

ABSTRACT

THEORIZING FREELANCE WRITING IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION:
EXAMINING THE PRESENCE OR ABSENCE OF CONTEXTUALIZATION AND
“THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE” FOR WRITERS EXTERNAL TO ORGANIZATIONS

An excerpt with quotes by Gaylon N. Cox II, /cidox

by

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009

Under the Supervision of Dr. Rachel Spilka

Faigley’s social perspective theory (1985) explains the critical relationship between writing and the social environment in which that writing takes place — the influence of corporate culture and interactions with supervisors and co-workers. Yet, despite the applicability of this theory to in-house technical writing, it does not explain the success of freelance technical writers who largely work removed from their clients’ corporate cultures. To examine this relationship, this study seeks to identify adaptive techniques used by 21 respondents to successfully perform their work removed from their clients’ organizations. The study also explores the concepts of professionalism and ethics as they relate to freelance technical writers. Data tools include email surveys, email interviews, and phone interviews. Respondents were categorized into two groups, according to their access to their clients’ corporate culture information: the High Corporate Culture group and the Low Corporate Culture group. Although both groups are successful and do not believe they work from a disadvantage as they freelance, they work very differently. High Corporate Culture group members largely have previous in-house experience as full-time writers for at least one of their clients, and perhaps as a result, structure their freelance work very similarly to how they worked when employed as full-time permanent employees. Few Low Corporate Culture group members have worked in-house for their clients and prefer to do most, if not all, of their work via remote. Low Corporate Culture respondents rely on patterns to acquire information regarding new clients. They seek patterns based on clients they have already worked with. There were few differences discovered between the two groups in regard to their professionalism and ethics. Both believe they face greater or different demands on their professionalism as freelance technical writers as compared to their in-house counterparts. Both groups have also experienced few ethical dilemmas with their clients but have a high awareness of ethical issues related to technical writing. © Copyright by Kathy Brady, 2009

All Rights Reserved

Clearly, technical writing for freelancers is a social act, requiring interaction with a number of players within the organization, whether face to face or remotely. There is, indeed, a structure of authority because the freelancer must create a product that meets client demands — although these demands may be filtered to them through only one contact person within the organization. As Gaylon Cox explained, “I often deal with one person, often communicate only via telephone and email, and even more often via email alone.”

Gaylon Cox (30 CCS) not only agrees that it is the reader’s culture that is of utmost importance, but that it is this aspect of writing that literally gives technical writers their purpose:

Most of my clients’ target audiences are not in the client’s corporate culture. This is sort of the whole purpose in having an outside writer provide their unbiased ideas and background. By definition, a technical writer takes difficult-to-understand information and makes it understandable to a general (or specified) audience.

The results of examining how freelance technical writers rank information regarding their clients’ social structures, as compared with information regarding their corporate cultures, also brought a wide range of views. For most, it is technical information related to the assigned project — or cultural information regarding the client’s client (or readers of the projects) that hold greater value than corporate culture. In essence, according to Gaylon Cox (30 CCS), were all readers nested within the client’s corporation, it is likely that technical writers would not be in as great a demand as they are now because there would not be as much translation required on the part of in-house writers, ostensibly familiar with their own corporate cultures.

Information through a contact person. For several of the respondents who indicated that their clients have tried to provide this information, much of it comes through one or more company-appointed contacts who deal with the freelancer on behalf of the organization. As Gaylon Cox (30 CCS) explains, “Procedures are usually touched on in the beginning. By combing through all of the points of contact available and by listening to the various players, you can quickly decipher who is who. Sometimes

The following is an example of mine:

Representative: Single Point of Contact

Unless written notification is sent to Gaylon Cox, NAME OF EMPLOYEE will be the NAME OF CORPORATION representative in this project and will have sole authority to sign written modifications or additions to the project. Gaylon Cox will be Gaylon Cox's representative.

For Gaylon Cox (30 CCS) and Cooper H. (28 CCS), printed documentation provides the best opportunity to assure that procedural information is communicated. Cox uses a contract to establish agreement on project procedures. He explains:

Having a rock solid contract usually takes care of any problems down the road. One of the best things to have on this topic is a Single Point of Contact clause.

The following is an example of mine:

Representative: Single Point of Contact

Unless written notification is sent to Gaylon Cox, NAME OF EMPLOYEE will be the NAME OF CORPORATION representative in this project and will have sole authority to sign written modifications or additions to the project. Gaylon Cox will be Gaylon Cox's representative.

Cox also states, "Finding out who else will be involved (if at all) in the project and including them with appropriate functions listed out is vital."

Even those clients who do not overtly specify culture can convey it through a contact person. As Gaylon Cox (30 CCS) explained, "By listening to various players...you can learn who is who." The project itself can also be a vessel for corporate information

As an outsider, I do not fall in to any office-based political problems. I simply deal with designated contacts. There is no "baggage" brought into the project on my side. I tend to be able to cut through any problems that usually come up (inter-office power struggles, etc.). This allows me to focus solely on the project to get it done correctly and on time.

Gaylon Cox (30 CCS) outlines why freelance technical writers frequently find themselves struggling to receive both quantity and quality of information:

Often, by the time a company that doesn't have in-house writers figures out they need a writer, it is already late in the development game. Everyone is scurrying around and nobody has much time to offer to the leveling-in of a writer. After initial talks regarding the project, my method of gaining information is:

Ask for existing documents.

Ask for beta version of product (if software).

Ask for interviews via teleconference with main contact and subject matter experts (SMEs)

Mastering several types and versions of software packages. I have clients all over the world. I might do a manual in FrameMaker 7 one day, and then use FrameMaker 8 the next day. Or possibly, use some obscure online help product only marketed in Europe.

Corporate Culture is Helpful, Although Not Necessary. Two respondents from the High CCS group and three respondents from the Low CCS group saw limited value in the relationship between corporate culture and professionalism. Gaylor Cox (30 CCS), for example, sees corporate culture as useful to his professionalism only in the sense that it can help him get his projects through his clients' organizations more smoothly:

While it [corporate culture] may be necessary to get the product out the door, an understanding of a business' corporate culture does not necessarily make for better documents or marketing collateral. Knowing upfront who has the final signoff, and dealing with that person as much as possible throughout the process should head-off any jams at the end of the project.