitzer, that “rhetoric is always persuasive.”¹²

To talk about the rhetorical dimensions of a discourse is to acknowledge its practical effects, as most theorists of the discipline emphasize. Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott, for example, view rhetoric as a “practical art . . . an instrument to aid man’s living.”¹³ A major way that rhetoric “aids living” is found in Roderick P. Hart’s characterization of rhetoric as “an attempt to build community by exchanging symbols,”¹⁴ which parallels Brock and Scott’s emphasis on “the importance of man’s effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols.”¹⁵ These and other contemporary definitions echo Aristotle’s original conception of rhetoric: “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,” confirming that the practical and methodological nature of rhetoric continues to be recognized, even after more than two millennia.¹⁶

The most influential rhetorical theorist of the twentieth century, Kenneth Burke, added his philosophical perspective to the definition of rhetoric when he asserted that

¹¹ Bitzer, “Situation” 4.

¹² Bitzer, “Situation” 4.

¹³ Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott, eds., Methods of Rhetorical Criticism (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980) 14.

¹⁴ Roderick P. Hart, Modern Rhetorical Criticism 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997) 36.

¹⁵ Brock and Scott 18.

¹⁶ Aristotle, The Rhetoric in Richard McKeon, ed., The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941) 1335b.

rhetoric is “the realistic use of addressed language to induce action in people” and noted that it involves “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.” This symbolic inducement, Burke believed, is “rooted in an essential function of language itself,”¹⁷ and therefore is fundamental to our experience as humans. The significance of these definitions for my project grows out of their stress on the pragmatic and persuasive nature of rhetoric.

In order to understand fully the relationship between rhetoric and professional or technical communication, let us return to Aristotle and the rhetorical triangle. Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, cited above, considers rhetoric as techne – a skill, method, or art for discerning the best means of persuading an audience in a given situation. For Aristotle, rhetoric is a skill that can be learned and practised artfully, and he distinguishes this body of teachable skills from “any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us.”¹⁸ As Wayne Booth suggests, it is “the art of ‘putting it across,’ considered as quite distinct from mastering an ‘it’ in the first place.”¹⁹ The study of rhetoric provides us with a method, as well as a variety of critical approaches, to effectively communicate and to persuade others, no matter what the subject. The method Aristotle offers for finding or discovering the resources available to a communicator leads our discussion back to the rhetorical triangle.

¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives [1962] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 42-43.

¹⁸ Aristotle 1355b.

¹⁹ Booth 139.

Aristotle's Rhetoric is intended to demonstrate how to locate and employ the "means of persuasion" in order to deliver effective persuasive speeches. Its emphasis is on what is known as rhetorical invention – the discovery or identification of possible arguments. Aristotle identifies three "means of effecting persuasion" that are "furnished by the spoken word" or "invented": the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos.²⁰ These depend, respectively, "on the personal character of the speaker" as displayed in the discourse, "on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind," and "on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself," and thus coincide with the elements of the rhetorical triangle.²¹ Ethos, logos, and pathos are the resources that a communicator must keep in balance while building, or inventing, an argument, and because they are still an important part of rhetorical study, they merit further examination here.

The first of these appeals, ethos, is arguably the most critical of the three because it is the ethical centre of rhetoric. A communicator who hopes to persuade an audience must be seen as credible and trustworthy. Aristotle argues this point forcefully, while summing up the nature of rhetorical discourse: "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided."²²

Rhetoric often mediates conflict, responds to delicate situations, or urges people to consider another viewpoint. It is a method of reflective judgement, of assessing the requirements of a situation and responding appropriately. Because of these challenging

²⁰ Aristotle 1355b.

²¹ Aristotle 1356a.

²² Aristotle 1356a.

communication goals, the communicator faces a situation where there is no clear answer or the possibility to pursue truth in a Platonic, or dialectical, fashion. Because rhetorical discourse responds to situations in which answers are not clearly visible, where there is conflict, or where absolute truth cannot be found, the audience will consider not only the rhetor's arguments, but also his or her ethical character as a factor in the persuasiveness of the appeal. A rhetor must, therefore, speak genuinely and credibly in order to persuade the audience.

Aristotle explains ethos as the speaker's character as it is revealed in the speech or discourse, noting that "persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible."²³ He provides three characteristics of a strong ethos appeal:

There are three things which inspire confidence in an orator's character – the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character, and good will. . . . It follows that anyone who is thought to have all three of these will inspire trust in his audience.²⁴

Thus, according to Aristotle, a speaker demonstrates credibility and trustworthiness by communicating good will toward the audience, good character or integrity, and good judgement about the communication situation. Aristotle reckons ethos "the most effective means of persuasion [a speaker] possesses," partly because of its influence on the other modes of persuasion.²⁵ For example, if strong ethos appeals are apparent in the

²³ Aristotle 1356a.

²⁴ Aristotle 1378a.

²⁵ Aristotle 1356a.

discourse, there will be a solid ethical foundation on which the pathos appeals can be developed.

Because rhetoric deals with subjects where “opinions are divided,” the speaker who hopes to persuade must do more than merely present information to the audience. Pathos appeals are those strategies that the rhetor uses to make a compelling connection with the audience. These are the appeals that stir the audience’s emotions. Pathos is important, Aristotle emphasizes, since persuasion “may come through the hearers,” as well as being achieved by the speaker’s personal character as it is in ethos appeals.²⁶ A communicator who makes a genuine emotional connection with the audience will be able to persuade them more effectively.

People rarely take action based solely on logical evidence presented to them; instead, they are moved only when their emotions are engaged, as Aristotle noted and as the philosopher George Campbell argued. According to Campbell,

in order to persuade, there are two things which must be carefully studied by the orator. The first is, to excite some desire or passion in the hearers; the second is to satisfy their judgment that there is a connexion between the action to which he would persuade them, and the gratification of the desire or passion which he excites. This is the analysis of persuasion.²⁷

The truth of this assertion can easily be demonstrated with a couple of contemporary examples. The ill effects of smoking have been proven scientifically, yet many people continue to smoke regardless of the widely available medical information. Similarly,

²⁶ Aristotle 1356a.

²⁷ George Campbell, The Philosophy of Rhetoric. Quoted from Barry Brummett, ed., Reading Rhetorical Theory (New York: Harcourt, 2000) 573.

students generally know that it is best to begin composing their papers or reports weeks in advance of the deadline, so that they will have time to carefully research, write and then edit before the work is due. Despite knowing this, students often postpone beginning the project until it is too late to adequately “plan, prepare and polish” their work.²⁸

It is this feature of human nature that makes persuasion so challenging: people may understand the facts of the case, and even be convinced of their relevance, but may still fail to act unless their emotional commitment is secured.²⁹ If a communicator simply presents a set of facts, the audience may see no relevance to themselves in the arguments. Even if they accept the facts as described, they are unlikely to take action unless their emotions are stirred.

It takes great persuasive effort to change someone’s beliefs, and it takes even more persuasion to move a person to action. In order to genuinely forge a bond with the audience and persuade them to act, the rhetor must take into account their hopes, needs, fears, loves, hates, and concerns in creating the discourse. A rhetor who has a clear and accurate impression of the audience can then adjust the message and specific pathos appeals according to the topic and situation. This will not only increase the rhetor’s persuasiveness with the audience, but also allow her to create an appropriate message using effective logos appeals.

The third means of persuasion identified by Aristotle is logos, those appeals based on the line of argument in a discourse. An appeal to logos is an appeal to the

²⁸ MacLennan 58.

²⁹ Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secour, A Rhetoric of Argument (New York: Random House, 1982) 243-284.

quality, the logical ordering, and the soundness of the message. Aristotle explains that when a rhetor is employing logos appeals, “persuasion is effected . . . through the speech itself,” and he notes that logos appeals are most persuasive “when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question.”³⁰

Effective logos appeals also demonstrate that the rhetor has composed the message with careful attention, has thorough grasp of the subject matter, and has presented the message with a command of the material in a stylistically pleasing manner.³¹ Even though they are not usually sufficient in themselves to move an audience, logos appeals are often seen by beginning writers as the most important, or perhaps the only, component of discourse. However, as Wayne Booth argues, it is the combination, or balance, of ethos, pathos and logos appeals that produces the most effective communication. A skilled rhetor appropriately considers all three elements of a communication interaction; he understands the need not just to present facts, but also to demonstrate good character and engage the audience’s interests, and remembers the importance of maintaining a balance among the various appeals, as appropriate to the context.

The practical nature of the modes of appeal is in keeping with Aristotle’s intention of developing a pragmatic rhetoric. His whole programme of argument – invention, arrangement, and presentation – hinges on his fundamental assertion that

³⁰ Aristotle 1356a.

³¹ MacLennan 7.

rhetoric is truly addressed and pragmatic. Persuasion can't occur without an audience, and is always addressed to specific hearers in a specific time and place.

This recognition that context helps to shape the kinds of appeals used has raised theoretical concerns about how exactly this shaping occurs. In rhetorical theory these kinds of concerns have been elaborated into a theoretical framework known as the rhetorical situation, which was systematized by Lloyd F. Bitzer in his 1968 article of that title (cited previously). Bitzer's article has for forty years set the terms of debate about the nature of the contexts in which rhetorical discourse arises.

Bitzer offers as a starting point a definition of rhetoric that will be critical to the theory of situation that he is going to establish. Bitzer, like Donald Bryant, Bernard Brock, and Robert L. Scott, follows Aristotle's tradition by asserting that rhetoric is pragmatic. For Bitzer, a rhetorical discourse "comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task."³² The task performed by rhetoric is the enlisting of an audience's cooperation, which is accomplished by the rhetor "bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes the mediator of change."³³ From this understanding of rhetoric as persuasive and pragmatic, Bitzer begins to theoretically address the contexts in which communicators create discourse.

³² Bitzer, "Situation" 3-4.

³³ Bitzer, "Situation" 4.

He begins by setting out the vocabulary and the constituents of the communicative contexts that he is interested in. His definition of the rhetorical situation incorporates his pragmatic conception of rhetoric itself as:

a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.³⁴

We can recognize rhetorical situations by the existence of three constituents that prompt, and shape, rhetorical discourse. These are an exigence, or pressing concern, that provokes the rhetor to speak; an audience who can be induced to act; and a set of shaping factors that Bitzer labels rhetorical constraints. Bitzer discusses each of these in turn.

It is not an accident that of the three constituents Bitzer deals first with exigence. In a subsequent article, he asserts that “exigence is pivotal”³⁵ among the constituents of the rhetorical situation. In part this is because “pragmatic communication begins with apprehension of situational constituents” and largely because exigences reveal “the shadow” between “the best of all worlds and the world we live in – between the ideal and the real.”³⁶

³⁴ Bitzer, “Situation” 6.

³⁵ Lloyd F. Bitzer, “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective,” Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) 26.

³⁶ Bitzer, “Functional” 26.

What Bitzer means, in less poetic terms, is that exigences are the problems or obstacles that humans routinely face as they interact with each other and with the world around them. An exigence is an “imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be.”³⁷ These imperfections may arise from either physical or social surroundings and invite each of us to intervene; Bitzer concludes that “the environment and persons invite change,” and without exigencies, “rhetorical communication would be unnecessary.”³⁸

However, not all exigences are rhetorical, and Bitzer is careful to distinguish between rhetorical and non-rhetorical exigences. To be rhetorical, an exigence must invite a discursive response, and it must be modifiable by people who can be persuaded to take action to solve the problem.³⁹ For example, aging, death, approaching hurricanes or other natural disasters, and the changing of seasons, while they may be imperfections, are not rhetorical exigences because they cannot be modified by persuasive discourse. People’s attitudes or responses to such events are potentially remediable by discourse, however, and these attitudes may well present rhetorical exigencies. The exigence is a crucial element of the rhetorical situation because it is what initiates the need for communication and the apprehension of a rhetorical situation by the rhetor.

Once an exigence has been identified, the rhetor then needs to demonstrate to an appropriate audience that this problem is one that concerns them. The audience is a second essential element of the rhetorical situation. Bitzer explains that non-rhetorical discourses do not require an audience in the “same sense” that a rhetorical discourse

³⁷ Bitzer, “Situation” 6.

³⁸ Bitzer, “Functional” 26.

³⁹ Bitzer, “Situation” 6-7.

necessitates an audience.⁴⁰ While audiences for scientific or poetic discourses need only be able to understand the details or participate in the shared aesthetic experience, the rhetorical audience “must be capable of serving as mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce.”⁴¹ They are not simply witnesses or disengaged hearers; instead, the truly rhetorical audience are capable of functioning as the agents of the proposed action.

The last constituent of the rhetorical situation is the circumstances or limitations under which the discourse must be created. Bitzer defines these constraints as “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence.”⁴² The constraints found within a rhetorical situation either limit or provide opportunities; they are conditions that the rhetor must negotiate and use to advantage in preparing and presenting a rhetorical discourse.

Echoing Aristotle, Bitzer contends that “the rhetor’s central creative task is to discover and make use of proper constraints in his message in order that his response, in conjunction with other constraints operative in the situation, will influence the audience.”⁴³ Adjusting to the constraints of a situation is part of the inventional process described by Aristotle, since “finding the available means of persuasion in any given case” means recognizing opportunities and accommodating limitations imposed by circumstance. According to Bitzer, once the rhetor has responded to a situation by

⁴⁰ Bitzer, “Situation” 8.

⁴¹ Bitzer, “Situation” 8.

⁴² Bitzer, “Situation” 8.

⁴³ Bitzer, “Functional” 23-24.

creating discourse, both the message and the rhetor become additional constituents of a further rhetorical situation.⁴⁴ In considering the constituents of the rhetorical situation – exigence, audience, and constraints – Bitzer has set out a framework not only for understanding why a rhetor attempts a discourse and how he or she responds to the communicative context, but also for creating effective messages of our own.

Recognizing the pragmatic and situated nature of rhetoric is the first step in understanding, both theoretically and practically, how we negotiate various day-to-day communicative demands. As Aristotle established, the purpose of rhetoric is not the pursuit of some transcendent Platonic truth; instead, it is the form of reasoning and argument that we use in those situations where truth is unlikely to be found, but practical decisions must nevertheless be made. Aristotle therefore offers concrete principles that can be used in developing and presenting effective messages.

Rhetorical discourse arises wherever there is conflict or divided opinion; it engages with daily problems, conflicts, and desires. The goal of rhetoric is therefore to persuade, or “produce conviction.”⁴⁵ It addresses itself to the goals and needs of both the rhetor and the surrounding community. As a practical method or tool for effective persuasion, rhetoric is thus “harnessed to the world.”⁴⁶ In fact, according to Bitzer, it is obstacles or problems in our environment that call forth rhetorical discourse. He explains that rhetorical communication is a process “through which human beings achieve

⁴⁴ Bitzer, “Situation” 8.

⁴⁵ Aristotle 1355a.

⁴⁶ George Dillon, Rhetoric as Social Imagination: Explorations in the Interpersonal Function of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 12.

harmonious adjustment with the environment.”⁴⁷ Such “harmonious adjustments” are necessary to our survival in both physical and mental environments.

Human agents seek to modify their surroundings for their comfort or convenience, and thus are characterized by a quality of “striving,” which Bitzer sees as “a fundamental and pervasive condition of life.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, “human societies and individuals do not merely rest, like rocks, upon the earth; they are actively engaged in adjusting, responding, overcoming, planning, laboring, making, and acting.”⁴⁹ Wherever these efforts depend on the cooperation of others, rhetorical communication provides the means. Through it, we make the necessary adjustments and overcome the difficulties and obstacles presented by the environments we inhabit.

Bitzer calls this process of ongoing adjustment and adaptation “functional interaction,” of which rhetoric is “a critical mode.”⁵⁰ He sees rhetoric as a product of this interaction between “persons on the one hand and the environment on the other,” and argues that this situated nature of rhetoric was insufficiently recognized by contemporary rhetorical theorists. It is Bitzer’s goal to “revive the notion of rhetorical situation, to provide at least the outline of an adequate conception of it, and to establish it as a controlling and fundamental concern of rhetorical theory.”⁵¹

Bitzer’s concern is largely pragmatic in nature: he is interested in why and how humans actually communicate in real-life situations. The situational view, as Bitzer

⁴⁷ Bitzer, “Functional” 21.

⁴⁸ Bitzer, “Functional” 22.

⁴⁹ Bitzer, “Functional” 22.

⁵⁰ Bitzer, “Functional” 21.

⁵¹ Bitzer, “Situation” 3.

explains, “seeks to discover the fundamental conditions of rhetoric – of pragmatic communication – in the interaction of man with environment.”⁵² This interaction with the environment occurs out of physical necessity, but also because our human “experience presents divisions that can be bridged through identifications.”⁵³ In other words, we communicate in order to survive, not only physically but emotionally, culturally, and socially. Bitzer argues that our existence depends on our ability to make “skillful and ongoing adjustments to, or modifications of, our environment,” adjustments that frequently rely on our rhetorical skill.⁵⁴

However, as pragmatic as his focus may be, Bitzer is interested in more than identifying and explaining individual or particular rhetorical situations. He also seeks insight into what might be regarded as the universal rhetorical situation: the human need for connection with and cooperation from others. This is a concept that Kenneth Burke will later take up in his own article on the rhetorical situation. Bitzer presents this universal, or general, rhetorical situation as being made up of the “mass of details comprising the total environment” and the general impulse that causes humans to communicate rhetorically.⁵⁵ He points out that our effort to “come to terms with the environment and with ourselves” is a matter of a “delicate balance,” and that “we engage the environment in a rhetoric of adjustment; through poetry, drama, ritual, education,

⁵² Bitzer, “Functional” 22.

⁵³ Bitzer, “Functional” 22.

⁵⁴ Bitzer, “Functional” 22.

⁵⁵ Bitzer, “Functional” 23.

philosophy, religion.”⁵⁶ He sees such efforts as pervasive, and it is in this respect that an exploration of the rhetorical situation is an exploration of human experience writ large.

Kenneth Burke, too, sees the rhetorical situation as potentially providing “a kind of summarizing statement” about the human condition, both sociologically and philosophically.⁵⁷ Writing in the 1970s, he considers major influences within society, such as technology, governmental decisions, and the economy, as key constituents of the “common” rhetorical situation in which humanity finds itself, and he sees these influences as a foundation for speculation on “the nature of the ‘human situation’ in general.”⁵⁸

As he explores “the essential attributes of ‘the rhetorical situation,’” Burke ranges over a variety of “extensions of persuasive processes,” including myth, magic, and charisma.⁵⁹ In so doing, he hopes to gain, and give, insight into human motivation, since motives, to Burke, are “shorthand terms for situations.”⁶⁰ For Burke, an understanding of the contexts in which humans communicate leads to insight about the reasons for which they do so.

Particular rhetorical situations, whatever their circumstances, are given flavour by the universal rhetorical situation. This insight is crucial to understanding how discourse comes into being and why rhetors make the choices they do in their

⁵⁶ Bitzer, “Functional” 38.

⁵⁷ Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Communication: Ethical and Moral Issues, ed. Lee Thayer (London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1973) 263.

⁵⁸ Burke, “Situation” 263.

⁵⁹ Burke, “Situation” 263.

⁶⁰ Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 29.

discourses, since not all choices are motivated by immediate circumstance. As Burke notes, even some of the apparently simplest actions are rooted in the universal human condition. This knowledge can help the critic to analyse and gain insight into everyday rhetorical situations by helping us to take into account the possible factors that are affecting our audiences and influencing our own choices as we create our pragmatic messages.

For the purposes of improving technical and professional communication, therefore, an understanding of the rhetorical situation may also be used inventively. The remainder of this thesis will demonstrate how these critical theories can be used to aid in the effective creation of technical discourses.

Chapter Two: Context as Writing Strategy: Burke's Dramatistic Pentad in Action

The role of context, or situation, in shaping the form and emphasis of a message as well as its content has long been understood by rhetorical theorists. As was established in the previous chapter, the theory of situation as a fundamental principle of rhetoric was systematized by Lloyd F. Bitzer in his influential article "The Rhetorical Situation," which elaborates the three components of situational theory: exigence, audience, and constraints.¹ Bitzer's initial article, along with his subsequent treatment of the subject,² seems intended as an aid to critics of rhetorical messages; neither paper addresses situation as a systematic approach to creating messages. What I would like to do in this chapter is to elaborate the understanding of situation as Bitzer explains it, to show its coherence with Kenneth Burke's system of dramatism, and in particular to demonstrate the usefulness of these critical concepts as systematic approaches to creating messages.

How situation functions as a generating principle for rhetorical discourse has been investigated and argued over by numerous theorists since Bitzer.³ The most

¹ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968) 1-14.

² Lloyd F. Bitzer, "Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective," Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) 21-38.

³ Including, for example, Donna Gorrell, "The Rhetorical Situation Again: Linked Components in a Venn Diagram," Philosophy and Rhetoric 30 (1997) 395-412; Cynthia Miecznikowski-Sheard, "Kairos and Kenneth Burke's Psychology of Political

interesting of these is Kenneth Burke, whose paper – though it bears the same title as Bitzer’s original – is completely different in focus and content.⁴ Burke is not interested in the components of individual rhetorical situations, as Bitzer seems to be; instead, his concern is with “the nature of the ‘human situation’ in general.”⁵ His discussion is much more philosophical and psychological than Bitzer’s pragmatic investigation. Nevertheless, like Bitzer’s construct, Burke’s theories can provide a helpful tool for the writer of professional communication.

Here, as elsewhere, Burke is particularly interested in the relationship between situation and human motivation, and he focuses on identification – human connectedness and identity formation – as the fundamental motive of all human communication.⁶ Burke understands identification as the joining of interests between people; it is a process of overcoming social and personal division. He argues that, for

and Social Communication,” College English 55 (March 1993) 291-310; Barbara A. Beisecker, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from within the Thematic of Differance,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 22 (1989) 110-130; Michael Carter, “Stasis and Kairos: Principles of Social Construction in Classical Rhetoric,” Rhetoric Review 7 (Fall 1988) 97-112; James L. Kinneavy, “Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric,” Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986) 79-105; James S. Baumlin, “Decorum, Kairos, and the ‘New’ Rhetoric,” Pretext 5 (Fall-Winter 1984) 171-183; Alan Brinton, “Situation in the Study of Rhetoric,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 14 (1981) 234-248; Richard E. Vatz, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 6 (1973) 154-161; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation,” Philosophy & Rhetoric 6 (1973): 162-70; Richard L. Larson, “Lloyd Bitzer’s ‘Rhetorical Situation’ and the Classification of Discourse: Problems and Implications,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 3 (1970) 165-168. This list could easily be extended further.

⁴ Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Communication: Ethical and Moral Issues, ed. Lee Thayer (London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1973) 263.

⁵ Burke, “Situation” 263.

⁶ Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives [1941] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 45-46.

social beings, the separateness of individuation is intolerable, and we seek to overcome this division by symbolic means. For Burke, identities are formed, and community with others is created, through the messages we create.

Burke's rather abstract approach may at first seem to have little to do with technical communication, which is, after all, fundamentally pragmatic and immediate rather than philosophical in orientation. However, as Burke points out, all communication – including the most pragmatic of messages – exists because of the gaps and divisions between ourselves and what we desire. These divisions may exist between societies, individuals, or cultures; between professions or between schools of thought within a profession; between engineer and client; between supervisor and subordinate. They also grow out of the imperfections in our environment: the gaps between things as they are and things as we desire them to be. It is here that the link between Bitzer and Burke is plainest. Recall Bitzer's emphasis on the quality of "striving" as "a fundamental and pervasive condition of life" and as the source and ground of communicative activity, and his assertion that our "experience presents divisions that can be bridged through identifications."⁷

According to MIT professor Donald Schon,⁸ professional activity in fields like engineering, architecture, medicine, or law exhibits this same quality of striving. Schon points out that professional practice in all these fields (and, arguably, in all branches of human endeavour) involves "converting actual to preferred situations"⁹ – in other words,

⁷ Bitzer, "Functional" 22.

⁸ Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁹ Schon 77.

overcoming the kind of division that underlies Bitzer's concept of the rhetorical situation and Burke's understanding of human motive in general. Division in this broad sense is, as Burke maintains, pervasive; without it, there would be no need for persuasion, no need for communication of any kind, no need for any human design. Thus, "division" refers not only to the distance between one individual and another, but also to the distance between two interpretations of the same event or problem, or between two approaches to solving it; it can be understood, too, as the gap between a problem and its solution, between the world as it is and the world as we desire it to be.

Like other professionals, the engineer's task is to overcome division at a variety of levels; she must bring together the needs of the clients and a suitable and feasible design; she must negotiate the sometimes incompatible pressures of safety and economy, functionality and appearance, deadlines and workability. She must find a way to conjoin the goals of management, marketing, and technical staff. And she must find a way to get the clients to see the problem and the solution – the resulting design – as she does.

It is for this reason that the theorist and communication consultant Cezar Ornatowsky characterizes technical communication as "much more political and rhetorical" and less "objective" than many practitioners recognize.¹⁰ Rhetorical theorists Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott argue that the rhetor's implicit goal is always to persuade an audience to "see as I see, know as I know, and value as I value."¹¹ This is

¹⁰ Cezar Ornatowsky, "Between Efficiency and Politics: Rhetoric and Ethics in Technical Writing," Professional Writing and Rhetoric, ed. Tim Peeples (New York: Longman, 2002) 179.

¹¹ Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott, eds., Methods of Rhetorical Criticism (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980) 19.

just as true for engineers as they communicate with their clients, with management, and with marketing professionals. They want all of these groups to accept their interpretation of the problem and the resulting design. While such efforts may be rationalized as simply providing the best service to clients, justifying the payment of fees, or creating a better society through technological advances, engineers are in fact engaged in the creation of identification between people and ideas.

However, as pervasive as it is, identification is not as simple a concept as it may first appear. Burke explains three different ways by which it may be achieved.¹² The first, not unexpectedly, conjoins understanding by stressing commonalities between people or ideas. Identification may also be achieved by stressing differences between the group to be identified and some other group – a kind of “common enemy” strategy.

It is the third form of identification that is most interesting rhetorically, according to Burke. He describes it as “identification by inaccuracy, unawareness, or false assumption,” which interests him most because “the rhetorical situation ... comes to a head in faulty identifications.”¹³ He characterizes this form of identification as “failing to draw the lines at the right places”¹⁴ – a kind of mistaken identity in which we align with something or someone based on an attribute that the person or thing does not in fact possess or confer.

Faulty identifications of this sort are common, as when a person driving a fast car exclaims, “Look at how fast I can go!” Examples of them abound: an ostentatious house

¹² Burke, “Situation” 268-269.

¹³ Burke, “Situation” 271.

¹⁴ Burke, “Situation” 271.

identifies a person as financially successful, when in reality he is near bankrupt from the cost of keeping up the appearance of wealth; a designer wardrobe compensates for a person's lack of confidence or physical attractiveness; association with someone who has achieved distinction confers greater social value to a hanger-on. Such "faulty identifications," in which we accrue to ourselves the prestige or power of someone or something else, are mostly harmless, but – as Burke explains in his analysis of Adolf Hitler's rhetoric¹⁵ – this process of faulty identification can take a much darker form.

This notion of "failing to draw the lines at the right places" has parallels in technical communication, and may help to explain some of the misunderstandings that can occur in the technical workplace. An outstanding field engineer is promoted to a supervisory position based on the excellence of his work record; he is happy to accept the post, but turns out to be an inept manager. A consulting engineer studies a structural defect in a client's building. She understands the client's plea to "fix the problem," but fails to take into account his aesthetic priorities; the resulting intervention – functional, but an eyesore – leaves the client enraged. The parties in these situations mistakenly assumed that their goals or interpretations were shared, but each has expectations of the other based on false or inadequate assumptions.

By far the most common form of "identification by false assumption" in technical communication is the inadequate understanding of communication itself. Too many professionals assume that communicating effectively is simply a matter of arranging factual material into a conventional form, overlooking entirely the "political and rhetorical" elements that influence every interaction, even in the professional

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 191-220.

workplace. Communicating effectively involves much more than stuffing facts into a report format and hoping for the best.

Fortunately, Burke offers a method that can help a technical communicator make more informed choices about his or her messages through a comprehensive analysis of the rhetorical situation. Known as dramatism, it is a practical method used to study the underlying dynamics of interaction by considering the relationship between a communicator and the message produced, the surroundings, the means or style of communication, and the reasons for the creation of the message.¹⁶ Burke conceived of the dramatistic pentad (so named because of its five terms) as a critical method for studying existing messages, but – as I will show in the remainder of this chapter – it can also assist a writer to create an effective message.

Burke is interested in the forces that motivate humans to act and choose as they do. He believes that these motivations can be detected in the patterns by which people communicate. He introduces the terms of the pentad by explaining that:

in a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*), and the *purpose*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Kenneth Burke, “Interaction: Dramatism,” International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, vol. 6 (New York: MacMillan Co and The Free Press, 1968): 445-452.

¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, “The Five Key Terms of Dramatism,” A Grammar of Motives [1945] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) xv.

As this excerpt suggests, Burke's conception of "scene" parallels Bitzer's characterization of the rhetorical situation, and he describes scene as a "blanket term for the concept of background or setting *in general*, a name for *any* situation in which acts or agents are placed."¹⁸ Like Bitzer, Burke sees as primary the relationship between the act (or message) and the context in which it is produced. For Burke, as for Bitzer, the audience is part of the situation in which the rhetorical act takes place. Also embedded in Burke's pentadic structure is the traditional rhetorical triangle of speaker-message-audience. As Wayne Booth does,¹⁹ Burke makes the interaction among act-scene-agent the primary dynamic in the creation and understanding of rhetorical action.

For the writer, the beauty of the dramatic pentad is its capacity to uncover several different points of view from which the same problem or situation may be considered. The fuller understanding of the dynamics of a situation provided by the pentad leaves less of a chance for false assumptions and inaccuracies. Burke invites us to consider what he calls the "ratios"²⁰ – by which he means the interaction – between pairs of terms: for example, the scene-act ratio studies the way in which the act and its context may be seen as "fitting" to each other (to borrow Bitzer's terminology).²¹ The act-agent ratio emphasizes the way in which the message typifies the rhetor who produced it (or, conversely, how the message helps to shape or sustain the character of that rhetor). The agent-scene ratio considers how a particular situation may call forth

¹⁸ Burke, "Five Key Terms" xvi.

¹⁹ Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication 14 (1963) 139-145.

²⁰ Kenneth Burke, "Container and the Thing Contained," A Grammar of Motives [1945] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 7.

²¹ Bitzer, "Situation" 9-10.

certain characteristics in the rhetor, or, conversely, how a rhetor might deliberately “set a scene” in which he can reinforce his image of himself. Similar ratios can be formed using the other elements of the pentad (act-agency, scene-purpose, and so forth). For example, a writer who focuses on the act-scene ratio may be most concerned with how to make her message as clear to the audience as possible. One who focuses on the act-agent ratio may be more interested in how effectively the message positions him as an expert.

Dramatistic analysis of the dynamics of scene-act-agent invites deeper and more subtle consideration of the contexts involved in technical communication, and is particularly useful in figuring out an appropriate way of communicating in highly charged or delicate situations. In terms of technical communication, a dramatistic approach has two benefits. First, the writer can step outside a routine or automatic view of the situation to uncover subtleties that might influence the way a message is read or understood, but which are not overtly in play in the creation of the message: one example is the influence of organizational power dynamics. The second benefit of using the pentad in creating messages is that it allows the writer to examine his or her own motivations, and to make more informed choices about how the message should be positioned.

I am not the first to see the potential of dramatism as an inventional tool for writers. An example of such an application can be found in at least one Canadian composition handbook.²² However, this simplified exercise reduces dramatism to a mere

²² Jack Finnbogason and Al Valleau, A Canadian Writer's Guide, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2002) 8-10.

rubric for finding topics and “jump-starting” the writing process, and thus fails to fully exploit the richness of the dramatistic approach as an aid to writers.

In order to illustrate how the pentad might actually be used as an inventional tool, I would like to offer some alternatives to the example provided in Finnbogason and Valleau’s writing guide. The exercise in their handbook provides a brief introduction to dramatism, and then demonstrates how it is a useful method for “pre-writing” exercises. The example cited concerns the topic of suburban development in Canada’s major centres. The authors have used the elements of the pentad to label aspects of the situation, in order to aid the students’ analysis. These are shown as follows:

Act:	The development of suburban sprawl
Scene:	between 1980 and 1990, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver
Agents:	builders, speculators, developers, real-estate agents, buyers, and town councils
Agency:	municipal council decisions, land-use agreements, interest rates, municipal politics
Purpose:	To find a profitable market where there is a demand To find affordable accommodation To ensure land is utilized in accordance with bylaws and to raise taxes

Table 1: Elements of Dramatistic Analysis²³

After identifying the five elements of the pentad, the authors suggest to the student that the most useful ratios to examine are the act-purpose and the agent-act ratios. According to their labelling of the situation, the act-purpose ratio would describe

²³ Finnbogason, 9-10.

the necessary development of suburban areas in order to exploit, or even create, a profitable market that addresses the demand for affordable housing. Unfortunately, this is as far as the authors go in using dramatism as a writing aid. The pentad is used only as a method of finding or clarifying topics, so that students can more easily start their task of writing essays.

However, Burke's goal in offering the pentad was to allow for what he called "perspective by incongruity"²⁴ – that is, a shifting of the writer's point of view as a means of challenging the way a problem has been interpreted. In the example provided by Finnbogason and Valleau, a shifting of the terms allows a whole set of alternate possibilities in the reading of the situation, which in turn would alter how the student might write the assigned essay.

For example, the act may not be simply the development of suburban areas as implied by the authors; a wholly different political and economic scene is invoked if we regard the act instead as that of exploiting those who need housing. The scene is not simply 1980s Calgary or Toronto, but a seller's market resulting from an influx of people to the urban centres. The purpose is not to find a market that has not excluded people, but to make a profit at the expense of those who are desperate for a home. The development of suburban sprawl is now seen not as the central act to be considered, but as the agency or means that enabled the act. The creation of affordable housing is now reduced to a by-product, or not considered at all. Switching the labelling once again would allow for yet another perspective on the situation.

²⁴ Joseph Gusfield, "Introduction," Kenneth Burke on Symbols and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 7, 26.

I do not intend to argue which of these readings, if either, offers the “correct” interpretation of what has been happening as urban areas expand. Instead, I am pointing out the inventional possibilities inherent in this shifting of the pentadic terms. Using the pentad in this way uncovers the motivations of the author that may otherwise have been unnoticed – in this case political and ideological motivations. It may also uncover possibilities for interpreting the act that did not initially occur to the critic. And, if I disagree with how the authors labelled the terms in this situation, and choose to arrange them in a different relation, I also reveal my own ideological or political leanings, which may become clearer to me as I work through this reflective process.

This example makes clearer how dramatism can be used to uncover motives both of the original writers of the text in which this example appeared, and of the critic who questions their arrangement of the terms. It also shows how dramatism can tease out more subtle intentions or meanings in any communicator’s interpretation of a situation. Although this example is not specifically technical in nature, dramatism can equally be used to study motive or political complications in technical communication.

Even an apparently factual or pragmatic discourse, such as a design report, is a product of selection and interpretation. Technical writers may have to work, at different times, in a variety of situations, each featuring a unique combination of constraints. Perhaps the writer must accommodate different agents acting with – or even against – many stakeholders, all as a part of a single scene. As Ornatowsky points out, technical writing inescapably involves a variety of political, ethical, and practical considerations,

as does any activity that takes place in a human organization, and these considerations must be accommodated in the messages produced in and for the organization.²⁵

Using the pentad in this inventional fashion can assist the technical writer in anticipating how a particular audience will receive the information contained in a report, or in accommodating that audience's likely response. The pentad is especially useful if the situation is atypical or if the audience is likely to be hostile to the message. The pentad offers the writer different perspectives, and thus different possibilities for approaching the problem. It can also serve as a corrective to hasty or faulty assumptions.

Using the pentad can help the technical writer to more fully understand and define the discursive problem, identify an appropriate solution, and envision the entire situation in alternate ways. This experience can be invaluable in dealing with the public or with clients who might, at least initially, view the situation in a different way from the way it is perceived by a technical professional.

There is one additional benefit to the pentad besides its capacity to provide insight into the political motivations of the participants. It can also help to ensure that technical writers' ethical responsibilities are fulfilled in their writing. In Burkean terms, too many technical writers focus exclusively on the purpose-agency ratio, leaving out the rest of the elements of the communication situation as they consider only the factual details that must be communicated and the format – report, memo, e-mail message – that they will use to “package” those details. Technical communicators who understand their

²⁵ Cezar M. Ornatowski, “Between Efficiency and Politics: Rhetoric and Ethics in Technical Writing,” Professional Writing and Rhetoric: Readings from the Field ed. Tim Peeples (New York: Longman, 2003) 172-174; Cezar Ornatowski, “Technical Communication and Rhetoric,” Foundations for Teaching Technical Communication: Theory, Practice, and Program Design, eds. Katherine Staples and Cezar Ornatowski (Greenwich, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing, 1997) 45-47.

role as simply to “stuff” information into a standard format are evading the full measure of their responsibility as communicators. They are, whether inadvertently or intentionally, falling into the rhetorical corruption that Wayne Booth describes as the pedant.²⁶

When a writer just plugs “facts” into a standard format without regard to their impact on the audience or the writer’s own ethos, ethical considerations can be ignored, or may not even be considered at all. The act and purpose become detached from their human implications, opening up the possibility for unethical treatment of the material, including suppressing important information the audience requires. In such circumstances, unethical decisions are much easier to make. For this reason, it can be argued that fully analysing your rhetorical situation – including a full consideration of both audience and ethos – can help to ensure a more ethical discourse. At the very least, the choices made by a writer in selecting and arranging information are made with full awareness.

The rhetorical situation can then be seen as an ethical system for generating discourses. By using the pentad as an inventional tool, the technical communicator can ensure that full consideration has been given to different perspectives, and that his choices are based on a full understanding of the situation. In this way, he can make sure that his documents are both ethical and appropriate for the audience.

This chapter suggests that Kenneth Burke’s system of dramatisic analysis and Lloyd Bitzer’s model of the rhetorical situation are more than critical systems. Both can function as aids to the technical writer, as writing tools and planners. They can help to

²⁶ Booth 141.

make writers much more aware of the complex and rich situations in which they are writing and in which they themselves play a part. Using dramatism and the rhetorical situation as strategies for message design will help move technical communicators from a belief that their language is transparent and objective to an understanding that language is always rhetorical, as well as functional. They will understand that everything they write is situational.

Chapter Three: Footing and the Notion of Rhetorical Balance

As important as situation to the effective crafting of a message is the relationship between rhetor and audience, which depends, as Wayne Booth explains, on discovering and maintaining . . . a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communication effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker.¹

In this chapter I would like to delve more deeply into the dynamic of rhetorical balance as described by Booth, in order to show how, like Lloyd Bitzer's construct of the rhetorical situation² and Kenneth Burke's dramatisitic pentad,³ an understanding of rhetorical balance can improve a communicator's effectiveness. I hope, in this chapter, to reveal how complex it can be to establish that balance, and how an understanding of the dynamics of relation can help to improve practical skills of message design.

In keeping with my purpose of bringing together rhetoric and technical communication, theory and practice, the next chapter of this thesis is written as a short manual, or handbook, for second-year engineering students on preparing and delivering

¹ Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication 14 (1963) 141.

² Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968) 1-14.

³ Kenneth Burke, "Interaction: Dramatism," International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, vol. 6 (New York: MacMillan Co and The Free Press, 1968): 445-452.

effective design presentations. As I laid out in my introduction, the inclusion of this manual, while unusual in a theoretical thesis, is central to this project because it is a case study of the practicality of marrying theory to practice, and rhetorical theory in particular to communication in a technical environment.

Writing instructions in any field is complicated by differences in the knowledge and assumptions of the author and the audience, but my situation is made more complex by the fact that the audience and I are experts displaced in each other's fields; I am a communication specialist and not a technical specialist or engineer. As such, I am an expert in an area in which my intended audience lacks knowledge and experience; at the same time, I lack experience in an area in which they are becoming experts. I will be instructing them on giving technical presentations, a specific application of public speaking skill in which I have no direct experience. One of the major challenges, then, has been establishing an appropriate stance or relationship with my audience.

In order to explore the dimensions of rhetorical balance in greater detail, I propose to draw upon the work of George L. Dillon, who offers an expanded model of rhetorical balance that he calls "footing," which includes five dimensions, or measures, of the quality of the interpersonal dynamic between speaker and audience.⁴ Dillon's study involves a selection of advice books, in which the establishment of relation is a prominent feature of the text. He argues that the relationship forged between writer and reader depends on elements of relational communication that are typically not stated in

⁴ George L. Dillon, Rhetoric as Social Imagination: Explorations in the Interpersonal Function of Language (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

the message itself. The unspoken “metacommunication” occurring between the reader and the writer is why Dillon classifies advice-giving, even in a written form, as interpersonal communication. Despite the fact that the writer is engaging many readers through the text, Dillon argues that the communication is interpersonal, or one-to-one, because each reader experiences the interaction individually.

In this chapter, I elaborate on Dillon’s construct and present the analysis I carried out in anticipation of writing the manual. I will then consider some of the ways in which the writing itself changed my understanding of the interaction and challenged the assumptions I had begun with, an outcome I will consider more fully in Chapter Five. My initial concern was to use the elements of footing, along with other aspects of Dillon’s “codes of engagement,”⁵ to explore how my ethos, including the constraints of expertise, authority, and identification, would be established in the handbook I was writing for my undergraduate audience, what exactly the dimensions of that relationship should be, and how it could be managed.

In examining the dynamics of advice-giving, Dillon is interested in what Burke would term the “act-agent ratio” of the interaction. He notes that a communicator’s style, like footing, includes that person’s “individual self-definition,”⁶ and thus depends on factors not wholly accounted for in a consideration of the rhetorical situation. In advice books, which he claims are largely unsituated due to the lack of context for the

⁵ Dillon 14-42.

⁶ Dillon 14.

relationship between writer and reader, there is nevertheless a “construction” of that relationship, and thus a footing between the participants in the interaction.

Writing under these circumstances is what Dillon calls “an act of social imagination,” hence the title of his work.⁷ Because the relationship, or footing, between these two constructions – writer and audience – can be managed in many different ways, it is necessary to develop a more detailed vocabulary of what constitutes footing than the terms “speaker” and “audience” offered by Wayne Booth in his discussion of the rhetorical stance. Dillon introduces five comprehensive dimensions on which the footing, or relationship between writer and reader, can be analysed. These are impersonal and personal, distant and solidary, superior and equal, confrontive and oblique, and formal and informal. The remainder of my analysis will consider these five elements as they relate to the demands of the advice manual I was setting out to write.

The first element of footing refers to how personal or impersonal the writer is with the reader.⁸ A common method of personalizing in a text is to use personal pronouns, like “I” and “you.” These aid in creating a sense that the writer is speaking directly to the reader. In short, personal pronouns help to create involvement in the text, which can aid in eliminating the objective, non-interactive voice that often renders a text impersonal.

This involvement creates various degrees of personal connection between the writer and the reader. Although “I” and “you” can also be used in a general sense to

⁷ Dillon 15.

⁸ Dillon 21-23.

mean anybody in society, a text can also be made more immediate and personal when the relationship is dramatized; for example, a writer can pose questions to the reader to develop a dynamic example scenario, or present a familiar situation in a narrative format, with the reader and the writer as the characters.

However, Dillon cautions that devices like these must be used carefully. Too many questions can begin to sound contrived; they may even inadvertently increase the impersonal quality of the text and possibly cause the reader to resist its advice. The reader may feel manipulated by too-obvious prompting and leading of the writer, who has been positioned as controlling or “superior.” This antagonism could be deepened if the writer is, or appears to be, either confrontive (threatening) or distant. By deftly using personal pronouns, questions and dramatization, a writer can maintain a personal interaction with the reader, but these elements must be kept in fine balance to avoid the opposite effect of contrivance.

What can be learned from this aspect of footing that would be applicable to the writing of a manual such as the one I was intending to write? Engineering students are most familiar with, and are being trained to emulate, an objective form of writing and reporting findings. Although they usually have a lot of personal and subjective interactions during the design process, when the reports are due they will be encouraged to write impersonally. The presentations based on their designs or findings are also largely objective, despite the more immediately personal nature of public speaking as a medium. Engineers rely on their professionalism and accurate, objective research in order to maintain their reputations and, ultimately, their livelihood.

Since this impersonal, objective style is widely expected, its use is one way in which engineers project their competence to each other and to society in general. In order to establish my own professional credibility to an audience who is used to such a style as indicating authority, I anticipated opting for a somewhat impersonal and objective footing in my manual. I judged this approach not only as helping to authenticate my credibility, but also as demonstrating the sort of final product that I would be teaching them to produce.

Like the impersonal-personal continuum, Dillon's second element of footing, the distant-solidary aspect of the relationship, refers to the level of identification or common ground between writer and reader.⁹ Solidarity, as Dillon explains, is achieved by recognizing and responding to the values, concerns, and knowledge of the reader.¹⁰ It is fully achieved when the writer actually approves of and endorses the reader's world view. Not only does the solidary writer share factual understanding with the reader, such a person also accepts and shares the attitudes of the reader toward the subject and recognizes that affirming these attitudes may even be more important than the message content to establishing an effective reader-writer relationship. These pre-existing attitudes about an issue, and the corresponding word choice, must be affirmed throughout the discourse in order to maintain common ground with the reader and to avoid the impression of distance in ideas and style.

⁹ Dillon 23-27.

¹⁰ Dillon 24.

Interestingly, the very acts of writing and reading themselves already assume some level of homogeneity between the writer and the reader, since it is a normal human response when we have entered into communication with someone to look for similarities between ourselves and the communicator. Kenneth Burke elaborates on this tendency in his concept of identification.¹¹ We communicate in order to overcome our differences and to ultimately, although never permanently, connect with other people. Burke asserts that such identification is the fundamental drive in all humans; everything that we do, especially linguistically, is an attempt at overcoming division in order to come together, or identify, with those around us.

Nevertheless, at the same time there is a recognition of the difference in knowledge and perspective between the writer and the reader, especially in the case of advice books on communication. The writer prepares the advice text because an intended audience out there need the information in order to increase the quality and effectiveness of their oral and written communication skills. The difference in knowledge between reader and writer imposes a distance between them, at least as regards their grasp of effective communication skills. Overcoming this gap is the task facing the writer of an advice book on communication. Dillon observes four devices that such a writer can – that I can – use to increase solidarity between writer and reader.

First, using humour is a common method of building a personal relationship with the reader. The author assumes that the reader will share a similar sense of humour and

¹¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* [1945] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 45-46.

that humorous comments will garner from the reader a like response. This sense of shared attitudes and understanding is increased as the reader “gets” the joke or humorous statement without needing an explanation of what is funny. Humour engages the reader through its participatory nature. For example, the reader is flattered and made solidary with the writer, as Dillon explains, by being able to identify irony without being told the statement was ironic.¹² If the humour fails to create this identification, if the reader doesn’t “get” the joke, it can backfire and actually exclude the intended audience. For this reason, it must be carefully handled.

The writer may also use jargon as a way of explicitly including the reader in the interaction. However, perhaps even more than humour, jargon can exclude as well as include, and may actually prevent some readers from being able to follow and understand the message. For example, terms that are specific to a certain discipline or field are typically created to simplify and accurately specify discussion in a shared field of knowledge. If the reader knows what the term signifies, then his understanding of the text will be clear. However, jargon prevents those who are not familiar with the terminology from grasping the meaning of the discourse, and has the effect of creating, or selecting, an audience made up only of those who are already in the “club” or discipline. Jargon unifies as long as writer and reader share similar expertise; however, it can create distance and even hostility when audience and speaker come from different disciplines.

¹² Dillon 26.

Clichés can function in a similar manner to jargon. However, clichés have a broader audience appeal, at times even including every speaker of the language or member of that society. They can help to explain the writer’s meaning in familiar phrases or ideas that most everyone is aware of. Instead of excluding, like jargon, clichés include many people into the discourse by illuminating the meaning in simple and common phrases. Nevertheless, these too can potentially backfire, since a writer who uses too many clichés introduces the possibility of seeming insincere and uninterested in the precise meaning of what is being said, potentially creating a distance from the reader.

The last method of increasing solidarity is using comparisons in the form of similes and analogies. These devices allow the writer to connect a new solution or method to something that the reader already understands clearly, has a more positive attitude about, or is more interested in. Writers can use similes to move the reader to an altered point of view, or just merely to cross the boundary between the writer’s imagination and way of thinking and the reader’s conceptions of the issue being examined.

If appropriately employed, all four of these devices of solidarity – humour, jargon, clichés, and comparisons – can bring the reader and writer closer together, or to a more even and personal level of understanding. My manual will have to create sufficient solidarity to engage the reader and show that improving presentation skills is possible with knowledge of message design and sensitivity to audience, combined with the experience gained by effective and consistent practice.

However, given the constraints of advice writing, only one of the four devices to increase solidarity is risk-free in a communication text for technical students. Jargon would not create solidarity because of the disciplinary boundaries I would be crossing. Using the technical jargon of engineering in this manual might create suspicion and resentment because I could not be certain of using it accurately. It is also inappropriate since I will be advising the students to keep jargon to a minimum in their talks. I am assuming expertise in my field, holding my authority in the area of presentations. As a student of rhetoric writing to technical students, I need to recognize and respect our differing knowledge bases or risk increasing distance by invalidly trespassing in their discipline.

Too much humour would also be inappropriate for this kind of book for this audience, not only because it is generally expected that textbooks not be ironic or overly humorous, but because I would not be carefully demonstrating the style of writing or speaking that is desired in a technical presentation. My ethos – good will, good character, and good judgement – would be weakened, and a reader could not easily be solidary with an instructor who cannot deliver the type and quality of work that is being taught. Humour will have to be used appropriately and not overdone.

Clichés also pose a danger in a discourse on delivering technical presentations. Such a presentation is supposed to keep the audience interested, and often even persuade them to take an action. However, clichés can drain the freshness and energy out of any communication by suggesting either that the speaker has not thought deeply about the subject or that nothing new is being said. A speaker or writer who uses too many clichés

may seem too unconcerned with the audience to consider trying to make the diction and implied assumptions new, interesting, and memorable. Overusing clichés does not present a professional image or quality of work to clients who require an innovative solution to a technical problem.

It is important for a writer to create solidarity with the reader in order to persuade, or even to establish positive ethos. However, in the presentation manual I will be writing, creating solidarity will be a challenge. I am instructing a reader on how to prepare better presentations, which automatically introduces distance because I am sharing knowledge that the reader does not already possess. In other kinds of interpersonal advice books, the author can admit to still struggling with the problem that the discourse is trying to ameliorate, but I believe that the situation, and the nature of what I am teaching, precludes this strategy. If I am to be effective, I must demonstrate my command of the medium of public speaking; I am also modelling good communication for my students to emulate. As a result, I must avoid devices that could potentially backfire, and choose instead strategies that will create identification without compromising my ethos. One such strategy may be to establish common ground based on the fact that, like my audience, I am a student who has learned some useful strategies for solving a problem we all share. This is one possible method by which the boundaries can be crossed between the differing knowledge bases, which are being forced closer together by the subject matter of the manual.

The third aspect of footing that Dillon presents is the level of superiority or equality in the relationship.¹³ Dillon contends that this continuum is based on the level of “vehemence” found in the discourse,¹⁴ or the amount of conviction with which the writer asserts ideas. This vehemence, or conviction, is measured by two more features of the writer’s stance, which are certainty-uncertainty and obligation-necessity. The first of these, certainty-uncertainty, describes the strength of conviction versus the degree of “hedging” that the author uses. The writer may hedge or qualify ideas with words such as “tends,” “sometimes,” “usually,” and “perhaps,” thus indicating to the reader a level of uncertainty or lack of confidence in the assertions. By contrast, the writer with a footing of certainty would use more authoritative, absolute terms, such as “always” and “definitely.”

Obligation-necessity, the second aspect of vehemence, explores the manner in which the writer asks the reader to act. The writer can tell the reader either that she “must do something,” out of necessity or that he “should do this,” out of obligation to self, to friends and family, or to society. Certainty and necessity, Dillon explains, are indicators of a superior footing, while uncertainty and obligation create a greater sense of equality between writer and reader.

The writer who wants to claim authority through superiority will communicate a vehement message to the reader. This writer may do so by using a couple of tactics to reduce the reader’s involvement in the interaction and control the reader’s opinion and

¹³ Dillon 27-30.

¹⁴ Dillon 27-28.

will. In a vehement and assertive discourse, the writer will make sweeping value judgements, characterized by the writer's claim to "know" that a thing is so. Often this claim to "know" is without any evidence or support, and leaves little room to consider opposing or alternative viewpoints. As well as making generalized value judgements, the superior writer will also avoid participatory reasoning so that the reader does not have to be involved in drawing any conclusions. The superior writer keeps the power to make assertions and direct the meaning and outcome of the discourse; the reader is left completely out of the interpersonal dynamic occurring in the writing and reading process.

Superiority can be qualified by employing equalizing devices in the discourse. Unfortunately, these devices, like other strategies of engagement, can easily miscarry and must be deftly executed. One possibility is for the writer to make references to his or her own performance in the area being discussed. For example, in my manual I could describe how poor my speaking skills were when I began my studies, and describe the struggle I had in improving them.

However, the danger of using such a device in an otherwise superior discourse becomes apparent even here, as the writer may begin to sound falsely apologetic or pandering toward those who are considered to be behind the writer in knowledge and experience. This potentially manipulative approach demonstrates how easily an equalizing device can become the agent of an even more superior footing. Dillon warns that "self-dramatization easily becomes self-glorification."¹⁵ Self-deprecating humour

¹⁵ Dillon 30.

can also be used to create equality between the writer and the reader, but if this humour is taken too far or is differently interpreted by the reader, it will only serve to highlight the differences in knowledge between the writer and the reader. In the dynamic between myself and my readers, I will have a superior understanding of the subject matter, since the purpose of an advice-giving text is to impart knowledge. However, I will have to consciously avoid equalizing devices that emphasize the superior footing at the expense of my ethos. Such choices could create a lack of credibility, most especially by my failure of judgement of the situation and the audience.

The next aspect of footing is what Dillon calls the confrontive-oblique continuum.¹⁶ This continuum introduces another dimension in the construction of authority in footing. Whether the footing is confrontive or oblique is dependent upon the manner and style in which solutions are presented to the reader by the writer. In composition texts, the more oblique writer may present information as a sharing of ideas and information that the reader will find useful, instead of challenging the reader's face¹⁷ with too much directive instruction. This oblique approach avoids openly challenging the reader.

By contrast, a confrontive writer constantly tells the reader what to think and feel, including why the reader behaves as he does. This tactic blatantly denies the reader's positive face needs, or the desire to be considered in a positive light. When carried to an extreme, the confrontive style can border on abusive, in that it does not

¹⁶ Dillon 30-31.

¹⁷ Erving Goffman, "On Face Work," Interaction Ritual (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

allow for positive reinforcement of the reader. It also prevents even the semblance of a “two-sided” dialogue between reader and writer. The writer’s thoughts, ideas, and solutions become the only important or valid way of seeing and solving a problem.

There is, however, a difference between a confrontive and a superior footing. Dillon asserts that a writer can be both superior and impersonal without being confrontive.¹⁸ Even when adopting an impersonal stance, a writer does not have to give up any superiority in order to be non-confrontive. It is possible to write impersonally and superiorly while maintaining good ethos, by employing a more oblique approach. This indirect approach is the best option for my situation; an approach that emphasizes shared objectives will serve me better in a context that offers so many other challenges to ethos, such as crossing disciplinary boundaries.

I need to be impersonal to fulfill my audience’s expectations for credibility, and superior in order to retain the authority to give advice on the topic, yet I must also recognize and respect the reader’s face and desire to be thought well of. If I can achieve this rhetorical balance, my ethos appeals will help create a positive interpersonal communication experience. I will be able to demonstrate my good will, good character, and good judgement to my intended audience, which will raise their engagement with my message and advice.

The last element of footing identified by Dillon is the formal-informal continuum.¹⁹ Informal style is seen as more immediate, comforting, and appealing than

¹⁸ Dillon 31.

¹⁹ Dillon 31-32.

a formal style. Informal style in diction and sentence structure can be advantageous in persuading people to follow a large course of change because it allows the writer to encourage and affirm the reader through the personal relationship that has been established. It is difficult to create the same personal bond with a reader through formal language and sentence construction.

However, formality has the advantage of connoting the writer's commitment to being explicit, clear, and trustworthy in thought and language. It can also express the writer's willingness to take responsibility for what is being said. In my manual, I will have to maintain a moderate level of formality because the students need to learn how to give effective formal and professional presentations. The constraints imposed by the textbook form also invite a more formal stance, but I could attempt to increase solidarity with the reader by introducing some informal qualities into my text.

The goal of the manual is to help the students develop solid skills in communication, so that when it is time for the design presentation, they will already have a strategy to clearly and effectively deliver what is required. Dillon's model of the codes of engagement, or footing, offers specific insight into that important dynamic of speaker and audience, and provides an elaborated understanding of Wayne Booth's rhetorical balance. Using Dillon's systematized vocabulary of footing to study the challenges of a communication dynamic allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between rhetors and their audiences.

Footing is a specific and concrete system for managing and understanding some of the more subtle aspects of assessing what is needed to construct good ethos appeals in

a given context. It does so by dealing specifically with five different stances that combine to create the overall relationship between writer and reader. The strength of Dillon's model is not only in its comprehensiveness, but also in its flexibility and relevance to the demands of audience facing the writer of a handbook on communication.

While Dillon advances his argument through analyses of a series of existing discourses, this model – like Bitzer's rhetorical situation – provides the rhetor with a valuable tool for approaching the creation of a message or text. An analysis of the dynamics of footing can help the writer to use good judgement in creating the most effective audience-speaker dynamic. Good will is exercised if the writer concentrates on the audience while choosing the most appropriate footing so that the message will be communicated clearly and effectively. Good character becomes apparent as the writer considers the reader's face needs and does not sacrifice those for the sake of claiming superiority and authority.

Ultimately, in examining footing using Dillon's model, I am evaluating how ethos appeals are actually established in books that offer advice to a reader, and more specifically, how I can create ethos with my audience of undergraduate engineering students. Based on this evaluation, I developed my initial ideas about how I should position myself with my audience in order to display good will, good character, and good judgement.

As I will discuss more fully in Chapter Five, writing a handbook on communication involves significant complications, since communication is a very

personal skill in which the reader has extensive face investment. When I initially completed this analysis, my projected footing was rather impersonal; typically distant, with the occasional solidarity demonstrated through slightly informal language and familiar comparisons; superior, with certainty, yet avoiding sweeping generalizations because the manual will discuss a specific topic; not confrontive, yet still superior and impersonal; and largely formal, with moments of informal footing.

The process of writing the manual challenged this initial assessment somewhat, not so much contradicting as refining my original analysis. For example, the relational dynamic depicted in an analysis of footing cannot be fully understood without reference to context and situational constraints, and the constraints facing me pushed me toward a “harder” rhetoric than I might otherwise have chosen. The manual has to be brief; it is not a primary textbook for any course, but a supplement that is to be handed to the students to aid them in preparing their design presentations. The audience will not be interested in an exploration of the “whys” of good rhetorical practice; they just want to know, in a quick, step-by-step guide, what to do to make their presentations effective. As I will elaborate more fully in Chapter Five, though I believe my initial instincts to have been trustworthy, there is always more to consider as the process of reflective practice unfolds.

Chapter Four: Better Design Presentations: A Student Guide

Design night is looming; the reality of presenting your work to a large group has sunk in.

Possibly panic has even set in.

How on earth are you going to face so many people, including other students, your professors, and the clients themselves? Will you throw up? Pass out? What if they laugh at you? What if you do a really lousy job and let down your group?

Sound absurd? Well, to the 90 per cent of people who are scared of having to speak in public, these concerns are real. But there is a way out.

This handbook will help you prepare effectively so that you don't need to feel panicked about giving your design presentation. It will teach you to organize and structure your talk, reduce your fear, and make a personal connection with your audience. Even if you've never felt uncomfortable with speaking in public, this handbook will still help you plan, organize, and deliver a professional quality presentation.

First, a few facts. (If you need to get right down to the step-by-step guide, you can skip this section and go right to page 65).

Fact One: You already know that, as an engineer, you'll be expected to give many public talks, from design presentations and technical briefings to progress updates, staff meetings, and workshops. Successful engineers know how to build their credibility

and make a positive impression on an audience, and if you take the opportunity to master these skills while you're still an engineering student, you'll have a real advantage for your professional future. Likely your engineering profs have emphasized that presenting your design is an excellent chance to get your feet wet and learn first-hand about the kind of public speaking that you will have to do throughout your career.

Fact Two: A surprising number of speakers forget the most important first step in putting together a talk: *why* they're doing it. Before you start, be sure you can answer this question:

Why are you giving a presentation?

Note that this question has two parts. First, why are *you* (or your design team) the one speaking? And second, why are you *speaking* at all? Why not just hand your report to the clients? Doesn't it contain all the information they need to make a decision on your design?

It's true that the clients could find out all they need from just reading the report. But what they won't get is something they can only get from hearing you talk about your work: your enthusiasm, your energy, your understanding, and your connection. Speaking directly to the clients is an opportunity to do something that's hard to do in a written report – create an immediate and personal relationship with a specific audience that is right in front of you, and make your design solution come to life right before their eyes.

Believe it or not, it's that vividness, and that relationship – not the technical information alone – that will persuade the audience to adopt your design. These qualities are a major reason why engineers are so often expected to present their designs in

person. Engineering firms know how important it is to build effective relationships with clients; doing so is a mark of superior service and helps to foster future business.

Fact Three: As a public speaker, and as an engineering professional, you cannot overestimate the importance of forming a positive relationship with your audience. Unfortunately, many public speakers – no matter how experienced – just don't get this important point. Instead of thinking about how to engage the audience's interest and enthusiasm, they focus on just surviving the experience and getting off the stage alive. But though this attitude is bad news for them and for their suffering listeners, it's actually good news for you: while those speakers are busy boring the audience into a stupor, you will shine by comparison.

You will shine because the audience will sense your genuine interest in their concerns and will know that you have specifically prepared your presentation for them. Knowing this, they will be more receptive to and enthusiastic about what you have to say.

Fact Four: Preparing effectively for your public speaking experience will give you a sense of control that will reduce your nervousness. If you learn to focus on communicating effectively with your audience rather than concentrating on your own discomfort, you will feel less nervous and may even learn to enjoy the experience.

There are seven steps to creating an outstanding presentation. Following these steps will help you to become a more confident, engaging and effective speaker. The rest of the handbook is organized as a step-by-step guide to help you do just that. Good luck!

Checklist: Seven Steps to an Effective Design Presentation

- ✓ **Position the topic**
- ✓ **Outline the content**
- ✓ **Polish the structure and prepare a speaking card**
- ✓ **Prepare your visuals**
- ✓ **Assign group roles**
- ✓ **Practise out loud**
- ✓ **Practise with your group and with the visuals**

Step One: Position the Topic

Topic “positioning” means making sure that what you present is what the audience needs to hear. Note that what’s important to the audience isn’t necessarily the same thing as what’s important to you. It also isn’t necessarily the same as what’s in the written report.

Positioning means selecting what is relevant to say as you take advantage of the opportunity to speak to your audience face to face. It does not mean trying to cover all the technical details that you’ve written about in your report, and it does not mean simply repeating the material covered there. In a presentation, you have a chance to *show* the audience how effective your design is, and you should take full advantage of that opportunity.

To position your talk effectively, you need to be able to answer these questions:

1. What is the most important information the client needs to hear in my talk?
2. What additional details or facts does the audience need to know?

3. What features will make my presentation engaging and persuasive?

1. What is the most important information for the clients to hear during my presentation?

Clients come to your design presentation to hear directly from you *how* and *why* your design is the best solution to the problem that led them to you in the first place. Your group must show the clients that your design solves the problem that they identified.

In order to do this, you need to do a little bit of homework to discover how to focus your talk. Remember that not all clients have the same priorities. Even clients who are interested in the same problem can have very different concerns. For example, a presentation to a client who can put up with a bit of inconvenience if it saves money should be positioned quite differently than one aimed at a client who doesn't care how much the device costs as long as it works and is hassle-free.

For some clients, cost is the major concern. For others, it's efficiency of operation, or ease of use. For still others, safety is the top priority. Every design challenge involves many or all of these considerations, and all of them should be addressed in your report. But every case is a little bit different, and one or two of these issues will undoubtedly be *most* important to the client. Your presentation should emphasize how your design offers a solution to the problem *as the clients conceived of it*.

Look back to your initial meetings with the clients to identify clues to their priorities. Reviewing the clients' initial presentation of the problem will help you figure out their central concerns. Remember that your conception of the problem may have

altered as you've worked on the design. Go back to the original statement of the problem, and to the notes you took when meeting with the client. Make sure that all of the obvious concerns are addressed.

Also, examine your notes and the questions below to figure out what some of the client's underlying needs are. Check to see if anything "sparks" your memory about a concern that the clients discussed. They might have mentioned some pitfalls they previously experienced, or even some doubts or fears about the outcome of the design process. Make sure you're clear on two things: Why do they need this design? What problem do they hope it will solve?

Is cost a main concern? Are the client's funds limited, or do you have some latitude in the cost of producing the device? How many of the items will be needed? Just the one prototype, or several? Will subsequent devices cost as much as the first one, or will set-up costs be reduced with subsequent production?

What do the clients want to do with the design? Are they looking for a product to mass-produce and introduce to the market? Are they hoping to gain a competitive advantage or regain lost market share?

Is ease of use an issue? Does the end product have to be easier to use or more efficient than other products on the market?

Who will be the end users of the device? Will it be the public, or will the device be used only by employees of the client's company? Will extra training be required to use the device? Will the users have, or need, industrial safety training? Will a 120 lb

woman be using the device, or a 220 lb man, or perhaps even a child? How, if necessary, will such different users be accommodated?

How important is safety to the operation of the device? Obviously, safety factors will always be an issue, but how central a concern is safety for your clients?

Take some time to ferret out the answers to these kinds of questions. Doing so has two immediate benefits: it will help you to “target” your presentation to the clients by reminding you of what originally motivated them to pursue this project, and it will provide you some clues as to how your presentation should be structured. If your group clearly addresses the client’s concerns, your group will stand out from the other groups and will win the approval of the clients.

2. What additional details or facts does the audience need to know?

In addition to addressing the client’s central concerns, your presentation should provide some convincing support for your argument. This doesn’t mean covering all of the technical calculations or details that are included in the written report. Give the clients only what can be absorbed in the twenty minutes you have to speak. Use that time to engage their attention and generate some enthusiasm. Help them to visualize how your device will operate.

One of the best ways to do this is to provide a working prototype and include a demonstration in your presentation. If the design is too large or too cumbersome for this to be practical, build a working model that is large enough to be seen by the audience during your presentation. At the very least, use the capabilities of computer-generated visuals to show your device in action.

Your presentation must also communicate your competence to the clients. To do this you need to show a complete understanding of the problem and of the issues at stake. Generally this means addressing some of the other issues that the clients will be interested in. These might include:

- costs of production, operation, and possibly dismantling, if applicable;
- the timeline for project development and final product being ready;
- safety concerns and factors;
- advantages to this design, especially if there are similar products already on the market;
- the effectiveness of the design; and
- ease of use.

Address these concerns explicitly in your talk. Keep highly technical details to a minimum, using only what is absolutely essential for communicating the most pertinent information to the client.

3. How can you make your presentation engaging and persuasive?

Nobody is persuaded by an impersonal recitation of technical details. To be effective, your presentation must offer something more. It must provide information that makes sense to the audience in a way that will engage and persuade them. It must respond directly to their interests, needs, and expectations.

After hearing your presentation, everyone in the audience should clearly understand what the device does, how it works, and how it solves the original problem.

An audience that does not understand these things will not be persuaded. Even worse, they will also have little confidence in *your* grasp of the issues.

To persuade the audience, you need to make explicit links between the problem as the clients understand it and the solution offered by your design. You may even want to structure your talk in a problem-solution pattern so that this relationship is explicit.

The demonstration provided by your prototype, model, or visuals will also help to communicate your competence and will give the clients confidence that your design will actually work as you have envisioned it. Seeing the device in action communicates more vividly than any description or diagram how exactly the device will function, and generates much more animation and excitement in the audience. It also establishes your engineering skill more vividly than any other strategy, because you have a working device to display as proof that your solution is possible. A prototype is a crucial part of your persuasion because it helps you to make the link between your design and the client's needs.

The structure of your talk and the professionalism of your delivery are also important in establishing your credibility and engaging your audience's interest in your presentation. These aspects will be dealt with in the remainder of this handbook.

Checklist: Positioning the Topic

- ✓ **Focus on what the audience needs to hear**
- ✓ **Keep technical details to a minimum**
- ✓ **Address the client's priorities, not your own**
- ✓ **Provide appropriate supporting information**
- ✓ **Link your solution to the client's problem and priorities**
- ✓ **Include a demonstration (prototype or model)**

Step Two: Outline the Content

Once you have a clear idea of the audience's priorities, you can plan the content of your presentation. This is something that the group should sketch out together, at least initially. Begin by listing everything that you think you might need to say about your design, remembering what was discussed so far. Continue to work with your list by organizing your points into an outline. Organize your material so there is a coherent and logical progression and delete any unnecessary information. You will also begin to add points that you didn't realize were important at the beginning of the process. Condense your outline to try to fit your material into the time limit you have been given.

Once the basic structure is established, sections of the presentation can be assigned to various group members. As you plan the content, you need to consider any expectations or standards that have been communicated to you by your instructors, and keep your eye on the priorities of the clients.

It is important as you start this process to work with an outline, not a script, for your presentation. Although you may on occasion have heard a speaker read from a script – usually out of fear or inexperience – such talks are rarely engaging or effective. The fact is that *good* technical presentations are not read; they are delivered from notes in a kind of structured conversation with the audience. For this reason, you should NEVER write out the text of your speech in full, even in the planning stage.¹ Instead, write just enough to be able to discuss your points freely without being tied to your notes. Make sure you keep the outline in point form and never write out your points in

¹ There are some exceptions to this rule, such as an actor delivering lines in a play or a judge rendering an official decision that will become law. For most speaking situations, however, it is preferable to extemporize from notes.

full sentences. Use only key words or phrases that will trigger your memory about the point. Talk your way through the presentation as it develops, even in rough form, to get a sense of how it's evolving and how you will get from one point to the next. Keep on doing this throughout the preparation stage.

To get started:

- *Jot down the major topics* that need to be included: the requirements and constraints of the project and how your design offers the best solutions to these problems, the design highlights, the major features of the design, and costs.
- *Decide on a general order* in which you will present this information: most design projects lend themselves to a problem-solution structure, though you may wish to try something a little different.
- *Select supporting details* according to what the audience needs to know in order to understand both the problem and the solution; think about the elements that will best convince them not only of the rightness of your design but of your credibility as an engineer.

As you develop your content, be sure to consider your time constraints – you will likely have only fifteen or twenty minutes for your entire presentation. You will need to allow some of that time for your demonstration. Include what is essential for understanding and leave out the rest.

Do not spend time explaining dead-ends that you investigated, or discussing the design challenges you faced. These things may be significant to you as an engineer; they may be what taught you the most; they may even be important enough to be included in

the written report; but they are rarely useful for the presentation. You have only a limited amount of time, and you need to be selective in what you present to give your audience the fullest understanding in the minimum time. Consider what needs to be there and be ruthless in weeding out the rest.

Think about how much information can, and should, be presented visually, and plan to include visuals to support your explanations. Include these in your planning from the beginning, so that your whole presentation will be coherent.

Checklist: Outline the Content

- ✓ **Define the problem clearly and simply, keeping in mind the client's needs**
- ✓ **Briefly state any significant constraints that affected the chosen solution**
- ✓ **Describe the proposed solution with enough detail so that the audience can grasp:**
 - **What the device is**
 - **How it works**
 - **How it will solve the problem**
- ✓ **Provide relevant information on costs, logistics, or operation**
- ✓ **Present a demonstration**
- ✓ **Conclude forcefully**

Step Three: Polish the Structure and Prepare your Speaking Card

Now that you have developed a preliminary outline of main points, you can start polishing. You do this by talking your way through the presentation, out loud, with each

group member presenting his or her material to the others. Use your brief notes only as “memory triggers” of what you need to discuss in each point.

The first few times through will be pretty rough and will take longer than your allotted time limit. Don’t worry yet about coming in on time; that will happen with practice. These first few times through, rough as they may be, are invaluable to your preparation because you are starting to become familiar with your material.

As you practise in this way, try to use different words and phrases each time through. Listen for places where the message isn’t clear, or where you aren’t sure exactly what you want to say. Keep your tone as conversational as possible, and avoid the temptation to become formal or stilted in your delivery.

Practising out loud will give you a strong sense of how the presentation is coming together and where any weak spots are. As you and your group members continue to talk your way through your outline, you will start to become sensitive to any structural weaknesses or incoherencies in your presentation. You will be able to make structural changes to the speech as needed and “beef up” any point that needs more support. You will also become more and more familiar with your material, so that when the time comes you will be able to present your topic conversationally.

As you refine and tighten your content, you should build in some strategies to help the audience follow your reasoning. These strategies are known as *survey*, *signpost*, and *summary*.

Like written documents, all oral presentations have an introduction, a discussion or body, and a clear conclusion. Each of these parts has a role to play in helping your

audience to stay on track throughout your presentation. The introduction should provide a clear and explicit *survey* or preview of the main points that you will be discussing, in the order they will appear in the presentation. This preview lets the audience know what's coming, and provides a framework to help them follow you as you progress through the presentation.

The body or discussion part of the presentation is organized to follow the preview that was given in the introduction. As you move from one major point to the next, you should signal this movement with a *signpost* comment that also serves to remind the audience of the purpose of your presentation. Signposts signal where you are in your speech, provide a transition between points, and reinforce the purpose or main goal of your presentation.

Finally, the conclusion includes a restatement or *summary* of the critical points in your presentation, so that they are firmly fixed in the minds of your audience. Your structure should be clear and explicit enough that a stranger, hearing your presentation once through, should be able to recount the main points. If you can get the audience to remember your points clearly, then they will be more likely to be persuaded by your presentation.

Speaking from a notecard

As you practise, you should aim to condense your points to a few brief trigger words to prevent any chance of reading to your audience. Once you've got your outline in a more or less final form, transfer it to an unlined index card. A 3 x 5" card is best, as it can be unobtrusively kept in the palm of your hand, and you can glance quickly at it as a cue to your memory.

Do not use a sheet of paper for your speaking notes, since these sheets can telegraph your nervousness to the audience. The slightest anxious quiver in your hands will be amplified by the rattling of the paper, which will be easily visible both to you and to the audience. Practise through your talk using the final version of the card so that it will be familiar to you when you get up to speak.

Checklist: Polish the Structure

- ✓ **Work from an outline only**
- ✓ **Talk your way through the material**
- ✓ **Listen for structural flaws and lapses in coherence**
- ✓ **Build in a survey, signpost your transitions, and develop a conclusion**
- ✓ **Present main ideas in the same order as previewed**
- ✓ **Condense main ideas and write on a 3x5" index card**

Step Four: Prepare your Visuals

If your presentation is to engage and persuade your audience, it will need to bring your project vividly to life. The easiest way to do this is with visual aids. The best visuals clarify your main ideas so that they can be grasped and retained by your audience.

A design project is highly visual and needs to be seen to be understood and appreciated. You should therefore find some way to display your work for the audience to look at. The best and most persuasive visual aid is an operational prototype of your design. It is powerfully persuasive, because it establishes your engineering skill and demonstrates that your solution is viable. The clients can see how your design will

operate, and can form their own judgement on its usefulness and how it will “fit” their required application.

Sometimes it’s just not possible to manufacture a prototype – the design may be too large or too complicated or too expensive for a student design team to reproduce. In such a case, a working model may serve just as well. Although it need not be full-size, your model should be large enough to provide adequate illustration of how the device works. Take some care in the building of your model. A shoddy replica hastily assembled from paper and drinking straws may undercut rather than enhance your professionalism and credibility.

If it’s not feasible to produce a prototype or working model of your design, you can animate a version on the computer. At the very least, since your design has to be seen to be appreciated, you must provide a series of slides or pictures illustrating the design. Such animations can clearly demonstrate how the device will operate and can be exploded to show how it is put together.

The goal of your presentation is to invite serious consideration of your group’s design. You will achieve this only if you present your work in a thoroughly professional manner. Make sure to choose your visuals with care: they should help you to communicate your message clearly and vividly to your audience. However, the visuals should not dominate the talk; their role is to support and elaborate, but if they attract attention away from your message, they are ineffective.

Slides or animation needs to be large enough, simple enough, and clear enough to be seen and understood by the audience. Make sure any text is at least 26-point size. Avoid crowding too much onto a slide – simple is better. Make sure lines are drawn

heavily enough to be seen by the audience. Contrast between colours should be as great as possible – avoid placing red on purple, yellow on white, or green on blue.

Do not display inappropriate pictures or images with suggestive content, even as a joke. Design groups sometimes do this, intending to lighten the mood and reduce the tension in the room. But these gestures are always a mistake; they will appear juvenile, undercutting your professionalism and possibly even offending and alienating your clients.

No matter what kind of visuals you choose, they should be

- Appropriate to the situation and purpose;
- Large enough to be seen by everyone in the room;
- Clear enough to be understood;
- Legible, with print size of no less than 26-point;
- Helpful in communicating your message; and
- Professional in quality.

Checklist: Prepare your Visuals

- ✓ **If possible, provide a prototype or working model**
- ✓ **Use visuals to clarify information**
- ✓ **Keep slides simple and uncluttered**
- ✓ **Make sure print is large and clear**
- ✓ **Avoid inappropriate images, even as a joke**

Step Five: Assign Group Roles

Each member of the group should have duties to fulfill during the presentation. This responsibility should include a turn speaking, but can also include setting up visuals, demonstrating the prototype to the audience, changing slides, or passing out handouts. Group members who are not speaking should remain still so as to avoid upstaging those who are speaking.

To ensure that everything goes smoothly during your presentation, assign roles in advance so that each person's responsibilities are clear. Try to divide the topics equally amongst the group members so that each person presents roughly the same amount of material and has the floor for an equal period of time. If your presentation is twenty minutes long, plan how long it will take to present each section, and make sure group members know how many minutes they have out of the twenty.

It is best to divide the speaking roles along the topic divisions in your presentation, but avoid changing speakers too often. Too frequent rotation of speakers can make the presentation appear choppy and disorganized, even when it isn't. One common practice is for the group leader to begin and end the presentation. The leader introduces the group members and presents the introduction and perhaps the first topic, then returns to offer the conclusion, including the recommendations and acknowledgements. In between, each member of the group takes a turn at speaking, handing off to the next speaker at a natural break in the organization.

The group should appear coordinated and well-organised, with all of the details taken care of. A well-coordinated presentation will communicate to the audience that your group is attentive to detail, conscientious, and professional.

Checklist: Assign Group Roles

- ✓ **Assign roles to each member of the group**
- ✓ **Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak**
- ✓ **Keep contributions roughly equal**
- ✓ **Avoid rotating speakers in the middle of a topic**
- ✓ **Don't change speakers too frequently**

Step Six: Practise Out Loud

In order to achieve a polished, professional delivery, you will need to practise your portion of the presentation – out loud, and numerous times. It isn't enough to practise just in your head. Talking through your presentation out loud will make you comfortable with the material and will help you to come in on time.

As you practise, aim for mastery of the ideas instead of trying to repeat the same wording each time. Do not try to memorize a particular way of saying each point – a memorized presentation sounds stilted and unnatural, and will lose the audience. Work with your notes just enough to become comfortable with what you have to cover, but not so much that your delivery becomes wooden.

Your delivery should be smooth and professional, and should not attract attention to itself at the expense of the message. An audience that's focused on your delivery (if it's over the top, if it's stumbling and underpractised, if it's nervous and shaky, if it's memorized and hollow) won't be paying attention to your message. You should practise your own segment until you're comfortable with what you have to say and can come in on time at least three times in a row.

If you can, it's a good idea to have an observer at your practices to catch awkward bits and help you polish. Ask this person to pay attention to clarity and coherence, and to watch for any elements of delivery that might compromise your message.

Checklist: Practising Your Segment

- ✓ **Practise out loud**
- ✓ **Practise several times through**
- ✓ **Time yourself**
- ✓ **Practise until you're comfortable with the message**
- ✓ **Stop if you find yourself memorizing particular wording**

Step Seven: Practise with Your Group and the Visuals

After each group member has prepared and practised individual segments, the group must practise together in order to make sure that the presentation is consistent in style and tone and covers all the information that needs to be presented. Practising as a group will also make your transitions smooth and expert as you get “the feel” of delivering the whole talk.

Part of the goal of practising together is to develop smooth transitions between segments and polish the “handoffs” between speakers. You may want to hand off to each other by name and topic – for example, “Now Mike will take us through the operation procedure” or “Charlotte will explain the safety features of our device.” This approach

will not only signal the transition between speakers and topics, but will also remind the audience of the structure of your presentation.

You should go through the whole presentation, with your visuals and your demonstration, several times, in order to coordinate all the portions and ensure that it all works and fits within your time limit. If it doesn't, you will need to make the necessary adjustments as a group. Each member should become comfortable with the entire presentation and know exactly what part he or she will play, so that a cohesive presentation emerges.

As you practise out loud, pay particular attention to your pacing, the smoothness of your handovers from person to person, the clarity of your main points, and operation of visuals. You need to get comfortable using them, and you'll be able to solve any quirks or technical problems before the presentation.

Aim for some consistency in delivery across the whole presentation – wildly different styles from speaker to speaker will be jarring to the audience. Make sure everyone articulates clearly so that they can be heard and understood. Finally, make sure that those who are not speaking stay still so as not to undercut those who have the floor.

If you can, practise at least once in the room where you'll actually deliver the presentation and with the supplied audio-visual equipment. Doing this will allow you to accommodate any peculiarities of the space so that there will be no nasty surprises when you actually get up to speak.

If you can, have a “dress rehearsal” and invite some observers. Ask them to pay attention to the structure and content of your message, and to watch for any elements of

delivery or coordination that might undercut your professionalism or clarity. Listen carefully to their suggestions; if necessary, make some changes and practise again.

Checklist: Practising as a Group

- ✓ **Practise out loud, as a group**
- ✓ **Go through the whole presentation**
- ✓ **Practise with your visuals**
- ✓ **Practise in the room where you will present**
- ✓ **Practise with the same, or similar, audio-visual equipment that you will be using in your presentation**
- ✓ **Watch for glitches in organization, pacing, and clarity**
- ✓ **Make sure delivery styles are consistent and clear**
- ✓ **When you are not speaking, do not upstage the speaker**
- ✓ **Invite an observer to critique your presentation**
- ✓ **Time yourself**
- ✓ **Correct the glitches and do it again**

Finally, remember that careful preparation and adequate practice are the keys to delivering an effective presentation. Good luck!

Chapter Five: Theory into Action: A Reflective Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to explore rhetoric's particular necessity of integrating theory and practice through a reflective analysis of the experience of writing the practical communication handbook that appears as Chapter Four of this thesis. To conduct this exploration, I will use a framework developed by Donald Schon, Ford Professor of Urban Studies and Education and senior lecturer in the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. In his book, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action, he introduces a process which he calls "reflection-in-action,"¹ which involves a thoughtful combination of theoretical and practical understanding.

Writing the manual was a difficult process for me, and was by far the most frustrating part of this thesis. The difficulty arose not only because I had never written course instructional material or a textbook or manual before, but also because of the enormous contrast in the kind of writing that was required. In undertaking this task, I was squarely confronted with the difficulty of applying my rhetorical knowledge to a practical situation and actually *doing* what I knew to be theoretically sound. Although I understood – or thought I understood – what was involved in adapting theory to practice, and in accommodating my message to my intended audience, this experience tested that understanding in ways that were completely unexpected.

¹ Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

My goal in writing the public speaking manual was to produce a practical guide to help students give better design presentations, which I hoped to do by emphasising the necessity of analysing and thinking about their rhetorical situation. Since I have been teaching this material for several years now in GE 300: Oral and Written Communication, and since I have regularly attended student design presentations since 2000, I thought this would be a manageable and straightforward task. I rapidly discovered how wrong I was.

My task was complicated by several factors, the first of which is the fact that the goals of the manual were in some ways at odds with the goals of the rest of the thesis. The thesis is intended to establish my mastery of a particular area of rhetorical theory, and it's aimed at an audience of senior scholars in rhetoric and other disciplines. The manual, by contrast, must display an understanding of that same theory while at the same time rendering the theory invisible to the novice speakers for whom it was primarily written.

Negotiating two audiences in different parts of the document turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated, but the handbook presented the greatest challenges. Although my purpose was to produce a manual that will be a useful hands-on guide for the design students as they prepare their presentations, it had to do much more besides. Its other purpose, as part of my thesis, is to demonstrate to my thesis committee my ability to apply a fairly sophisticated body of theoretical knowledge, in particular Lloyd Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation and Kenneth Burke's complex dramatic model, to a practical task.

Not only are the two audiences disparate in their abilities, education and experience, but I also found myself struggling throughout the project to decide which

was the group I most needed to address and satisfy as I wrote the manual. I thought I knew who my audience was – or my audiences were – but in practical terms, as I was engaged in the actual writing, I found it a struggle to be sure what exactly I was trying to accomplish, and for whom. Was the primary purpose to enlighten and guide the undergraduate audience, or to reassure and demonstrate understanding to the committee?

In order to get at some of the challenges of this duality, I would like to introduce Schon's concept of "reflection-in-action." Schon speaks of the reflective process specifically in the context of design, as it is carried out in a number of different professional contexts, including architecture, engineering, management, and psychiatry. Schon contends that "in the last twenty years or so, the concept of design has broadened." He notes a trend among architects who increasingly treat "design as a social process,"² and points out that it is a feature of "all occupations engaged in converting actual to preferred situations."³

This conception of design echoes the treatment of rhetorical invention in the tradition of rhetorical theory, starting with Aristotle. Rhetoric, of course, is a highly social process of adaptation. According to the theory of the rhetorical situation, one of rhetoric's primary functions is to convert actual situations to preferred ones, as Lloyd Bitzer explains when he points out how a situation is altered by the introduction of discourse that mediates the thoughts and actions of the audience.⁴

² Schon 78.

³ Schon 77.

⁴ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968)

The problem-solution structure that is basic to engineering design is paralleled in the relationship between the rhetorical exigence and the discursive intervention that is basic to the rhetorical process. Both involve the accommodation of constraints in the effort to convert an existing, flawed situation into a preferred one, and in both cases the audience (or client) must be considered.

Schon offers yet another definition of design that is central to his understanding of reflective practice, one even more akin to the task of the rhetorical practitioner. “I shall consider designing,” he tells us, “as a conversation with the materials of a situation.”⁵ Like all reflective practice, good rhetorical practice involves just such a conversation with the exigence, audience, and constraints that make up the rhetorical situation. And it is this idea of a conversation with the materials – or in Bitzer’s terms, the constituents – of the situation that I will employ as I reflect on what insights into rhetoric can be gleaned from a case study of my experience in writing this manual.

Schon explains the dynamics of the reflective “conversation” as taking place in three distinct stages. The designer initially “shapes the situation, in accordance with his initial appreciation of it,” but he does not stop with this initial apprehension. Instead, “the situation ‘talks back,’” to the reflective practitioner, who in turn “responds to the situation’s back-talk.” Schon further explains that, “in a good process of design, this conversation with the situation is reflective . . . the designer reflects-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of the phenomena” and uses this reflection to shape his further understanding and action.⁶

⁵ Schon 78.

⁶ Schon 79.

For Schon, reflection-in-action comes out of an understanding of “knowing-in-practice” or “-in-action.”⁷ He posits this “knowing-in-action” as a corrective to the model of “Technical Rationality,” which he says “leads us to think of intelligent practice as an application of knowledge to instrumental decisions.”⁸ In opposition to technical rationality, knowing-in-action refers to a practitioner’s tacit knowledge, or instinctive understanding, which Schon argues is not consciously applied, at least during the design process. Schon explains that “in much of the spontaneous behavior of skillful practice we reveal a kind of knowing which does not stem from a prior intellectual operation.”⁹ It is from this understanding that his whole reconceptualization of professional practice originates.

This concept of reflection-in-action also offers a fruitful understanding of the “design” process that rhetoricians undertake as they create messages. Like the Dartmouth model of engineering problem-solving,¹⁰ the process of rhetorical message-making was also formalised into a kind of problem-solving cycle – the “five canons” of classical rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.¹¹ The first three canons, devised as a method for sizing up a situation and creating an appropriate message, are clearly a form of the reflection-in-action that Schon describes. They

⁷ Schon 62.

⁸ Schon 50.

⁹ Schon 51.

¹⁰ Carol B. Muller, “What is Engineering Problem Solving? The Dartmouth/Thayer Approach,” Dartmouth Project for Teaching Engineering Problem Solving. Available on-line. <thayer.dartmouth.edu/teps/what.is.eps.html> Accessed 16 May 2001.

¹¹ Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 33.

constitute the preparation stages for creating an oral presentation (or, in the case of writing, they represent the entire process). However, as in engineering design, the model by itself isn't enough to produce a perfect intervention. For example, in any really good extemporaneous presentation, "the spontaneous behavior of skillful practice" described by Schon is clearly evident.

As I was working through the writing of the manual, I was involved in exactly this kind of reflection-in-action as I considered just how I was going to arrange the material and how I was going to "pitch" the footing or tone when writing to a specific undergraduate audience. However, it was during the invention and arrangement stages that most of my learning happened. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to provide some examples of how I reflected-in-action and how this process of "design" practice occurred.

The first example is the struggle I encountered coming up with a suitable structure for the manual. I began by considering as many possible structures as I could think of. For example, I thought about using the five canons as the main sections of the manual, or the 3 P's of public speaking that are taught in GE 300: plan, prepare, and practice. I could also use Wayne Booth's concept of rhetorical balance as the framework for the manual – the delicate art of managing the relationship between speaker, message, and audience, as well as Aristotle's corresponding appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos. Another idea was to fit my main points and instructions under the headings of Jennifer MacLennan's Nine Axioms of communication, familiar to the students from their required course in communication.¹²

¹² Jennifer MacLennan, Effective Communication for the Technical Professions (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2003) 7-13.

I finally settled on a structure based on Bitzer's constituents of the rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, and constraints. I liked this structure most because of its close fit with my theoretical material. I believed it was a good organizational structure because it emphasized the problem-solution pattern of engineering design and the rhetorical invention process of identifying the problem, remembering your audience, and negotiating your constraints. These three points represented the three constituents, while at the same time offering a procedural framework for the students to follow. I thought I had found the ideal structure, because it would cover everything that I wanted to address, and it would offer a theoretically solid foundation for the advice I was offering. I secretly congratulated myself on this stroke of brilliance and set about writing.

However, almost as soon as I began, I ran into difficulty. The structure I had carefully chosen didn't seem to be working, and I couldn't understand why I was having problems. I reasoned that the structure included a clear way of understanding the requirements and expectations of preparing a solid speech, so it must be a good one. After all, a speaker needs to clearly identify the exigence, and carefully consider who the audience is and what their needs are, all while negotiating the constraints presented by the situation. I knew that this approach was theoretically sound and had been demonstrated throughout centuries of rhetorical study and practice.

Still, there were problems, the most pressing of which was deciding under which of the three headings I should place certain specific pieces of advice. Does the extemporaneous speaking and delivery advice fall under constraints, or under audience? Where does choosing a group leader and assigning group roles fit? In addition to these placement problems, I also struggled with the order in which I should deal with the constituents.

It seemed obvious initially that exigence should come first, with audience and constraints to follow. But placing these was not so simple. After some struggle, I began to think that maybe audience should be dealt with first, as understanding and responding to the audience was one of the most important points that I wanted to get across to the students. Somewhere in this structure I also needed to include how the students could use Kenneth Burke's pentad to change their point of view, or achieve, as Burke states, perspective by incongruity.¹³ My structure was beginning to break down.

Even though I was beginning to doubt my structure's usefulness, I still believed that it was a solid and practical way to organize the manual. Because it was theoretically sound, it would also prove to the students that the manual was worth their attention. I thought that they would be impressed to see a theoretical model – in this case, the rhetorical situation – being used as a practical method to generate effective discourse. Wouldn't they be happy that finally a text that uses theory would explain it, and even more so, demonstrate how useful it is?

As I began to write my manual I kept this positive outcome firmly in sight. However, even before I submitted the preliminary draft to my supervisor, I was beginning to question whether it really was a suitable handbook for students and whether they would find it useful. When I submitted it, my supervisor saw immediately that I had gone wrong; despite my attempts to adapt to them, I was still writing far too theoretically for my audience of undergraduates. In Schon's words, I had "shape[d] the situation in accordance with my initial impression of it."¹⁴ I had decided that the best

¹³ Joseph Gusfield, "Introduction" to Kenneth Burke on Symbols and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 7, 26.

¹⁴ Schon 79.

way to approach writing the manual was to structure it around theoretical concepts. This was my “initial impression” of the situation and how I should go about the project.

However, the next part of Schon’s definition points out that the situation “talks back.”¹⁵ The context in which I had to write the manual resoundingly spoke back, and what it “told” me was that I was not pitching my work appropriately. My supervisor concurred. The manual needed to be useful so that its audience of second-year engineering students would actually read it and easily take away practical tips and directions on how to improve their speaking skills. It had to be confident and directive so that the students would believe my advice. It had to be simple and clear, so that they could follow my instructions to prepare their design presentations. Finally, it had to be brief, appealing directly to these non-theorists who would need to put its advice into practice.

In the early drafts I failed utterly to achieve these goals. In fact, at the beginning the only bright spot was the analysis of footing that I had conducted before beginning to write. I had an understanding of my audience on three levels: I had been teaching them communication for several years, and was familiar with some of their typical difficulties with public speaking and what challenges them; I had learned to overcome my own fears of public speaking through years of study and practice; and I had attended several “design nights” of the sort for which the manual was designed to prepare them.

In retrospect, I am pleased to see that I accurately anticipated most of the requirements for positioning the manual: I understood that an advice book of the sort I was writing would need to be largely impersonal and somewhat distant, displaying a significant level of certainty in its tone. I had anticipated using some personal revelation

¹⁵ Schon 79.

as a means of heightening the identification with the student audience. I had used this strategy successfully in the classroom, and had found it effective in forging a link with my students, who were reassured by hearing about my own struggles with becoming a better speaker.

I realized early on in the writing process, however, that my plan to use personal disclosure – revelations about my own struggle with public speaking, the admission that I, like them, am a student – would not achieve the connection I had hoped for. Instead, such a strategy could even undercut my ethos by compromising the authority of the manual; I would, in effect, have neutralized the ground upon which I would be giving advice in the first place. Because the manual had to be short and very practical, I would have little time to build the kind of relationship that can be established, for example, in the classroom. There I can draw upon my own struggles with public speaking because the students have the opportunity to see for themselves how completely I have overcome them. In the manual, this demonstration would be absent, and thus similar revelations might even compromise my credibility.

Unfortunately, my prior understanding of footing didn't guarantee that the manual would otherwise be effectively positioned. Schon emphasizes that the designer must "respond . . . to the situation's back-talk,"¹⁶ and, like Schon's reflective practitioner, I had to respond to what my situation had made clear to me. It is this response that constitutes the heart of what Schon refers to as reflection-in-action. The reflective conversation that Schon describes follows this pattern: "In answer to the situation's back-talk, the designer reflects-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of phenomena, which have been implicit in his

¹⁶ Schon 79.

moves.”¹⁷ As I reflected on the way I had constructed the problem and the way I had begun writing the manual, I realized that my “strategies of action” had led me to do the very thing that I wanted to warn the students against in the manual. I had focussed on what was interesting to me – theoretical, yet generative, models – and had simply assumed that it would be equally interesting to my audience. This was not so. What they needed instead was some quickly and easily accessible tips and useful instructions on how to make their design presentations more effective.

How did this happen? I know, and know deeply, that it is crucially important to concentrate on your audience’s needs, and I wanted to make this point strongly with my intended audience. And yet, when I sat down to write that advice, I found to my embarrassment that I was not able to do it myself. The choice, regardless of how conscious or active it was, to use a theoretical structure and use theory to drive the instruction was “implicit in [my] moves” as a designer of that message. In the end, I had to admit that the reason I was having difficulties making the structure work was that it was theoretical rather than practical.

My supervisor immediately saw the errors that had arisen out of my implicit choices. As the author of numerous communication textbooks, she could immediately spot where I had gone wrong. She knew that I was being much too theoretical. She suggested a step-by-step approach to the manual that would give the students a clear plan for working through the speech design process. It would offer a place to begin and provide some structure for what seems to students to be a difficult and shapeless task.

While using a step-by-step structure for a handbook on public speaking might now seem an obvious choice, it was not a choice that was clear to me when I began. I

¹⁷ Schon 79.

had been too involved with the theory and not concentrating enough on the audience and purpose of the manual. In spite of everything I know about rhetorical practice, I was guilty of falling into Booth's pedant's stance – of ignoring my audience's needs in order to explore those aspects of the subject that I find especially engaging.

Reflecting on this occurrence led me to realize an irony facing rhetoricians. As a rhetorician, I teach students to understand and carefully address their audiences. This necessity is stressed over and over again in the introductory course that I teach. Not only do I know this to be very important, I also understand theoretically why it is crucial. But this realization didn't automatically translate into an effective handbook, as I had perhaps assumed it would.

In my classes, I have witnessed many poor speeches that were not positioned properly for the audience. Some of my students seemed to have given no thought at all to the audience, a fact that I have always found frustrating. It would be easy to assume – and I think now that I sometimes did assume – that these students had simply disregarded my advice. However, in writing the manual I have been given a pointed reminder of just how difficult it is to keep the audience firmly in sight as you develop a message. I am humbled by the recognition that, even with all my knowledge and experience, I was unable to carefully and fully consider my audience and clearly define my purpose with respect to the audience's needs. One result of my experience will likely be a greater sense of sympathy when my students struggle with positioning their talks.

As much as I tried to adopt the concrete, simple, and forceful style demanded by the handbook, I found it almost impossible to manage. Although I am convinced that it is crucial for rhetoricians to practise the theory that they study, despite my initial confidence, I was unable to do so in this case. My initial drafts of the manual were

almost purely theoretical, a problem that persisted through several re-writes. I understand, and had frequently taught, the necessity of adapting to my audience's needs and expectations – in fact, this is the advice I was putting into the manual itself as I was writing – but I found myself repeatedly stuck as I tried to make the handbook directive and accessible for my audience. I knew where I wanted to go, but for some reason I just could not get there. A time came when I would gladly have written two more theoretical chapters rather than face yet another re-write of the manual. In the end, I had to have substantial assistance from my supervisor, who pointed out again and again where I was too abstract or theoretical, and who helped me to edit ruthlessly. I discovered, to my surprise, that the segment of the thesis that I had thought would be simplest – and that looks simplest to the reader – is the one that demanded the most rhetorical skill and understanding.

Although I hated every minute of writing that handbook, and although I still feel that it's not quite the manual I envisioned when I began, I don't consider the experience to have been wasted. In fact, the challenge of writing the practical segment of my thesis is – perhaps ironically – what produced the most theoretical insight. While I learned a great deal from studying and integrating several disparate theories into a coherent approach, I believe that my struggle to use the theory has provided a level of understanding that I would not have gained had I written an exclusively theoretical study.

As rhetoricians, we often take for granted that we can easily connect with an audience and focus on audience needs, because that's what we teach and study. But it turns out that it's just as easy for us as it is for anyone else to forget the audience when we get caught up in writing about something that really interests us. What I realized

through this process is how much easier it is for me to give advice about rhetoric than to take it myself, and actually apply it in my own discourse. The irony is that, even as a student of rhetoric and communication, I don't always, or perhaps even can't, actually do what I teach and study! At the very least, I have been reminded again that creating effective discourse is a difficult process, one that even rhetoricians struggle with.

There's no doubt that my failure to effectively adapt my message to the audience or to "practise what I teach" was troubling; I was embarrassed to realize that in spite of all my training and experience I had demonstrated more concern about what interests me than what would engage my audience. But it's in these failures that the real learning occurs, as Schon recognizes.

The unexpected realizations that came out of my reflection-in-action are what Schon describes as being "stimulated by surprise."¹⁸ The reflective practitioner makes a discovery, gets unexpected results, or has a startling realization that "turn[s] thought back on action"¹⁹ and on the implicit assumptions that governed his or her choices. This process continues the "conversation with the materials of the situation" and leads to a more conscious understanding. Through my reflection-in-action, I have been able to bring what I know implicitly to the level of conscious application, which in turn will make my future rhetorical or discursive choices more effective. This is the process of professional reflection and praxis that Schon discusses in his book.

Schon also recognizes that reflection-in-action can serve as a correction to what he calls over-learning – or in my case, over-theorizing. He argues that "through reflection, [the practitioner] can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have

¹⁸ Schon 50.

¹⁹ Schon 50.

grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice.”²⁰ It was the process of reflection, as well as the assistance of my supervisor who has reflected for many years on her own discursive practices and those of her students, that allowed me to recognize what I had been taking for granted in writing the manual. It was also the process of reflection that enabled me to accept the criticism that what I had written was too theoretical. Employing this process of thoughtful reflection will in the end make me a better practitioner, one who can read his own work with a more critical and practised eye. Schon confirms that reflection becomes more “tacit, spontaneous, and automatic” with practice, and notes that the insights gained from this reflective approach are among the chief “benefits of specialization.”²¹

Schon’s concept of reflection-in-action also helps to explain why the integration of theory and practice is so important to a field like rhetoric, which studies the actions of real people in real situations. Rhetoric has always been understood to be an instrumental and practical art, and in this sense rhetoric – like engineering and other professional disciplines – is “harnessed to the world.”²² The study and understanding of rhetoric is intended to guide action, so that we can produce more effective communication. Knowledge of rhetoric should give us the ability to understand, and more important, respond to, the many situations we face.

So how is it that, with all of this understanding, a rhetorician can still go wrong when confronted with the constraints imposed by an actual audience? Barnett Baskerville suggests that the problem may be too much theorizing in the absence of

²⁰ Schon 61.

²¹ Schon 60.

²² Bitzer, “Functional” 21.

practice, and argues that problems arise whenever “prescription has outrun performance.”²³ This drifting of theory away from its grounding in practice leaves us “over-concerned with ‘how to do it’” at the expense of “get[ting] on with the job” of communicating effectively.²⁴ In a discipline like rhetoric, theorizing in the absence of any connection to practice “can become just so many polysyllabic dead-ends.”²⁵ Wayne Booth makes a nearly identical point when he chastises his audience of writing teachers for the all-too-common practice of setting rote assignments that have been allowed to become “totally abstracted from any notion of purposeful human communication.”²⁶

Throughout history, and even in the twentieth century flourishing of rhetoric, it has been understood that rhetoric needs to be practised and not just studied in the abstract. Rhetorical understanding involves more than just knowing what should happen; it has to be continually refreshed with an understanding of what does happen when you approach an audience with the intent to engage, inform, and ultimately influence them. Even though I know this material intimately – I routinely teach these principles to my students – to really understand what rhetoric is requires that I be able to do these things myself when I write or speak.

If theory can too easily become divorced from practice, Schon’s process of reflection-in-action offers a means of reuniting them, since “when someone reflects-in-

²³ Barnet Baskerville, “Rhetorical Criticism, 1971: Retrospect, Prospect, Introspect,” *Southern Speech Journal* 37 (1971) 117.

²⁴ Baskerville 117.

²⁵ Baskerville 117.

²⁶ Booth 143.

action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context.”²⁷ Accordingly, a rhetorician who reflects on his or her own creation of discourse is in this sense pursuing not only a practical art, but a theoretical understanding of how communication functions. This is so partly because the reflective practitioner “does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry.”²⁸ The theory becomes reunited with practice through the reflective practitioner’s reflective “conversation” with the materials of the situation.

Schon points out that “reflection-in-action can proceed even in situations of uncertainty or uniqueness.”²⁹ Writing the public speaking manual was an uncertain and new process for me, even more so than writing the theoretical chapters of this thesis. I had written papers of a theoretical nature before, directed to scholarly audiences like the readers of my thesis. However, I had never before written anything like a practical guidebook for novices in the discipline. In trying to write this guidebook, I was given a unique opportunity to put my theoretical understanding into action. Because I was engaging in what was, for me, an experimental rhetorical action, in the sense of starting out without certainty of what the results would be, I had to implement what I knew about rhetorical theory in a new and uncertain way.

This new experience became a part of my inquiry into rhetorical theory and practice. If I was to be a researcher in the practice context, I definitely had a lot of

²⁷ Schon 68.

²⁸ Schon 68.

²⁹ Schon 68-69.

research to do. I found that I was able to make sense of my situation in part by reflecting-in-action, and in part through the guidance of my supervisor, who helped me to interpret the “backtalk” provided by my situation. The process led me to confront some of my long-standing questions about the study and practice of rhetoric.

In many academic disciplines, theory and practice never meet, and most likely there are few discussions around putting the theory into practice. However, I believe that a discipline like rhetoric demands an integration of theory and practice, available to us in part through the reflective approach advocated by Schon. Unfortunately, as Schon explains, not all practitioners are reflective. There are those who remain “locked into a view of themselves as technical experts, [and therefore] find nothing in the world of practice to occasion reflection.”³⁰ Baskerville confirms that some of those who prefer to see themselves as theorists only are scholars of rhetoric, who like their technical counterparts see nothing of scholarly value in practical application. In contemplating these rhetoricians, Baskerville notes that the observer is “led to wonder if [such a] critic himself has ever stood before a real live audience – whether he has any clear conception of the immense difficulties involved in adjusting people to ideas and ideas to people.”³¹

The difficulties are immense. People are not always easily persuaded to change their point of view or readily moved to action. While the “pure” rhetorical critic or theorist can easily avoid having to face this challenge, the practitioner cannot do so. Baskerville comments that the academic rhetorician who remains in “his sheltered position on the sidelines, with his ‘model’ of communication and his ‘critical

³⁰ Schon 69.

³¹ Baskerville 121.

methodology' before him, finds it relatively easy to pass judgement on what should have been done."³² As a "pure" theoretician, such an academic prides himself on being free of the taint of practical application. But according to Baskerville, and according now to Urquhart, such an academic is incomplete in his understanding of what it really means to be a rhetorician.

I believe this is partly why I have found it difficult to switch from writing the more theoretical chapters to writing the handbook chapter. In writing about rhetorical theory, I could hide behind my argument, buttressed by rhetorical theorists. By contrast, in the manual I couldn't quote theorists to back up my points. Instead, I had to personally connect with an audience that would have no use for theory. The things I said had to be compelling not because some famous theorist endorsed them, but because they made sense to their intended audience. The advice also had to be rhetorically sound.

I had to write in a manner that was suitable for undergraduate engineering students, and offer advice of an immediately practical nature. I had to "adjust people to ideas and ideas to people" without the opportunity to explain why my advice was theoretically sound and how it addressed Bitzer's rhetorical situation and Burke's dramatic pentad. I had to put my face on the line by actually producing hands-on persuasive discourse for an audience with whom I had no automatic credibility.

I realized, more fully than I ever had, how really difficult it is to produce effective communication, and I gained empathy for the students who have to prepare speeches that will convince a client to choose their design. I came to understand Baskerville's admonition about how important it is, as a rhetorician, "always to keep at

³² Baskerville 121.

least one foot on the ground” of practical application.³³ I needed to write the manual so that I, as a “critic of persuasive discourse [could] become [an] effective persuader.”³⁴ By putting rhetoric into practice, by creating my own persuasive discourse, I gained a different and much fuller understanding of the theoretical aspects of rhetoric that I have studied and worked with for more than ten years.

I believe that it is in this reflective process that rhetoric’s power really lies. Rhetoric is adaptive to new and uncertain situations and it is portable across topics, disciplinary boundaries, and situations. Rhetoric allows for learning through careful reflection and practice, and it blossoms in the understanding when the two are brought together. The growth of rhetorical understanding comes not only through theoretical advancements, but also through the examination of practice and the application of theory to that practice. It comes, too, in the incorporation of knowledge gained through practice into theoretical models. In rhetoric, it is essential for theory to guide practice and conversely for practice to inform theory. Practical application of rhetorical principles is a scholarly endeavour in rhetorical studies because we must be “researchers in the practice context,” as well as critics and theorists. It is only through such reflection-in-action and knowing-in-action that our discipline advances.

As a result of this work, I am even more convinced of the value of bringing the principles of rhetoric into the study and practice of technical and engineering communication. Both disciplines rely on thoughtful practitioners who practice reflection-in-action. By using rhetoric as a methodological, theoretical and practical framework for improving technical communication, not only are insights made into the

³³ Baskerville 122.

³⁴ Baskerville 123.

production of technical communication, but the practical lessons learned in creating technical discourse will add to rhetoric's understanding of practice and theories of communication.

Conclusion: Reflective Practice and the Art of Rhetoric

When I began this study, I imagined my task to be challenging, but more or less straightforward. I wanted to explore two main questions: first, the relationship between the principles of rhetoric and the practice of technical communication, and second, the integration of theory and practice as the foundation of rhetorical understanding. I proposed to approach this task in two ways – first, by using the standard techniques of humanistic research, and second, by providing a case study in the form of a demonstration: I would use the theory to create a practical and directive discourse for a specific audience.

The job I had set for myself turned out to be much more difficult than I had anticipated. I had embarked on an experiment that is unusual, at least in a humanities thesis. I proposed not only to bring together a number of disparate theorists to show the commonalities in their approach to the task of message-making, but also to demonstrate for my committee my own ability to apply these integrated theories in writing a handbook, based on the theory, for a very specific audience. This latter task, which I had expected to be the easier of the two, turned out to be by far the more difficult. It is also where I believe I learned the most. To be reminded that, even with my theoretical grasp, I still have to struggle when I face a task like writing this manual is a humbling experience. However, it's one that will make me a better rhetorician and, I think, a better teacher.

As I anticipated at the beginning of this project, I have been able to demonstrate the value of the theoretical and critical constructs of the rhetorical situation, the dramatic pentad, footing, and especially reflection-in-action, as strategies for improving practice. My discoveries in writing this thesis have been many, and though I think that writing the manual has produced the most visceral understanding of what rhetoric really is, I also believe I have gained something of value from the juxtaposition and integration of the theories I have worked with most.

I began with two primary concerns. I asserted that a knowledge of rhetorical principles is valuable to both the academic study and the practice of technical communication. I still believe that this is true, despite my struggles with translating my theoretical understanding into practical results. Although my experience here has reminded me that knowing what to do isn't the same as being able to do it, I still believe that my knowledge of the principles has made me a better writer than I would have been without them. It was this knowledge that showed me where I had gone wrong and helped me to see what needed to be done to fix it. With practice, I will be able to get to where I'm going more quickly and directly.

Writing the manual has given me a fuller understanding of things I thought I already knew. For example, I have been working with Lloyd Bitzer's concept of the rhetorical situation¹ since I first encountered it in an undergraduate course in 1996, and it is one of the foundations of the course I've been teaching in the College of Engineering. Its importance to the understanding of rhetoric can be measured by how much other theorists intrinsically make use of the same kinds of arguments and assumptions. While

¹ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968) 1-14.

my encounters with Kenneth Burke have been more recent than my experience with Bitzer, and my acquaintance with Donald Schon's work more recent still, I have found numerous points of similarity among their works and Bitzer's.

Although Burke is more philosophical and psychological in his discussion of the rhetorical situation² than Bitzer's original treatment was, Bitzer himself drew on Burke's theories of identification in his elaboration of his own theories.³ The two use different language to talk about the coherences between the scene, or situation, and the act, or message, that arises from it, but both stress the centrality of what Burke refers to as the act-scene ratio.⁴

Donald Schon's book – an exploration of professionalism – was written for a different audience and a different purpose.⁵ Nevertheless, Schon's characterization of reflective practice as a “conversation with the materials of the situation”⁶ parallels Bitzer's delineation of what he calls the “constituents” of the rhetorical situation and can therefore be seen as contributing to the rhetorician's understanding of how rhetorical discourse arises. As I have suggested, each theorist's work can be seen to complement

² Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Communication: Ethical and Moral Issues, ed. Lee Thayer (London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1973) 263-275.

³ Lloyd F. Bitzer, “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective,” Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) 21-38.

⁴ Kenneth Burke, “Container and the Thing Contained,” A Grammar of Motives [1945] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 7.

⁵ Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁶ Schon 78.

the others': Bitzer explains in some detail what, for a rhetorician, the "materials" of the situation are; Schon in turn shows us how to use those materials – Bitzer's constraints – in the process of developing a fitting response to our situation.

Similarly, Wayne Booth⁷ and George Dillon⁸ provide further complementary insights into the making of messages. Both return us implicitly to Aristotle's original formulation of speaker-audience-message as a means of understanding the dynamics of rhetorical interaction. Booth is interested in what he calls "rhetorical balance,"⁹ the managing of the act-agent, act-scene, and agent-scene ratios. Booth points to the necessity of achieving an appropriate balance fitting to the situation in which and the audience for whom we are communicating, but we must turn to Bitzer again for the analytical tools to assess how to shape the discourse. Dillon's elaboration of the concept into a comprehensive model of footing again provides a finer and more subtle tool for analysing the precise role of discursive style in the speaker-audience dynamic.

All of these theorists follow Aristotle in understanding the interconnectedness of rhetor, message, and audience, although each elaborates on this idea in different ways. Though each of these theorists brings a different focus to the question of how a rhetor (or a practitioner in any field) discovers the constraints that govern his situation and how he may adapt effectively to them, all of them contribute to an elaborated method of rhetorical invention: the discovery and creation of arguments.

⁷ Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication 14 (October 1963) 139-45.

⁸ George L. Dillon, Rhetoric as Social Imagination: Explorations in the Interpersonal Function of Language (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

⁹ Booth 141.

Burke suggests that all human communication, in whatever context, originates in our need for identification – the need for community and a sense of self. Although the other theorists don't explicitly make this assertion, all seem to be working implicitly with the same idea. Booth emphasizes the relational connection between speaker and audience, as does Dillon in his emphasis on the interpersonal dynamics of language. Dillon explores the nature of various forms of identification inherent in the practice of advice-giving and elucidates the stylistic choices that make these identifications possible. His own study thus functions as a handbook of advice for a rhetorician who hopes to forge similar identifications with her own audience.

All of these rhetorical theorists are encouraging the kind of reflective approach advocated by Schon. Each offers a method of carrying on the “conversation” that Schon sees as the heart of professional practice, and in particular as the heart of the design process. Schon is not a rhetorician, nor does he include rhetoric as one of the fields in which design in this sense is carried out. Nevertheless, his observations hold true for many more fields of human endeavour than are specifically covered in his study, and in particular, rhetorical message-making is a kind of design. Each of the rhetorical theorists considered here offers, in his own terms, a method for reflecting on the materials of the rhetorical situation so as to create more effective interventions and, in the process, forge bonds between a rhetor and his or her community. As Schon's book suggests, this social process is as important to professionals as to others, and in some sense even his book – like the other theories discussed here – concerns the relationship of human beings to their environment and their communities.

One of my primary goals in this study has been to demonstrate how each of these constructs, which are theoretical or critical in their original form, can be used practically

as an aid to producing more effective messages. Although very little of this theory emerges explicitly in the handbook, it serves as the foundation for the advice that is given there. Even as the students are advised to clearly identify the purpose of their presentation, to fully consider and accommodate the needs and expectations of their audience, and to identify and carefully negotiate their constraints, they are being encouraged to establish, before all other considerations, an effective relationship with the audience. These principles are, in simpler terms, the same ones emphasized by Bitzer, Booth, Dillon, and others. They are also designed to encourage – insofar as is possible given the constraints of their own situation – a reflective approach to the crafting of their message.

The manual doesn't offer a theoretical treatment of dramatism or situational politics, nor does it guide the students through a full consideration of footing or rhetorical balance. This is deliberate: given the kind of audience and the purpose of the manual, such a full-blown theoretical examination would have been misplaced. This is the mistake I made at the beginning – knowing the theory as I do, and understanding its potential for rhetorical invention, I wanted to equip these students with a sophisticated set of tools rather than a few precepts. If I'm honest, I also have to admit that part of my purpose was to impress my audience with my ability to use theory in this way. But the approach I had taken – as theoretically noble as it might have been – was wrong, both for this audience and for this situation. In the end it was a reflective conversation with the materials of my situation, aided by the advice of my supervisor, that showed me that this approach was a mistake.

Nevertheless, although the theory is not explicitly present in the handbook, the book fulfils its goals in a theoretically sound way. In the final version included here, I

have tried to address the students at their level of concern and anxiety as they approach the design presentation; to provide them with a method for reflecting on their own situation and the needs of their audience; and to show them – within the constraints of a brief manual – how to forge an appropriate response.

As I wrote the manual, I found myself “stimulated by surprise”¹⁰ to discover, all over again, just how difficult it can be to follow the advice I had been, with such good intentions, handing to my students. I remembered with some embarrassment my frustration with their seeming inability to follow these simple instructions. How humiliating to find myself in the identical situation with a task that I had expected to find simple and straightforward.

As frustrating as they have sometimes been, though, my own difficulties in actually applying theory to practice have given me insights I wasn’t expecting. I understand now how easy it can be for theoretical mastery to outrun practice, and I have been reminded again how important it is for a rhetorician, like other practitioners, “to keep one foot on the ground.”¹¹ I am convinced the process has made me a better rhetorician and critic. It will, I am sure, make me a better practitioner. And I believe, too, that it will make me a better, more understanding teacher of rhetoric as I help to guide future rhetoricians to the understanding that rhetoric depends on the successful integration of theoretical understanding with practical skill. In short, this complex

¹⁰ Schon 50.

¹¹ Barnet Baskerville, “Rhetorical Criticism, 1971: Retrospect, Prospect, Introspect,” Southern Speech Journal 37 (1971) 122.

process has demonstrated to me the necessity for all of us to become, as Donald Schon advises, better “researchers in the practice context.”¹²

¹² Schon 68.

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