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Terri A. Fredrick

Eastern Illinois University, tafredrick@eiu.edu

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Practicing Professional Communication Principles by Creating Public Service Announcements

Terri Fredrick

A PRIMARY GOAL of most introductory business and technical communication courses is to introduce students to the idea that the professional communication most of them will engage in is different from the writing they do for academic purposes. This overall idea covers several principles concerning professional writing. First, in an academic essay, a student may tell all he or she knows about a topic to an expert reader (the instructor); in professional writing situations, however, writers are most likely sharing only a small part of the information they know with nonexpert readers. Second, when writing in professional situations, writers must actively envision audiences different from themselves, audiences that will have different concerns and purposes than the writers do. Finally, the audience, purpose, and medium of a professional communication situation drive the choices a writer will make. If students are to understand these principles, discussing them in class is insufficient; students must also practice them.

Implementing active learning that applies these principles authentically can be challenging. The makeup of many business and technical communication courses means that not all students share expertise in a given field that they can draw on for common assignments. Hypothetical assignments may not give students a deep sense of context, and students may continue to perceive the instructor as the real audience for such assignments (e.g., Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994). Service learning and client-based projects, while beneficial, do not fit the time frame of every class and often involve a steep learning curve in which the students never come to view themselves as “experts” writing about topics they know well.

The Introduction to Professional Writing course on my campus serves two populations: students majoring in community health, who take the course as their single advanced writing class, and professional writing minors, who take the course as an introduction to more advanced professional writing coursework. Assignments focus on introducing professional communication concepts and asking students to apply those concepts to diverse situations. In the introductory class, we have only a short amount of time for each project. The challenge, then, is to provide students with a real communication situation in which they would be asked to grasp a specific rhetorical context, select content from knowledge available to them, and employ organizational and stylistic strategies appropriate to a particular medium.

The Radio Public Service Announcement (PSA)

To accomplish these goals, I introduced the PSA assignment. In coordination with our campus radio station and the university’s Health Education Resource Center (HERC),

students develop 30-second radio ads addressing particular health topics. Because the radio station broadcasts over a 50-mile radius, students must think beyond their own position as college students and consider the health concerns of people in our semirural community. Because the majority of students do not come from the communities served by the radio station, they must consider the ways the audience's concerns differ from their own.

Students begin the assignment with broad topics determined by the HERC and the season in which the ads will air. But because 30 seconds is a short time span, students must ultimately select only a small portion of the information they have available around which to craft their ads. Even a student who reads only two or three articles on a topic will have a knowledge base larger than that which could be included in the radio ad.

The radio format introduces several other contextual constraints that students must grapple with. First, the 30-second time frame leaves little room for "filler," so students must edit their sentences for maximum impact. Students comfortable with general opening statements and conclusions must instead "hook" listeners in the opening seconds. In addition, because the radio format is based on blocks of time, students cannot use the 30-second time frame simply as a guideline but must continue revising their scripts until the length is exact. Finally, because the ads will be sponsored by the HERC and played on the campus radio station, all aspects of the ad must meet the approval of these stakeholders during the drafting and revising phases.

The PSA Unit

To begin this assignment, the class meets with a representative from the HERC who introduces the students to the HERC's mission and the purpose behind the PSA project. The students and the HERC representative discuss features of the university and local community and those health and wellness issues that may be of greatest concern. As a class, the students select 8 to 10 general topics for that semester's PSAs. Individual students then volunteer for specific topics and engage in preliminary research to narrow their topics further.

Next, we discuss with a staff member from the radio station and/or the HERC's marketing director some of the features of a successful radio announcement. These principles include the following:

- Estimate three to five syllables for each second of air time. Estimate 1 second for long pauses.
- Hook listeners' attention in the first few seconds of the ad through the use of dialogue, humor, music, sounds, or startling facts or statistics.
- Involve listeners actively in the announcement by posing questions and/or using you.
- Use repetition and overt transitional devices to draw listeners' attention to important information.
- Provide listeners with specific actions they can take.
- Find ways to make the announcement locally relevant.

After we brainstorm a list of approaches students might take and listen to some examples of professional and student-created PSAs, students draft three possible scripts using the content they have chosen for their PSAs, without worrying about length at this stage. For the following class period, students bring the three rough scripts to class. The students begin the first round of peer review by passing their scripts around the room along with an envelope. Each student reads the three scripts, writes the number of his or her favorite on a slip of paper, places the slip in the envelope, and then passes the scripts and envelope to the next person. When students have read all the scripts (about 20 minutes for a class of 18 students), they move into small groups to count their votes and choose which of the three rough scripts to use. The group members discuss how to revise the chosen script for maximum effectiveness. At the end of the class period, I give students a worksheet with 30 lines and ask them to make a preliminary length check by writing three to five syllables of their draft on each line.

For the next class period, students bring revised drafts of the PSA script, and we begin oral peer review. Each student goes to the back of the class and reads his or her PSA aloud; those students who have written dialogues ask classmates to provide additional voices. Students then provide feedback and suggestions to one another on everything from the content to the delivery. When possible, the HERC representative attends this peer review session and makes requests for revision as well. Each PSA is also timed. In this preliminary oral peer review, it's not unusual to have PSAs that are under 20 seconds or as long as 1 minute. For that reason, students will revise again, and we will have a second oral peer review during the next class period. An oral peer review of 18 PSAs can be completed in a 50-minute class period.

Once the final scripts have been reviewed thoroughly by the HERC (the class and I move on to the next assignment while the scripts are under review), we go to the campus radio station, where students record their PSAs. After the radio staff has edited the recordings and added the requested background sounds and music, each student receives a CD copy of his or her PSA. Within a week, we begin to hear the ads broadcast on the radio station.

Assignment Benefits

This project is usually one of the students' favorite assignments all semester. The prospect of having their words and voice broadcast all over campus and the community motivates them to craft their ads carefully. Because the PSAs are so short, students are able to engage in a real writing situation with multiple drafts in a short period of time. In addition, because the audience and purpose for the ads is real, students must grapple with applying concepts from the class, and they come to see that many of the techniques they use successfully in academic papers will not serve them in this medium, for this purpose, or with this audience. The need to apply concepts from professional communication to this real situation leads to productive class discussions in which students recognize the importance of context. Discussions that have arisen as a result of this project include the following:

- How to ethically handle the use of source material in a radio format
- How to convey sensitive health information without alienating listeners
- How to get listeners involved without implying that everyone suffers from the same health and wellness problems
- How to convey both professionalism and approachability
- How to match the attention-getting device with the relative seriousness of the topic.

Through this assignment, students engage in a process, in miniature, that they can use for future professional communication tasks.

Note

I would like to thank Rachel Fisher, marketing and promotions director for the Health Education Resource Center at Eastern Illinois University, with whom I designed this assignment, and former student Breanne Stillwell, who provided me with several worksheets that I have adapted for use with this assignment.

Reference

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