Stories and Maps: Postmodernism and Professional Communication – Johndan Johnson Eilola

(Print version of presentation given at Midwest Association for Business Communication Conference in Indianapolis in 1995)

From Stories to Maps

Communication used to be about telling stories, about listening to narratives of discovery, learning, redemption, and war. Not just little stories, but **big** stories: heaven, hell, utopia.

Relatively recently, though, the map has started to replace the story as our fundamental way of knowing. The new emphasis on spatial rather than temporal or historical concerns goes by a number of titles -- postcapitalism, networked places, nonhierarchical management -- but the most popular (and often misunderstood) is postmodernism.

In this text, I sketch out some of the ways that postmodernist tendencies affect the careers and possibilities for business and technical communicators. Briefly, I see the potential for increased responsibility, prestige, and influence for business and technical communicators, but only if we are able to reconceive what we think of as the value of our work; that is, we must reposition ourselves as mapmakers rather than authors.

**Articulating a Postmodern Theory of
Professional Communication**

Although we typically apply "postmodern" as a negative term to things like confusing music videos and disconcerting performance art, the idea becomes more useful to us if we can begin to understand it as the breakdown of history under the weight of technology and capitalism. Very briefly and roughly, postmodernism involves three key assumptions:

- a loss of faith in "grand narratives",
- the abandonment of foundationalism
- a fragmentation of stable, unitary identities.

The rise of postmodernism -- the movement toward space and away from history -- has been tied to a number of forces, including quantum mechanics and relativity, the evolution of capitalism, the rise of information as a commodity, and mass media.

I'm not going to try to pinpoint the cause right now (I don't think there is a single cause; the breakdown of the idea of simple cause-and-effect is another casuality of postmodernism), but we can associate postmodernism's current form with contemporary mangement techniques that value interdisciplinary teams, collapse of middle-management, rapidly shifting careers, and a general movement toward quick change and instability.

Making Potentials

Postmodernism can help explain such concepts as the rise of contract over permanent labor, the growth of global markets and information networks, interdisciplinary teams in business and industry, among other things. But we will gain productive and valued positions in the workplace only if we begin to understand these cultural developments in new ways.

We must avoid understanding postmodernism in a reductive way, but we also must avoid dismissing it as a fad. It is, instead, a general cultural condition within which we must learn to live and work. There are both positive and negative aspects to this; we must learn to bring the positive into being.

Possibilities in Postmodernism

As many people are finding out, postmodernism can mean new, exciting ways of working, of breaking down hierarchical structures of authority that tended to stifle rather than reward creative thinking and hard work. Interdisciplinary teams and the relative flattening of hierarchical corporate structures are postmodernist.

At the same time, many other people (sometimes the same people) are finding out that postmodernism can also mean the loss of stability, the denial of supportive communities, and the perpetual increase in expectations that often accompany a shift to decentralized, postmodern workplaces. Postmodernist shifts provide a useful rupture in traditional structures of work, but those same structures often also gave us security.

Theory = Practice

Even as business and technical communication professionals and educators are beginning to address these shifts (see, for example Barton and Barton 1993; Doheny-Farina, 1992; Bazerman and Paradis, 1991), we too often undertake these rethinkings on a symptomatic and ad hoc basis.

Thinking about collaboration in the workplace, for example, continues to struggle with the baggage of individual authorship (see, e.g., Doheny-Farina, 1992; Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller, 1985). We trail behind not only literary and cultural theorists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard but also, perhaps most importantly, business and management experts such as Peter Drucker (1992). Drucker's "post-capitalist" organization, for example, can be easily seen as postmodernist tactics applied to the workplace.

It's easy to shrug off Baudrillard's proclamations about the death of the real. It's a little more difficult to ignore Peter Drucker's advice to managers that freelance and contract workers save a company money by not burdening retirement and healthcare funds (a position not appreciated by the many technical and business writers who have seen permanent jobs evaporate to be replaced by less desirable, temporary contract work).

Technical Communication as Symbolic-Analytic Work

Robert Reich's work is particularly helpful in thinking about how important it is that we cast ourselves as people who analyze and arrange symbols. In his analysis of contemporary business trends, Reich sees a movement toward three main job classes:

A. **Routine Production Services.**

Routine production service "entail[s] the kinds of repetitive tasks performed by the old foot soldiers of American capitalism in the high-volume enterprise" (Reich, p. 174). These jobs include traditional blue-collar positions and also a number of white-collar jobs -- "foremen, line managers, clerical supervisors, section chiefs -- involving repetitive checks on subordinates' work and the enforcement of standard operating procedures" (p. 174). These workers are valued for their ability to follow rules, remain loyal to a company, and work accurately and quickly.

B. **In-person Service**

In-person service workers also complete routine, repetitive tasks and are usually closely supervised. The primary difference between routine production workers and in-person workers is that in-person service workers deal with people directly. So in addition to the skills of routine production, in-person workers must possess what Reich calls "a pleasant demeanor. They must smile and exude confidence and good cheer, even when they feel morose. They must be courteous and helpful, even to the most obnoxious of patrons. Above all, they must make others feel happy and at ease." (176).

In-person service workers have replaced much of the historical emphasis on routine production work. There were more in-person service jobs created during the 1980s than there are total workers in the steel, textile, and automobile job classes combined.

C. **Symbolic-Analytic Work**

Symbolic-analytic workers identify and solve problems; in Reich's words, they are "strategic brokering" people. In some ways, symbolic analysts are similar to routine production workers because they typically compete on an international level for positions; because so much of the work of symbolic analysts takes place in computer-mediated communication, they are more likely able to telecommute. But in most other ways symbolic analysts differ from the other job classifications in terms of status, responsibility, mobility, and pay. Because they are often highly recruited, they are more able to move from place to place because of their higher disposable incomes and because companies will often pay moving expenses for their services. In essence, symbolic analysts act out the movement away from history

(where an employee often worked in the same location and position as their parent and even grandparent) to power over global information spaces.

Technical and business communication can be classified as in-person, routine production, or symbolic-analytic service For the most part, though, we're in danger of remaining in the first and second rather than moving toward the third classification.

The reason I see for these trends is not because of the ways that we typically think about technical and business communication. We think of our work as non-routine, difficult, not amenable to direct supervision or inflexible rules.

At the same time, though, we don't think of our value in the manner of symbolic analysts, because we are content to think of ourselves as enablers, people whose main job is to help customers find the real value (which is in the technology). If we wish to capitalize on our somewhat hazy position and to reconstruct technical and business communication as symbolic-analytic work, we need to begin to think of ourselves as not just enabling people to use technologies someone else invented, but to think of ourselves as orchestrating a context, of arranging user, technology, and knowledge in particular, valued alignments.

We need to think through the idea of communication as mapping at a broad, institutional and disciplinary level that can help us to rearticulate in valuable ways our (multiple) positions in postmodern society.

Making Maps

From a postmodernist perspective, we might instead begin to value the idea that technical communicators' talents lie not in their skills at taking (and simplifying) dictation but in constructing novel and useful (if contingent) structures in fields of information. In other words, business and technical communicators do not write documentation or author reports, but make maps. What better job than mapmaker in an era when information is portrayed to users as a confusing, jumbled tsunami of data? If this new epistemology were being put forward only by professional communicators, it could easily be dismissed as egocentric, careerist maneuvering. But the general postmodernist model has already gained influence in a wide range of disciplines, a situation that professional communicators must quickly act on in order to assume new responsibilities and positions of influence.

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