WikiPedience: Teaching Students to Write for Nonacademic Audiences

Rhonda Lorraine McCaffery
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Other Communication Commons, and the Rhetoric Commons

Recommended Citation
McCaffery, Rhonda Lorraine, "WikiPedience: Teaching Students to Write for Nonacademic Audiences" (2012). Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 12693.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/12693

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
WikiPedience: Teaching students to write for non-academic audiences

by

Rhonda Lorraine McCaffery

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Rhetoric and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
David R. Russell, Major Professor
   Michael Mendelson
   Barbara Blakely
   Gloria Betcher
   E. Ann Thompson
   Ann M. Blakeslee

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2012

Copyright © Rhonda Lorraine McCaffery, 2012. All rights reserved.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES v
ABSTRACT vi

CHAPTER 1. WIKIPEDIENCE: WIKIPEDIANS AS AN AUDIENCE OF STUDENT WRITING 1
  Defining the Problem of Transfer 3
  Dissertation Structure 5
    Article 1: “(un)Intentional: Using Contradiction as a Catalyst of Student Learning” 6
    Article 2: “The Other Side of the Desk: Students’ Perceptions of a Wikipedia Project” 7
    Article 3: “Intersections of Influence: Audience, Learning, & A Research Narrative” 8

CHAPTER 2. SITUATING THE RESEARCH: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR WIKIPEDIENCE 10
  A Pedagogical Concept of Audiences of Writing 10
  Audience, Situated Theory, & Professional Communication Pedagogy 15
  Activity Theory, Contradiction, & Development 21
  Why Wikipedia? 24

CHAPTER 3. (UN)INTENTIONAL: USING CONTRADICTION AS A CATALYST OF STUDENT LEARNING 30
  Abstract 30
  Introduction 31
  Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory & Professional Communication Pedagogy 35
    Contradictions & Development in Activity Theory 35
    Purposes, Practice, & Pedagogy of Writing in School & at Work 38
  Contexts: Activity Systems, Participants, & Assignment 42
  Methods: Data Collection & Activity Theory Analysis 48
    Researching in My Own Course 48
    Analyzing & Representing Data 49
  Results: Narrative Representations & Implications 52
    Developing & Teaching the Wikipedia Assignment 53
    Interpreting & Understanding Penni17’s Perceptions & Activity 60
  Implications: Lessons in Pedagogy & Directions for Research 71
  References 76

CHAPTER 4. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK: STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A WIKIPEDIA PROJECT 83
Abstract 83
Introduction 84
Method 88
  Setting & Participants 88
  Data Collection & Analysis 89
Standing in Their Shoes: Three Individual Students’ Perceptions 91
  Ms. Co-branding 92
  Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. 94
  Ms. Child Life Specialist 97
Rearranging Desks: Situating Individual Perspectives within the Classroom and the Discipline 101
  Confusion Surrounding the Assignment’s Purpose 101
  Misunderstanding Surrounding the Purpose and Function of Wikipedia 105
Back on Our Side of the Desk: Implications Business Communication Instructors Can Draw from Students’ Experiences with the Wikipedia Authorship Project 110
References 113

CHAPTER 5. INTERSECTIONS OF INFLUENCE: AUDIENCE, LEARNING, & A RESEARCH NARRATIVE 116
Abstract 116
Introduction 116
Theoretical Influences on My Research & Assignment Design 121
  Audience, Situated Writing and Learning, & Technical Communication Pedagogy 123
  Audience & Cultural Historical Activity Theory 127
Research Methods 130
  In Defense of Teacher Research 131
  Settings, Participants, & Data Collection 134
  Looking Into a Mirror 137
Struggles with Confining the Research 139
  Struggling with Contradiction 140
  Struggling with Theory 146
  Struggling with Data 150
Implications and Conclusion 152
References 156

CHAPTER 6. WRAPPING UP THE RESEARCH: GENERAL CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS OF WIKIPEDIENCE 165
How Did the Students’ Perceptions of the Teaching Unit Affect Their Work? 166
How Did the Students’ Perceptions of Audience Change During the Teaching Units? 170
How Did the Students’ Perceptions of Social Motive Change During the Teaching Units? 173
Why Did These Perceptions Change? 175
What Have the Answers to These Questions Taught Me About Teaching Audience? 178
Directions for Future Research 181

APPENDIX A: TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION WIKIPEDIA ASSIGNMENTS 184
APPENDIX B: FREEWriting PROMPTS FOR WIKIPEDIA ASSIGNMENT 193
APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION PROMPTS AND HANDOUT FOR BAZERMAN READING 195
APPENDIX D: BUSINESS COMMUNICATION WIKIPEDIA PROJECT 201
REFERENCES 205
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH 213
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 214
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A Basic Activity Theory Triangle 37
Figure 2: Timeline of Penni17’s Wikipedia Assignment Activity 48
ABSTRACT

As a qualitative study and that employs teacher research methods and activity theory analysis, this dissertation explores the effectiveness of an assignment designed to both teach introductory technical and business communication students how to better write for nonacademic (workplace) audiences and to facilitate skills and knowledge transfer using Wikipedia as a writing medium. In particular, it explores the potential and problems that can arise when contradiction, something that can interfere with an individual’s successful completion of a task, is used to promote student learning. In a three-article format, the author presents case studies of one technical communication student and three business communication students and narrates the surprises and struggles of researching and writing a dissertation in which the data leads in a direction other than her original intention. The first article presents the narrative of Penni17, a chemical engineering student enrolled in introductory technical communication, whose anxiety over the assignment ultimately revealed a contradiction between the student’s and instructor’s perceptions and interpretations of the instructor’s learning goals and interfered with the student’s learning. The second article presents the narratives of three business communication students who similarly misunderstood their instructors’ learning goals, the terminology he used to describe their tasks, and his purpose in using Wikipedia as a medium. For these students and the majority of their classmates, the contradictions that arose contributed to their lack of motivation to work on the assignment and inhibited their learning. However, when one student was able to negotiate the contradiction she faced with another’s help, her learning progressed. The third article is a teacher-research narrative that presents the author’s own struggles to keep the dissertation focused on audience (and what students learned about
writing for audience) rather than on learning and contradiction, and concludes that teaching audience is much more complicated than the professional communication field has previously acknowledged or treated it. The author argues for a more expansive (less isolated, or situated) view of audience than that which currently exists within the field. Ultimately, the author argues for an approach to teaching audience that complicates students’ notions of audience and introduces the deliberate use and concept of contradiction in the classroom to promote student learning.
CHAPTER 1. WIKIPEDIENCE:

WIKIPEDIANS AS AN AUDIENCE OF STUDENT WRITING

During the 2006 – 2007 school year, I launched a new assignment in my introductory technical communication service courses. The assignment, which I designed to give students practice writing for actual, nonacademic audiences in preparation for workplace writing, was to write an article for Wikipedia. It was a process-driven assignment meant to simulate the experience students would face upon leaving school and entering the workforce: an unfamiliar working environment in which employers expect new employees to communicate effectively without extensive training or explicit instruction. Instead, these new employees learn what their coworkers—who are among their audience members—expect of them through practice, trial, and error. For me, Wikipedia held the potential to simulate such a working environment. Volunteer contributors collaborate to create articles using an agreed-upon set of rules and standards, and newcomers, rather than being encouraged to learn those rules, are encouraged to “be bold” and learn through practice.

For the Wikipedia assignment, students explored Wikipedia through reader and context analyses (including activity theory analysis); drafted and published contributions on the wiki; and revised them over a period of several weeks using feedback they solicited from those who worked within Wikipedia on a regular basis. These individuals were volunteer contributors and administrators who functioned as self-appointed gatekeepers (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007) of the Wikipedia community. This gatekeeper audience, I surmised, could act as both the students’ audience—a simulated workplace audience—and collaborators in a way that could simulate workplace writing processes. Using the feedback (or lack thereof) they
received, students could revise their contributions in an attempt to meet the audience’s expectations. However, I did not expect this process to be easy for students.

Throughout the process, I expected students to encounter contradictions between their own notions of what constituted good writing and the Wikipedia contributors’ standards for writing. Such contradictions would make it difficult for students to accomplish their tasks successfully unless students were able to resolve them. Within activity theory (prominent in this study), theorists argue that contradictions are powerful learning opportunities (Virkkunen, 2009) for individuals or collectives who recognize them as problems and work to negotiate solutions to them. My hope was that students could learn from contradictions they encountered between their own values and those of Wikipedia contributors by negotiating solutions to the contradictions that would help both students and contributors accomplish their tasks satisfactorily.

The Wikipedia assignment, seeming to hold promise, became the focus of a class research project. The following year, that research project became the model for my dissertation research. This dissertation, essentially a study of transfer, is a pedagogical investigation and activity theory analysis of the way introductory professional communication students learn to write for nonacademic (workplace) audiences. I had four primary research questions:

1. How did the students’ perception of the teaching unit affect their work?
2. How did the students’ perception of audience change during the teaching unit?
3. How did the students’ perception of the social motive change during the teaching unit?
4. Why did these perceptions change?
In the following sections, I briefly define the problem of transfer and preview the remainder of the dissertation.

**Defining the Problem of Transfer**

Traditionally, the problem of transfer between school and work is defined as the inability or difficulty students have applying the knowledge and/or skills they learned in school to a workplace context (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström, & Young, 2003). Writing to meet the expectations of new employers has proven continually difficult for former students (Ford, 2004; Ruff & Carter, 2009), particularly because students tend to write for one audience and for one purpose: students write for their instructors to obtain a grade (Kain & Wardle, 2005). These students emphasize an adherence to mechanics (Paretti, 2008) or form (Kain & Wardle) rather than adjusting for the nuances of a particular situation (Miller, 1984), as is characteristic of workplace writing (Freedman & Adam, 1996). Writing at work often involves multiple audiences and is a means of accomplishing a task, rather than a knowledge building or learning activity as it is in school (Dias et al.; Freedman & Adam). It is to these differences—socially situated differences between the purposes, uses, and reasons people write within school and work—that workplace writing researchers point to as a root of the problem of transfer (Dias et al.).

The goal of my dissertation research, a qualitative study for which I would use activity theory analysis, was to determine how useful such an assignment could be in helping introductory technical and business communication students learn to write effectively for nonacademic audiences in a way that would help them bridge (Blakeslee, 2001) the gap between school and work. The participants would be my own technical communication
students, another introductory business communication instructor, and his students.

Professional communication instructors have devised multiple pedagogical strategies and assignments to encourage student writers to practice writing for audiences other than an instructor, but these often fall short. For students, the assignments are still school activities; the real audience of school activities is the instructor, the person who assigns the grades (Blakeslee, 2001). To me, this seemed a problem of motivation. I wondered what would happen if we nudged students out of the school setting (at least partially) and into a situation where writing for nonacademic audiences had real consequences (thus, real motivating factors) apart from the grade—into Wikipedia, where other contributors have the power to edit or delete contents depending on how well those contents meet the community’s expectations. Students would encounter these consequences as contradictions between their own standards and goals for work and Wikipedia contributors’ standards and goals, and these contradictions, in turn, could become learning opportunities for students.

It was the unexpected contradictions, however—primarily, those between students’ perspectives and their instructors’ (my own and the business communication instructor’s), both of which were influenced by our membership in communities outside the classroom—that provided the most significant learning opportunity of this research. That learning opportunity was one for me as an instructor. As the study progressed, its focus broadened to student learning itself—to learning how students learn—rather than focusing on how students learn to write for nonacademic audiences. This dissertation, described below, reflects this shift in focus and ultimately brings the question back around to ask, “What does this teach me about teaching audience?”
Dissertation Structure

The structure of this dissertation is nontraditional in that it consists of three journal-quality articles tied together with a common introduction, literature review, and conclusion. Choosing the three article format rather than a traditional dissertation format was a strategic move on my part; with a Wikipedia assignment at the heart of the research, it is by its nature dated since technology tends to change quickly. If I am to publish the results in another forum, I will need to disseminate them quickly; I intend to submit each of the articles for publication to their intended journals shortly after completing the dissertation.

The articles appear in the order in which I wrote them, although this was not my original intent. I began by drafting “(un)Intentional: Using Contradiction as a Catalyst of Student Learning.” I intended to focus on the contradictions that one technical communication student and one business communication student encountered as they worked on the Wikipedia assignment. I was especially interested in those students’ actions and learning in response to the contradictions. However, as I analyzed the data, I uncovered a contradiction between my student’s perspective and my own that overtook the article and ended up teaching me more about teaching than it taught her about writing for audiences. In the second article, “The Other Side of the Desk: Students’ Perceptions of a Wikipedia Project,” I incorporated these lessons and continued with the theme of students’ perspectives and prejudices by demonstrating how they can become deterrents to student learning if left unaddressed. In the third article, “Intersections of Influence: Audience, Learning, and a Research Narrative,” I explored the implications of the research for audience theory and pedagogy by describing my struggle to maintain the focus of the study on audience as I analyzed the data. A summary of each article appears below, and the articles themselves
appear following the literature review. In the conclusion, which follows the three journal articles, I return to my original research questions. I had designed the questions as part of an activity theory analysis I had intended to use to determine whether and how students learned about writing for nonacademic audiences through the Wikipedia assignment. In the conclusion, I use data from each of the three articles to answer each of the questions in turn and ask one additional question: What can the answers to these questions teach me about teaching audience? The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research.

**Article 1: “(un)Intentional: Using Contradiction as a Catalyst of Student Learning”**

*Targeted journal: Research in the Teaching of English*

This qualitative case study features one introductory technical communication student’s experience completing the Wikipedia writing assignment. As the instructor for course, I intentionally relied on the assignment’s inherent potential to trigger contradiction, the inconsistency of inherent factors, actions, or propositions within a situation that prohibits individuals from achieving their objectives. Students and established Wikipedia contributors were likely to face contradiction over standards of writing, and I hoped that such contradictions would function as catalysts for students to learn to write effectively for nonacademic audiences. In this article, I use activity theory analysis to question that use of contradiction. I also examine the impact on student learning of unintentional contradictions arising from students’ individual interpretations of instructors’ intentions and learning goals for writing assignments. My findings suggest that by relying on their individual knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences associated with writing to interpret instructors’ intentions
and form their own goals for assignments, students can create unintentional contradictions that may interfere with their learning if left unrecognized and unresolved. However, even when left unrecognized, unintentional contradictions of this sort are not always counterproductive to instructors’ intentions because they may still stimulate learning that proceeds along the general intent of an instructor’s intentions yet is incomplete. This unfinished learning holds the potential for continued student learning beyond the course.

**Article 2: “The Other Side of the Desk: Students’ Perceptions of a Wikipedia Project”**

*Targeted journal: Business Communication Quarterly*

This article explores the effects and implications that one introductory business communication instructor’s choice to replace a client project with a Wikipedia Authoring Project had on its realistic and motivational qualities for his students from their own perspectives. Students were required to draft, publish, and revise original Wikipedia articles for the project, with which the instructor attempted to replace both students’ clients and their teammates (their collaborators) with the strangers that were members of that wiki and the project’s context and the text’s purposes with the hierarchical, member-governed structure and organization of the wiki. But many of the students perceived the project as irrelevant and unrealistic, and these perceptions posed as a deterrent to student learning. In particular, this was evident in students’ misunderstanding of the project’s purpose and of the primary tool they were to use to achieve that purpose, Wikipedia itself. In part, these students’ misunderstandings contributed to their lack of motivation to complete the project as directed. These misunderstandings illustrate not only the importance of helping students understand a
task’s relevance within its social context, but also indicate that students are often unwilling to accept the alienation and confusion that new working environments inevitably offer. Finally, the study suggests that commonly held beliefs about differences between workplace and academic communication—the one being largely practical, and the other being epistemic—may be outdated, particularly in the face of the rapid advancements of communication technologies.

**Article 3: “Intersections of Influence: Audience, Learning, & A Research Narrative”**

*Targeted journal: Technical Communication Quarterly*

In this narrative report of research, I recount my struggles to keep my dissertation’s focus on audience, which was my original intent, and not on the theories of student learning upon which I had based my research and assignment design. As I recount these struggles I explore the reasons for them, particularly through the question of “Why?” Why did the data that I had so carefully planned for and collected with a specific goal in mind not help me answer the questions I sought? What happened to divert my data away from my intended goal? And most importantly, what could these diversions teach me about the nature of audience and audience research? I conclude by arguing that audience should not be thought of, theorized, taught, or researched as existing within isolated social situations. Rather, audiences are fluid entities whose members experience overlapping social boundaries on a daily basis, as do writers. As writers we could learn more about writing for audiences if we would, instead, explore the multiple directions from which these points intersect, and as
instructors, we should encourage our students to complicate their notions of audience by suggesting they do the same.
CHAPTER 2: SITUATING THE RESEARCH:
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR WIKIPEDIENCE

When I set out to investigate the ways students learn to write for nonacademic audiences, I did so in a very specific manner with the Wikipedia assignment. This assignment was a culmination of my understanding of a number of theories of associated with audience, workplace writing, professional communication pedagogy, and student learning, including situated writing and learning theory and activity theory. This chapter, a theoretical framework, surveys these associations and theories and serves to position my work in lieu of a literature review. In this way, the chapter provides “more depth than might be found in a literature review” (Fecho, 2003, p. 289) by offering readers a “theoretical lens” of their own (Fecho, p. 289) from which to interpret my data and conclusions. I begin the chapter with a brief historical review of the concept of audiences of writing and its implications for writing instruction.

A Pedagogical Concept of Audiences of Writing

Current concepts of audience within professional communication can trace their roots to the early 1980s, when there was an explosion of interest in the concept within rhetoric and composition circles. In part, this interest was due to an earlier (ca. 1960–1975) renewal of interest in classical rhetoric within English departments (Porter, 1992), one that grew out of scholars’ interest in “the contemporary relevance of the classical rhetorical tradition” (Lunsford & Ede, 2009, p. 46). At the forefront of this interest was Aristotle’s portrayal and treatment of audience in the *Rhetoric* and a debate between scholars over how it portrayed audiences. On one side of the debate were scholars who argued that Aristotle portrayed
audiences as passive receptors of a rhetor’s message (Newman, 2002; Porter, 1992); on the other side, scholars argued that the audiences portrayed within the *Rhetoric* were active players in a dialogic process (Lunsford & Ede, 1984). The latter view was more in keeping with the social constructionist epistemology toward which the field of rhetoric and composition was leaning (Kirsch & Roen, 1990). But from a practical standpoint, writing instructors within the discipline were also interested in Aristotle’s classification scheme for audiences.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle classifies audience members by their emotions and character traits and describes the types of argument that would best persuade each audience member. While Aristotle’s classifications are often prejudiced generalizations, composition instructors still recognized pedagogical value in a classification system for audiences. For these scholars, the *Rhetoric* modeled a practical method of audience analysis (Ede, 1984). Writers could ask a series of questions about their audiences’ demographic characteristics, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs and then use the information they had gathered to develop arguments that would be more likely to appeal to their audiences. This was not a new interpretation of Aristotle (audience analyses had been used in a similar fashion within speech departments for decades), but it was a popular one because it seemed a relatively easy way to approach the concept of audience in writing classes (Ede, pp. 140–143). Audience analysis heuristics began to appear in increasing number in composition and professional communication textbooks, and to this day they remain one of the most popular approaches to audience within them (e.g., Johnson-Sheehan, 2007, the textbook I used in my introductory technical communication course).
All of the interest in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* had served to put the focus of rhetoric and composition scholars on the concept of audience. Inevitably, however, scholars would point out that there was a problem with using the *Rhetoric* as a model for a modern concept of audience or method of audience analysis. The *Rhetoric* was “a rhetoric for speech occasions” (Porter, 1992, p. 21), which differed tremendously from writers’ circumstances. While audience analysis could be useful for determining how to tailor information for audiences of speeches, “it distorts many of the decisions facing most writers in most situations” (Long, 1990, p. 74). In speech occasions, an audience is present and its characteristics are somewhat predictable based on the speech’s context. But a writer’s audience typically is not present as a writer composes a text; this makes predicting and analyzing audiences of writing difficult. This fact prompted the questions, “What exactly is an audience of writing? How do audiences of oral discourse differ from audiences of writing?”

As a discipline, rhetoric and composition leapt forward in its answers to these questions when Ede and Lunsford (1984), following notable and influential works drawn from speech communication by Bitzer (1968) and Park (1982), introduced the addressed/invoked dichotomy. According to Ede and Lunsford, audiences were both real readers, people who existed outside the text and whom writers addressed, and people whom writers invoked and created within texts by “[establishing] the range of potential roles an audience may play” (p. 166). Writers, they argued, went from one activity to the other, performing both activities at different stages in the composing process. Their emphasis could “shift and merge” (Ede & Lunsford, p. 168) depending on the situation, purpose, and genre of the writing task at hand.
Ede and Lunsford’s article sparked a plethora of theory and research on audience within rhetoric and composition. In recognizing that writers both address and invoke audiences, many within rhetoric and composition began to assign audiences an active role in shaping written discourse. Much of this theorizing adopted the social constructionist premise that “knowledge is indeterminate, contingent, and socially derived as opposed to foundational, cumulative, and capable of verification or falsification” (Berkenkotter, 1990, pp. 193–194). Social construction added “what [had] been missing” (Kirsch & Roen, 1990, p. 14) to discussions of audience: “a sense of the social context in which text production and dispersion takes place, a sense of the forums (publications, talks, conferences) that shape audiences, and a sense of the shifting dynamics of discourse communities” (Kirsch & Roen, p. 14). In this sense, the line between audience and author of written texts becomes unclear or disappears (Phelps, 1990, p. 156). This view was in keeping with post-structuralist viewpoints within English departments, whose proponents argued that texts have multiple meanings and, in the sense that a text’s interpreter (audience) is an author, multiple authors (Barthes, 1968/1977). They challenged “the linear model of communication, the representation of writers as message senders and of readers as mere decoders of the author’s message, at the same time that [they recognized] the interpenetration of writing and reading” (Roth, 1990, p. 175).

Thus, the concept of an audience of writing became one that was social, multiple, complex, and active in the writing process. The image of a solitary writer hard at work was no longer a valid one since that writer was now involved in dialogue, in multiple conversations between and with texts and people (Kirsch & Roen, 1990). This sense that “all writing is social” (CCCC, 2004, p. 786), along with a sense of the complexity of the term
*audience* when applied to writing, has become a commonplace to those within rhetoric, composition, and professional writing studies. It is also something that writing instructors expect their students to recognize, particularly in light of the rapid advances in communication technologies. In 2004, a committee of composition scholars commissioned by the Conference on College Composition and Communication wrote, “Because digital environments make sharing work especially convenient, we would expect to find considerable human interaction around texts; through such interaction, students learn that humans write to other humans for specific purposes” (p. 787). But while they understand this to a degree, most undergraduate students of introductory technical and business communication lack this perspective.

Undergraduate students are not privy to the rich history and theoretical and disciplinary associations (Lunsford & Ede, 2009) that the term *audience* carries with it and that their instructors invoke when they use the term. For students, the term still recalls an element of the linear, that “of writers as message senders and of readers as mere decoders of the author’s message” (Roth, 1990, p. 175). And while we may expect students to understand that writing is a social activity because of their consumption of social media, many students do not recognize their use of social media—their posts to Facebook or Twitter, for example—as writing. Conversely, drafting letters, memos, and reports is clearly writing, but many students do not think of it as social. Instead, students tend to think of writing as a matter of mechanics (Paretti, 2008) or of following rules-based forms or models (Kain & Wardle, 2005) rather than as taking social action (Miller, 1984; Bazerman, 1994).

My understanding of writing as social and of audiences as an integral part of the production process colored my understanding of the problem of transfer when I began this
research. So, too, did situated writing and learning theories, particularly because of the work theorists had done in transfer between professional communication classrooms and the workplace (Freedman & Adam, 1996; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999).

**Audience, Situated Theory, & Professional Communication Pedagogy**

Learning how to communicate in the workplace is, perhaps, the predominant activity of both technical and business communication students. But for many professional communication instructors, teaching workplace writing presents a prevailing pedagogical problem. Writing itself is a social activity (Bazerman, 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Miller, 1984), but its rhetorical and practical uses and purposes differ so much between school and work that it is a different activity in each socially situated context, as is learning to write in each context (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Freedman & Adam, 1996). Students often fail to recognize this and, upon entering the workforce, find it hard to adapt because they try to write as they did in school, focusing on mechanical skills (Paretti, 2008) or genre form (Kain & Wardle, 2005) rather than adjusting to the nuances of each situation (Miller). They also have difficulty anticipating and incorporating audience reactions and feedback (Ruff & Carter, 2009), both of which are actions that characterize workplace writing (Freedman & Adam).

Much of the pedagogical research within professional communication supports this theory by pointing to employers’ dissatisfaction with new employees’ communication skills (Ford, 2004; Ruff & Carter, 2009). This research reveals several difficulties of teaching workplace writing from academic contexts. These difficulties have become focal points and learning goals for professional communication instructors. One of these goals include helping
students to recognize and understand differences in the purposes of academic and workplace writing, important because the reasons people write affect the ways they use writing (Bazerman, 1994, 2004; Miller, 1994). Situated theorists contend that students have difficulty adapting to workplace writing because they fail to understand that writing at school and writing at work are two different activities that require different approaches. For situated theorists, “the context constitutes the situation that defines the activity of writing” (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999, p. 17). At school, writing is learning activity; it is “knowledge oriented … [and] an end in itself” (Dias et al., p. 45), typically addressed to an instructor and characterized by the “recitation of given information” (Greene, 2001, p. 560). At work, however, writing is a means to an end. As a part of productive activity, it is a communicative tool targeted to specific audiences within specific contexts (Ruff & Carter) for specific purposes—to “get things done” (Dias et al., p. 45).

A second goal of professional communication instructors is to help students develop strategies for learning in different contexts. This can prove difficult for students because, like writing in each context, learning at work and learning at school are also two separate activities. At work, most learning resulting from writing is tangential rather than intended. Learning is typically self-directed and erratic (Freedman & Adam, 1996), a form of “attenuated authentic participation, a process that characterizes various forms of apprenticeship” and is “oriented toward practical or material outcomes” (Freedman & Adam, pp. 398–399; this is based on the notion of legitimate peripheral participation). This differs markedly from learning at school, which is often a case of “facilitated performance” (Freedman & Adam, pp. 398–399)—an explicit (Beck, 2006) process of guiding,
challenging, scaffolding (Spafford, Schryer, Mian & Lingard, 2006), and supporting learners through problem solving using language—and its ultimate goal is student learning.

Third, professional communication instructors often adopt the goal of helping students transfer and adapt rhetorical knowledge and skills they learn in school to workplace contexts. Transferring classroom-based lessons about writing to work often proves difficult for students because they tend to approach writing in both contexts not as different, but as the same activity (Ford, 2004; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Russ & Carter, 2009). In other words, students often fail to recognize the differences between the purposes of writing in school and at work. This creates difficulties for learning to write in the workplace as well. Not only do students not know how to write in a new situation; neither do they know how to learn in a new situation. “When students move from the university to the workplace, they not only need to learn new genres but they also need to learn new ways to learn those new genres” (Freedman & Adam, p. 395).

Professional communication instructors often use a combination of complementary pedagogical strategies, each with its own inherent strengths and weaknesses, to accomplish these goals. Three of the most prominent strategies are workplace simulations, client projects, and rhetorical analyses. Workplace simulations imitate workplace functions, processes, or writing strategies in the classroom (see Fisher, 2007 and McGovern, 2007 for examples). Client projects require students to develop documents for clients outside the classroom (client projects are often group projects). Rhetorical analyses, often assigned with both simulations and client projects, require students to investigate and analyze targeted audiences, organizational contexts, and stated uses and purposes of assigned genres and communication situations and practice using that information to adapt messages and genre
forms appropriately. All three strategies can help instructors emphasize the differences between school and work and are intended to be “transitional” (Dannels, 2003, p. 141), knowledge that will help students transition smoothly into workplace communication. Instructors also attempt to use simulations and client projects to help shift students’ proclivity to approach writing purely as an academic activity. Each of these strategies, however, has weaknesses in one area or another.

Simulations tend to be too weak to overcome their underlying academic purpose and structure (Freedman & Adam, 1996). Students often perceive them as inauthentic (Freedman & Adam; Greene, 2001) and “select more often the strategies that they have learned as academic readers and writers rather than those characteristic of … organizations” (Spafford, Schryer, Mian, & Lingard, 2006, p. 125). Client projects have been dubbed “the cornerstones of business writing curricula” (Siefert, 2009, p. 200) because both teachers and workplace writing researchers (Siefert) assign great value to their ability to motivate students and to “incorporate actual business situations” (Addams, Woodbury, Allred, & Addams, 2010, p. 282) into student assignments. These projects can compensate for problems of authenticity since they are hybrid projects simultaneously situated in school and at work (at least, in a contractual sense). However, they can also quickly revert to purely academic exercises if the clients treat them as classroom/learning projects (versus actual work) or neglect to take the time to work with students (Blakeslee, 2001; Chappell, 2005). In either case (as well as in cases when students themselves fail to take the projects or clients seriously), students tend to privilege the instructor and the classroom instead of the client (Blakeslee). Finally, rhetorical analyses’ analytic components can compensate for problems of authenticity, but students
often perceive them as school lessons—“abstract rhetorical strategies” (Ford, 2004, p. 310) inapplicable to the workplace.

Some promising pedagogical research exists in which the researchers/instructors integrated activity theory into their investigations of students’ difficulties with the situational differences in writing and learning between school and work. In one study (Kain & Wardle, 2005) involving introductory professional communication students, the researchers taught their students a basic form of activity theory analysis rather than assigning the traditional rhetorical analyses described above. Their students used an analytic triangle (see Figure 1) to

**A Basic Activity Theory Triangle**

![A Basic Activity Theory Triangle](image)

*Figure 1: A Basic Activity Theory Triangle.* Researchers use these triangles to visually display relationships and contradictions between nodes within an activity system.
compare how writing works in academic and workplace activity systems and visualize the systems’ nodes (or elements—these include tools, rules, division of labor, community, subject, and object) and their relationships to one another. The students’ analyses were in-depth, insightful, and complex, especially in comparison to the researchers’ previous students’ traditional rhetorical analyses. While the study was not longitudinal (thus, inconclusive about students’ ability to transfer the knowledge to “new situations”—p. 134), the research “suggest[ed] that when students begin their analyses with a suitable framework for studying context, they move toward developing the mindfulness required to assess different situations and thus the role of texts within those situations” (Kain & Wardle, p. 134).

In a separate study (Dannels, 2003) involving engineering students, the researcher observed both the students and their instructors encounter and proceed to choose or negotiate between contradictory assignment requirements for an oral presentation. The assignment required students to simulate workplace presentations and pretend they had a workplace audience, but also to include information in their presentations that was only applicable to an academic setting. The researcher concluded that simulations force students into contradictory positions that make them choose between “dual identities” (Dannels, p.141) and actions, consistent with either an academic or workplace context, but not both. While she interpreted this as a weakness of simulations, stating that instructors would need to teach students “a way of critically approaching contradictions” (Dannels, p. 164), other research suggests that this type of contradiction is precisely what gives it the potential to be a learning opportunity (Russell & Yañez, 2002). The former researchers’ study suggests that using activity theory analyses might prove useful in this capacity.
This use of activity theory, together with the notion that contradiction could create learning opportunities, both intrigued and appealed to me since I was interested in the theory itself. Combining workplace writing research with activity theory analysis has become common among workplace writing researchers (Russell, 2009) because it allows researchers to focus on how people communicate (and learn to do so) within social contexts and helps researchers understand “the aspects … that influence how people use the tools of language and genre” (Kain & Wardle, n.d.). Likewise, it is a useful theory for professional communication instructors because such an understanding can aid instructors in “planning interventions to improve students’ literacy, at all levels” (Russell, p. 40). The next section describes activity theory and activity theorists’ perception of contradiction and development, which were crucial to my study.

**Activity Theory, Contradiction, & Development**

As a social theory of learning and development (Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009), activity theory is particularly suited to investigating questions of student learning. Activity theorists examine the activity (work) people do toward an object (goal) (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) within cultural and historical contexts (Cole, Engeström, & Vasquez, 1997). To do so, they use activity systems (groups of people working toward a common object and mediating their activity with tools) as the main unit of analysis (Kain & Wardle, n.d.; Kaptelinin & Nardi) and measure systemic and individual change in response to contradictions as an indication of development and learning (Ludvigsen & Digernes, 2009). Activity theorists’ concept of learning is not simply a measure of past achievements. Rather, it encompasses individuals’ potential to learn over time, a potential that theorists assess by
tracing changes in individuals’ “independent” versus assisted “problem solving” skills (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 49) while making use of both external (physical) and internal (psychological) tools (Kaptelinin & Nardi) in a cultural environment.

To measure change, activity theorists note the differences in subjects’ degrees of dependence on others (mentors) and sophistication in using tools to complete tasks and solve problems (Lektorsky, 2009). The tools themselves are a system’s cultural artifacts, “the historical evidence of their development” and “an accumulation and transmission of social knowledge” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 100). An investigation of change within an activity system involves examining the relationships and contradictions between nodes of that system from subjects’ points of view—the community; its tools, rules, and division of labor; and its object, its members motives for pursuing that object, and the outcome of their efforts. It also often involves depicting these visually in the activity theory triangle (Kain & Wardle, n.d.; Kaptelinin & Nardi) or a variation of it (e.g., Russell & Yañez, 2002). (See Figure 1 on page 10).

Most often, contradictions within or between activity systems are what signal the need for, and begin the process of, developmental change within individuals or systems (Lektorsky, 2009). Contradiction is a concept that was developed by Engeström over the past two decades as part of cultural historical activity theory and expansive learning theory (Lektorsky, 2009; Miettinen, 2009) and is an important constituent of activity theory. When individual or collective members of an activity system encounter contradiction either within or between that system and another—something that interferes in some way with the successful completion of their tasks or object—they must eventually act, either consciously
or unconsciously, to change their own activity or object in order to continue their work (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Miettinen).

Perhaps the most significant sort of contradiction is one of object (Ludvigsen & Digernes, 2009), because objects are the “most important attribute[s] differentiating one activity from another” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 61). Individuals shape their activity around their understanding of the object—of the goal, or purpose, of their activity. But in activity theory, the concept of object encompasses individuals’ motives as well as system-wide goals. Motives are individuals’ reasons for working; as such, they are objects that individuals search for and adopt (Virkkunen, 2009), sometimes unwittingly, in response to personal needs (Kaptelinin & Nardi). Thus, individuals’ “actions are typically motivated by one object but directed toward another” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 58). Directing objects—the stated, or conscious, goals for members of an activity system—are often “forced on the individual by the organization of the activity” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 58). If motivating and directing objects are contradictory, individuals’ “activities can potentially develop a complex relationship” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 58) between the objects and could cause further contradictions within or between activity systems during their problem-solving processes (Virkkunen).

It is important to understand that inherent in activity theorists’ concept of development is a nuanced concept of activity as hierarchical, consisting of levels of activity, action, and operation. At the overarching level is social activity itself, which is “a system of processes” that are both “oriented toward … [and] characterized by a disassociation between their motivating and directing objects” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, pp. 60, 62). This disassociation occurs most often when directing objects (conscious goals) are “‘given’ to the
subject” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 63), because they often contradict individuals’ (at times, unconscious) motives. Activity, then, is “composed of a sequence of steps, each of which is not immediately related to the motive even though the sequence as a whole may eventually result in attaining the motive” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 62). These steps, called actions and operations, compose the lower levels of activity and are differentiated by individuals’ levels of consciousness while performing their tasks. Actions are conscious efforts people make toward attaining specific goals, while operations, lower than actions, are “routine processes … oriented toward the conditions under which the subject is trying to attain a goal” and of which people are typically unaware (Kaptelinin & Nardi, pp. 62–63). While operations may be improvisational, they may also be habitual processes developed when, “over the course of learning and frequent execution, a conscious action … transform[s] into a routine operation” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 63) in a process called automatization. Its opposite, deautomatization, is “the transformation of routine operations into conscious actions” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 63). These types of transformations, typically responses to the need for change that contradictions reveal, occur “with respect to the changing object and motive of a given activity by the people who participate in that activity” and constitute “learning activity” (Miettinen, 2009, p. 161)—the type of activity that students undertake.

**Why Wikipedia?**

When I began this research project, research on the use of wikis to teach writing in professional communication was scarce, although it existed in other disciplines, such as English language instruction and the social sciences (e.g., Forte & Bruckman, 2006; Guth, 2007). Those studies focused on wikis as a collaborative writing tool rather than a tool to
teach students to write for (and with) nonacademic audiences. But both when I began this research and more recently, scholars have cautioned instructors to think carefully about adopting new technologies into the classroom, and rightly so. Wikis and other Web 2.0 tools and platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are such technologies.

Scholars who caution against arbitrarily incorporating new technology into the classroom argue that instructors must have a reason for adopting use of the technology, and that its use in the classroom needs to provide clear benefits for students (Cardon & Okoro, 2010; Guth, 2007). Cardon & Okoro, business communication scholars, take their cautions to one extreme, arguing that adopting Web 2.0 technologies not in frequent use by a majority of business managers (those doing work directly related to the discipline, rather than public relation departments, marketing departments, and the like) could harm the identity of the field (p. 438). Their stronger argument, however, is that instructors should focus on those skills and supporting technologies most relevant to the workplace, like interpersonal communication and email. They caution against ever replacing what they term the “richer communication” (p. 437)—e.g., face-to-face communication—with technology. Doing so, they argue, would mean that instructors are “not sufficiently preparing our students for the workplace” (p. 437).

In making their argument, Cardon and Okoro (2010) stress that they are only advising caution when using technology rather than arguing completely against its use. Their idea of the proper use of Web 2.0 technology—to “augment and compliment” those “rich” (p. 437) forms of communication—is illustrated well in Crews and Stitt-Gohdes’ (2012) use of Facebook and Twitter within the context of a service-learning project. Working for nonprofit organizations, their students’ main objective was to develop a specific set of documents
(specified by the instructors themselves, rather than the nonprofits) to help those organizations improve their communication with the public. In addition to those documents, Crews’ and Stitt-Gohdes’ students had to make a number of Facebook and Twitter posts—also instructor-specified—toward that same objective. While this may be a good example of using Web 2.0 technologies to augment rather than replace other forms of communication, however, the degree to which the students’ objectives were set by the instructors rather than the nonprofits themselves subtracts from the realism that the project might otherwise have had.

On the opposite end of the argument from Cardon and Okoro (2010) are those like Jennings (2010), who enthusiastically argue that the pedagogical possibilities for using Web 2.0 technologies within business communication are endless. Buechler (2010) argues that one such possibility is to use Web 2.0 technology to update familiar assignments. And there are now emerging some peer-reviewed reports within professional and technical communication and distantly related fields, like English language instruction, of attempts to incorporate Web 2.0 technologies into classroom pedagogy. For example, Walsh (2010), working within technical communication, and Guth (2007), observing an ESL class, both used wikis—one private and password protected (Walsh), and the other public (Guth)—to teach collaborative authoring skills. Walsh’s use of the wiki was also a client project, in which clients and students alike had the option of working face-to-face, via phone or email, or on the wiki. The results of such pedagogical experiments are mixed, but have at times been promising enough to call for continued research in the area.

I conducted my own research using a wiki because I believed that good writers intentionally tailor their writing for their audience(s) and I wanted to help students develop
their own ability to do so in the workplace as well as at school. I hoped that, through the Wikipedia assignment, students would develop new, analytic writing habits (processes) based on rhetorical knowledge and skills that could become nuanced with additional practice over time. I also hoped to investigate the use of contradictions to teach workplace writing. When I designed the Wikipedia assignment and my research, my concepts of audience and context encompassed the concept of an activity system and its nodes, and I relied on the notion that contradiction is a catalyst of change. I saw the classroom and the workplace (as well as Wikipedia) as separate activity systems. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia; as a member-governed wiki—a Web 2.0 technology that allows users to communicate and collaborate with others to write and edit text quickly through their browsers—volunteers contribute all of its contents. Wikipedia’s stated purpose is to compile an online reference base of free, verifiable (but not new), non-biased encyclopedic information (“Wikipedia:About”). Since anyone can contribute, millions of registered and unregistered users work on its contents. However, its core members, administrators and countless other volunteers who work daily within Wikipedia, serve as the primary audience for each others’ writing. These core members work collaboratively through tools like discussion and history pages, each with his or her self-assigned tasks, to uphold Wikipedia’s principles (namely, the five pillars—see “Wikipedia:Five pillars”) and ensure that others’ contributions align with Wikipedia’s goal (or their interpretations of it). In this way, the core membership of Wikipedia constitutes a social context working toward a purpose.

The Wikipedia assignment, then, blended elements of both simulations and client projects by emphasizing a writing process that took place outside of the classroom (although in the online, and so physically removed, or “distant” environment of Wikipedia) and by
involving outside readers (the Wikipedia contributors/“gatekeepers”—Johnson-Sheehan, 2007) whom I surmised would not know or care that the writers were college students completing a class assignment. They would just care that it met their standards for writing. But in order to understand who their readers were and what they expected of written work, students would need to undergo a learning process similar to those within workplaces, and I believed that reader and context analyses could help with this. In my own courses, inspired by Kain & Wardle (n.d.; 2005) and Bazerman (2004), I taught students a simplified version of activity theory analysis alongside reader analysis in hopes that it would prove a more useful tool than reader analysis alone. But even with all of these elements, there would have been one crucial element missing to the assignment design had I stopped there: the element of contradiction.

I predicted that, upon drafting and uploading their initial Wikipedia contributions, students would ignore the implications of their activity theory and reader analyses and (consciously or unconsciously) rely instead upon their own understanding of Wikipedia, the assignment, and what they needed to do to get a decent grade. When they did so, I hoped that they would encounter contradictions in the form of edits, comments, or deletion from those Wikipedia gatekeepers, or even contradictions between what those gatekeepers expected and what I, as their instructor, expected. It was through these contradictions and the process of recognizing and negotiating between them that I hoped students would learn: I wanted them to recognize that audiences should not be ignored, but rather play an important role in text production. I also hoped that students would adopt activity theory analysis into their writing processes—or at least, a conscious recognition, upon entering a new writing context and encountering contradiction, that several factors influence others’ perception of “successful”
writing and can differ from one context/situation to the next, and these factors should, in turn, influence the decisions they make as they write.

Analyzing students’ learning about writing for audiences can contribute powerfully to the body of professional communication pedagogy. But doing so also has practical benefits. It can help writing instructors—particularly those who do research in their own courses by examining both themselves and their students as subjects—to understand how, and why, their assignments and learning goals aid (or inhibit) student learning and create classroom contexts in which there are “variations in students’ success” (Beck, 2006, p. 422). The results of my research are presented in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 3. (UN)INTENTIONAL: USING CONTRADICTION
AS A CATALYST OF STUDENT LEARNING

A paper to be submitted to Research in the Teaching of English

Rhonda L. McCaffery

Abstract

In this qualitative case study, I use activity theory analysis of one introductory technical communication student’s experience completing the Wikipedia writing assignment I designed to address the problem of teaching workplace writing within a situated school context. I question my use of intentional contradiction—the inconsistency of inherent factors, actions, or propositions within a situation—within the assignment as a catalyst for student learning, and I examine the impact on student learning of unintentional contradictions arising from students’ individual, historically- and socioculturally-influenced interpretations of instructors’ intentions for writing assignments—in particular, instructors’ learning goals for students. My findings suggest that by relying on their individual knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences associated with writing to interpret instructors’ intentions and form their own goals for assignments, students can, indeed, create unintentional contradictions that may interfere with their learning if left unrecognized and unresolved. However, even when left unrecognized, unintentional contradictions of this sort are not always counterproductive to instructors’ intentions because they may still stimulate learning that proceeds along the general intent of an instructor’s intentions yet is incomplete. This unfinished learning holds the potential for continued student learning beyond the course.
Introduction

**contradiction** noun. 3b: a situation in which inherent factors, actions, or propositions are inconsistent or contrary to one another

As an introductory technical communication instructor tasked with preparing students to write in the workplace, I deliberately build opportunities for students to encounter contradiction into my assignments. For many people, the term *contradiction* has negative connotations. But for activity theorists, these sources of “tensions, conflicts, and breakdowns” (Ludvigsen & Digernes, 2009, p. 242) that reside “at the heart of human activity” (Blackler, 2009, p. 27) are also potential “sources of change and development” (Lektorsky, 2009, p. 79). In other words, contradictions are something that interferes in some way with the successful completion of individuals’ or collectives’ tasks or goals. They usually manifest as “discrepancies in individuals’ views and understandings” (Virkkunen, 2009, p. 150). But they are also opportunities to stimulate learning; if recognized as such, contradictions can prompt students to begin a problem solving process that can eventually lead to “increased capability” (Engeström, 2009, p. 313) and understanding, both for individual students and the communities in which they act (Lektorsky; Miettinen, 2009; Virkkunen).

In the process of designing and managing such learning opportunities, though, it is possible for unintentional contradictions to arise, particularly when it comes to articulating intentions (learning goals) for writing assignments to students. The difference between a **deliberate**, or **intentional contradiction** and an **unintentional contradiction** is that the former is predictable, something that writing instructors can deliberately build into their assignments and coursework as problem-solving opportunities and teachable moments, while the latter is
unplanned—an inconsistency, discrepancy, or problem within assignments or coursework that an instructor is not likely to anticipate or prepare students for. For example, a writing instructor may develop a workplace simulation that requires students to compose product descriptions for consumers using materials from several departments within a company that contain conflicting information or represent conflicting values; this would be an intentional use of contradiction. But that same instructor may not anticipate a marketing student’s decision to write the product description as she would for her marketing professors by relying on her personal experience and knowledge of the product instead of using the materials she has been given; this would be an example of an unintentional contradiction. It is often the case that unintentional contradictions arise from miscommunication or misinterpretations derived from differences between instructors’ and students’ individual background knowledge and sociocultural beliefs, values, and experiences associated with writing (Beck, 2006). If students are to learn from either type of contradiction and develop as effective writers, they must learn to recognize these discrepancies and negotiate solutions that will resolve the conflict and allow them to accomplish their tasks.

Unintentional contradictions are problems writing instructors may not have planned for, but might instructors still use these unintentional contradictions, like deliberate contradictions, as learning opportunities that prove beneficial for students? Or might students’ tendency to interpret instructors’ intentions through their past experiences and personal beliefs and values cause unintentional contradictions that prove counterproductive to an instructor’s intentions by inhibiting students’ learning potential or producing “unintended or undesired results” (Beck, p. 422)? Such questions bring to light the importance of understanding how students may interpret instructors’ articulations of their
intentions for writing assignments and whether students’ interpretations are likely to create unintentional contradictions that could inhibit students’ ability to fulfill those intentions—the learning goals instructors have set for students and the expectations they have of students’ work. Previous research indicates that an instructor’s “ability to conceptualize student thinking productively, to recognize … pre-conceptions students may bring to disciplinary tasks and contexts, and to develop instruction accordingly” (Hamel, 2003, p. 50) can impact student learning. This is because students are likely to use their interpretations of that instruction (assignment sheets, evaluation criteria, feedback, lectures, etc.) to set their own goals for writing assignments (Beck, 2006). These goals of students ultimately direct their assignment activity, including their decision-making and problem-solving processes. It is easy to imagine how unintentional contradictions that arise at the goal-setting stage of activity, if left unrecognized and unresolved, might limit the learning opportunities even deliberate contradictions can provide by misdirecting students’ activity from the outset. But is this the only possible outcome?

In this article, I examine these questions and the impact on student learning of unintentional contradictions arising from students’ individual, historically- and socioculturally-influenced interpretations of instructors’ intentions for writing assignments—in particular, instructors’ learning goals for students. Comparative studies of students’ and instructors’ perceptions of writing instruction do exist (Beck, 2006; Hamel, 2003), but my study’s focus on the impact of unintentional contradictions on student learning is particularly unique. It is also a teacher research study (e.g., Lutz & Fuller, 2007; Walsh, 2010; Yu, 2008) in which I use an illustration based on activity theory analyses of one student’s experience completing a Wikipedia writing assignment that I designed to address a prominent
pedagogical problem within technical communication: that of teaching writing within situated contexts. Extensive pedagogical research compares differences between both writing and learning in school and at work, the two situated contexts I address in this article (Blakeslee, 2001; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1997; Ford, 2004; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Paretti, 2008; Winsor, 1996).

My findings suggest that by relying on their individual knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences associated with writing to interpret instructors’ intentions and form their own goals for assignments, individual students can, indeed, create unintentional contradictions that may “produce unintended or undesired results” (Beck, 2006, p. 422) if left unrecognized and unresolved. However, even when left unrecognized, unintentional contradictions of this sort may not always be counterproductive to instructors’ intentions. Rather, although they may interfere with students’ learning processes, unintentional contradictions may also still stimulate learning that proceeds along the general intent of an instructor’s intentions yet is incomplete, or unfinished, when the allotted time for learning (e.g., the assignment due date or the end of the semester) comes to an end. Unfinished results are not necessarily undesirable; rather, they hold the potential for continued learning beyond the course. But the notion of unfinished results also complicates pedagogical research that insists that school and work (and learning to communicate within them) are “worlds apart” (Dias et. al, 1997), or situated. The notion of unfinished results implies that rather than being isolated to specific situated contexts, learning can traverse social and rhetorical boundaries (Engeström, 2009) and prove useful over time. The next section frames my research theoretically, beginning with activity theorists’ concepts of development and contradiction.
Understanding these two concepts is important to understanding my Wikipedia assignment design and data analysis.

**Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory & Professional Communication**

**Pedagogy**

As a social theory of learning and development (Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009), activity theory is particularly suited to investigating questions concerning the impact that students’ interpretations of their instructors’ intentions have on their potential to learn. Activity theorists examine the activity (work) people do toward an object (goal) (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) within cultural and historical contexts (Cole, Engeström, & Vasquez, 1997). They do so by using activity systems as the main unit of analysis (Kain & Wardle, n.d.; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) and measuring systemic and individual change in response to contradictions, or discrepancies in individuals’ understandings (Virkkunen, 2009), as an indication of development and learning (Ludvigsen & Digernes, 2009). Activity theorists’ concept of learning is not simply a measure of past achievements. Rather, it encompasses individuals’ potential to learn over time, a potential that theorists assess by tracing changes in individuals’ “independent” versus assisted “problem solving” skills (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 49) while making use of both external (physical) and internal (psychological) tools (Kaptelinin & Nardi) in a cultural environment.

**Contradictions, Motivation, & Activity in Activity Theory**

To understand my use of the terms *intentional contradiction* and *unintentional contradiction*, it is necessary to understand the connections between contradiction,
motivation, and activity. Each of these is an important component of individuals’ development. Most often, contradictions within or between activity systems are what signal the need for, and begin the process of, developmental change within individuals or systems (Lektorsky, 2009). Perhaps the most significant sort of contradiction is one of object (Ludvignsen & Digernes, 2009), because objects are the “most important attribute[s] differentiating one activity from another” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 61). Individuals shape their activity around their understanding of the object—of the goal, or purpose, of their activity. But in activity theory, the concept of object encompasses individuals’ motives as well as system-wide goals.

Motives are individuals’ reasons for working; as such, they are objects that individuals search for and adopt (Virkkunen, 2009), sometimes unwittingly, in response to personal needs (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Thus, individuals’ “actions are typically motivated by one object but directed toward another” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 58). Directing objects—the stated, or conscious, goals for members of an activity system—are often “forced on the individual by the organization of the activity” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 58). If motivating and directing objects are contradictory, individuals’ “activities can potentially develop a complex relationship” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 58) between the objects and could cause further contradictions within or between activity systems during their problem-solving processes (Virkkunen).

Inherent in activity theorists’ concept of development is a nuanced concept of activity as hierarchical, consisting of levels of activity, action, and operation. At the overarching level is social activity itself, which is “a system of processes” that are both “oriented toward … [and] characterized by a disassociation between their motivating and directing objects”
(Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, pp. 60, 62). This disassociation occurs most often when directing objects (conscious goals) are “‘given’ to the subject” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 63), because they often contradict individuals’ (at times, unconscious) motives. Activity, then, is “composed of a sequence of steps, each of which is not immediately related to the motive even though the sequence as a whole may eventually result in attaining the motive” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 62). These steps, called actions and operations, compose the lower levels of activity. One can differentiate between them by individuals’ levels of consciousness while performing their tasks.

Actions are conscious efforts people make toward attaining specific goals; operations, lower than actions, are “routine processes … oriented toward the conditions under which the subject is trying to attain a goal” and of which people are typically unaware (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, pp. 62–63). While operations may be improvisational, they may also be habitual processes developed when, “over the course of learning and frequent execution, a conscious action … transform[s] into a routine operation” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 63) in a process called automatization. Its opposite, deautomatization, is “the transformation of routine operations into conscious actions” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 63). These types of transformations, typically responses to the need for change that contradictions reveal, occur “with respect to the changing object and motive of a given activity by the people who participate in that activity” and constitute “learning activity” (Miettinen, 2009, p. 161). Learning activity is the type of activity that students undertake. When I designed the Wikipedia writing assignment I used for this study, I built intentional contradictions into it hoping that they would trigger processes of deautomatization and (re)automatization that would help students develop refined writing processes that could aid them in their transfer
from school to the workplace. (I discuss my assignment design in more detail in upcoming sections.)

Purposes, Practice, & Pedagogy of Writing in School & at Work

Learning how to communicate in the workplace is, perhaps, the predominant activity (and directing object) of technical communication students. But for many instructors, teaching workplace writing presents a pedagogical problem. Writing itself is a social activity (Bazerman, 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Miller, 1984), but many professional communication theorists believe that its rhetorical and practical uses and purposes differ so much between school and work that it constitutes a different activity in each socially situated context, as does learning to write (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Freedman & Adam, 1996). For situated theorists, “the context constitutes the situation that defines the activity of writing” (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999, p. 17); students’ difficulties adapting to workplace writing arise because students fail to understand this. Employers’ complaints about new employees’ (former students) communication skills support this notion (Russ & Carter, 2009). So does pedagogical research that shows that students tend to approach writing in both contexts as they would in school (Ford, 2004; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Russ & Carter, 2009) by focusing on format (Kain & Wardle) or mechanics (Paretti, 2008) rather than the nuances of a particular situation (Miller, 1984).

Professional communication instructors employ a number of common pedagogical strategies to help students overcome these difficulties, including workplace simulations, client projects, and rhetorical analyses. But some less common, yet promising pedagogical research also exists in which the researchers/instructors integrated activity theory into
investigations of students’ difficulties with the situational differences in writing and learning between school and work. In one study (Kain & Wardle, 2005) involving introductory professional communication students, the researchers taught their students a basic form of activity theory analysis rather than assigning the traditional rhetorical analyses described above. Their students used an analytic triangle (see Figure 1) to compare how writing works in academic and workplace activity systems and visualize the systems’ nodes (or elements, which include tools, rules, division of labor, community, subject, and object) and their relationships to one another. The students’ analyses were in-depth, insightful, and complex, especially in comparison to the researchers’ previous students’ traditional rhetorical analyses. While the study was not longitudinal (thus, inconclusive about students’ ability to transfer the knowledge to “new situations”—p. 134), the research “suggest[ed] that when students begin their analyses with a suitable framework for studying context, they move toward developing the mindfulness required to assess different situations and thus the role of texts within those situations” (Kain & Wardle, p. 134).

In a separate study (Dannels, 2003) involving engineering students, the researcher observed both the students and their instructors encounter, and proceed to choose or negotiate between, contradictory assignment requirements for an oral presentation: students’ assignment was to simulate workplace presentations and pretend they had a workplace audience, but also had to include information only applicable to an academic setting. The researcher concluded that simulations force students into contradictory positions that make them choose between “dual identities” (Dannels, p.141) and actions, consistent with either an academic or workplace context, but not both. While she interpreted this as a weakness of simulations, stating that students would need to be taught “a way of critically approaching
contradictions” (Dannels, p. 164), other research suggests that this type of contradiction is precisely what gives it the potential to be a learning opportunity (Russell & Yañez, 2002). The former researchers’ study suggests that using activity theory analyses might prove useful in this capacity.

As a teacher-researcher in my own technical communication course, I hoped to investigate the use of deliberate contradictions to teach workplace writing in an assignment that took advantage of the strengths that common pedagogical strategies like simulations, client projects, and rhetorical analyses, and the less common strategy of theoretical analyses offered. When I began this study, I believed that writing was situated and my task was to help students bridge the gap between school and work. I developed the Wikipedia assignment to help me with this task. With it, I could deliberately place students in a context where they were likely to encounter, and need to negotiate, contradictions resulting from their assumptions and habitual approaches to writing. What I did not expect, and what I investigate in this article, were the effects on student learning of unintentional contradictions that arose from differences in my own perceptions and those of my students’—in particular, of one student’s individual, historically- and socioculturally-influenced interpretation of my intentions (learning goals) for the Wikipedia assignment.

My student’s experience taught me many lessons, but perhaps the most important (and what I aim to provide support for in this article) is that deliberate and unintentional contradictions alike can be “constructive mechanisms” (Engeström, 2009, p. 312) that stimulate student learning proceeding along the general intent of an instructor’s intentions. Even unintentional contradictions of object arising from discrepancies in students’ and instructors’ perceptions can stimulate learning. Students’ learning may be incomplete, or
unfinished, when the allotted time for learning (e.g., the assignment due date or the end of the semester) comes to an end, but this type of learning also has potential to continue beyond the course if, and when, students confront similarly constructive contradictions in different environments. While this was my own lesson, it also comes with a caution for writing instructors at all advanced levels. It warns of unplanned complications and highlights the necessity of understanding our students—of knowing something of their social, cultural, and historical experiences and influences—as well as our subject matter, and of examining our pedagogy as carefully as we design our assignments. An argument that unfinished lessons may extend beyond our courses also implies that individual learning, far from being situated, can cross boundaries (Engeström) between social and rhetorical contexts.

Analyzing the effects on student learning of unintentional contradictions arising from students’ interpretations of instructors’ intentions, then, can contribute powerfully to the body of professional communication pedagogy. But doing so also has practical benefits; it can help writing instructors to understand how, and why, their assignments and learning goals aid (or inhibit) student learning and create classroom contexts in which there are “variations in students’ success” (Beck, 2006, p. 422). It can do so particularly for those who do research in their own courses by examining both themselves and their students as subjects. Acting as teacher researchers allows us to ask questions of ourselves to which others, lacking our experiences and intimate knowledge of our classrooms and students, simply do not have access (Fecho, 2003). The research questions I asked of myself and investigated through activity theory analyses of one student’s experience completing the Wikipedia assignment are as follows:
1. What were my learning goals for the Wikipedia assignment? Did I clearly explain these learning goals to students?

2. How did my students (in particular, the student featured in this article—Penni17) interpret my learning goals? What factors contributed to these interpretations, and how did they affect Penni17’s Wikipedia assignment activity and learning? How did these interpretations differ from my intentions?

3. What contradictions did Penni17 experience with the Wikipedia assignment, and how did she handle them?

**Contexts: Activity Systems, Participants, & Assignment**

This study involved two distinct contexts and two primary participants: my technical communication course and Wikipedia, and me and my student, Penni17. But activity theory analyses require one to consider each participant’s (subject’s) cultural and historical influences since those influences affect individuals’ perceptions, motivations, and activity. This section, then, broadens the setting descriptions for each of us to include relevant background information in addition to describing the objects of each context, or activity system, that we acted within. The descriptions of object pay particular attention to details of the assignment featured in this investigation, the Wikipedia assignment.

The study took place at a large land-grant university while I was finishing my last year of coursework in a doctoral program, teaching as a graduate teaching assistant, and gathering data for my dissertation. As a service course offered by the English department, introductory technical communication was writing-intensive, academically vigorous, and had
a strong rhetorical emphasis. Although students from a variety of majors and minors could elect to take the course, instructors (who each developed their own syllabi, assignments, and lesson plans) could expect several junior and senior-level engineering majors, a few science majors, and an occasional odd major in a class of twenty. The students, accustomed to high academic standards, were typically bright, hardworking, and technologically adept, which was an advantage since the course’s sessions were split between computer labs and traditional classrooms.

In my own course, my primary aim was to prepare students to write in the workplace. In our university, each instructor is free to create his or her own syllabus and assignments for a course as long as they fulfill the general description for the course in the course catalog. I had developed and refined the assignments I used for several semesters. These included a mixture of individual and group projects, oral presentations and written reports, and basic genre writing and experiential instruction (e.g., client projects). I believe that understanding material requires active engagement on both intellectual and practical levels, so participation in discussions, in-class exercises, and small group activities was a large part of students’ grades and was my preferred method of reinforcing concepts from our textbook (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007) and supplemental readings. In keeping with my teaching philosophy, I split students’ time in the lab between activities and individual or group work; I spent my own time circulating the room observing students, answering questions, offering advice, and reading samples of students’ work.

While my course was demanding, most of my students were determined to earn good grades and made genuine efforts to do so; they contributed valuable comments to class discussions and group work and used my feedback and their peers’ critiques with
discernment to improve their written and verbal communication. This was particularly true of
the engineering students. In part, the engineering college’s culture contributed to this
mentality. For an English student and instructor like me, explaining what it meant to be a
member of the engineering college is difficult but not altogether impossible. My experience
teaching dozens of the college’s students gave me insight into its culture, where being an
engineering student meant being dedicated to your studies. The engineering students at our
university were impressive; they were young, serious, smart, hard working, grade conscious,
and future oriented, focused on training for their careers. These full-time students, believing
that the writing they had done in their engineering courses was sufficient for their needs,
typically delayed enrolling in technical communication until they were seniors. Instead, they
focused on educational experiences with direct applications for their future careers such as
core courses, internships, and studies abroad (as my featured participant had done). The
seniors also tended to think of themselves as engineers-in-training rather than engineering
students, a perspective that the engineering college’s culture seemed to encourage; its
website, and those of its departments, promoted it as an environment in which faculty
prepared students for the “real world” and claimed that upon graduation, students would be
professionals ready to step into their careers.

Although many of the engineering students did not recognize the applicability of an
“English” class to their future, my primary aim was to prepare students to write in the
technical workplace. To me, this involved helping students develop their sense of audience
awareness and learn how to make use of that sense to write appropriately for diverse
audiences. When I spoke about my goals to students (especially in connection with the
Wikipedia assignment and my research) I frequently said, “If there’s one thing I want you to
remember from this class, it’s to think about your audience when you write.” The students were accustomed to being asked to participate in research studies (it was a Research I university) and seemed more concerned with the assignment’s applicability to the course and their future careers than they were about my role as a teacher-researcher. They knew their participation (or non-participation) would remain unknown to me until I had assigned semester grades and seemed unconcerned, and only mildly curious, about the research itself. For the Wikipedia assignment, students had to write and post contributions on technical topics (related to their future careers) to Wikipedia using their reader and activity theory analyses; solicit feedback from other Wikipedia contributors; use the feedback to revise their contributions; and write about the process in blended reflections/analyses to me. (See Appendix A for the two versions of the assignment I used during this research.) But most students wondered why (at least, initially) they had to analyze and write for Wikipedia and its readers; as they frequently pointed out, it wasn’t likely that any of them would be writing for Wikipedia as part of their engineering careers.

Using Wikipedia as a writing medium in a technical communication course was (at the time) unconventional. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia; as a member-governed wiki—a tool that allows users to communicate and collaborate with others to write and edit text quickly through their browsers—volunteers contribute all of its contents. Wikipedia’s stated object is to compile an online reference base of free, verifiable (but not new), non-biased encyclopedic information (“Wikipedia:About”). Since anyone can contribute, millions of registered and unregistered users work on its contents. However, its core members—the administrators and countless other volunteers who work daily within Wikipedia—seemed like ideal (and real) audience members for my students’ writing. These core members work
to uphold Wikipedia’s principles (namely, the five pillars; see “Wikipedia:Five pillars”) and ensure that others’ contributions align with Wikipedia’s goal (or their interpretations of it).

I believed that by interacting with my students by revising or commenting on their work, offering advice about their contributions’ contents or Wikipedia itself, or even rejecting students’ work outright, this “gatekeeper” (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007) audience could simulate (although abstractly) coworkers and supervisors for my students. Wikipedia itself could serve as a simulated workplace environment. Students, unfamiliar with working and writing within Wikipedia, would have to learn how to do so through observation, analysis, and trial and error, a process that would correspond to the messy, spontaneous (Freedman & Adam, 1996) learning process of the workplace. Although part of students’ learning curve would necessarily be technological—Wikipedia volunteers use a simple coding language and tools like history and talk pages to communicate—to me, learning how to use wiki technology was only an auxiliary benefit of the assignment for students; learning new technologies is an integral part of any workplace activity.

Penni17, the participant featured in this article, was a senior in chemical engineering when she took my course. I chose to feature Penni17 as a matter of convenience (she had volunteered to let me use all of her work, correspondence, and to interview her) but also because was an engineering student whose work on the Wikipedia assignment was comparable to others’, which made her seem representative of her classmates. One of the quietest students in class, Penni17 really only seemed comfortable conversing and working with one other student and admitted in our interview that she hadn’t known her too well. As a self-proclaimed history and World War II buff, Penni17 confessed that she probably would have chosen a history or war-related topic for her article if I hadn’t included the technical
requirement in the assignment. As it was, she chose to write about engineering heuristics, a core topic in the senior capstone design course for chemical engineers, which she was taking that semester. But she was not yet confident in her knowledge or expertise about the topic, nor was she confident of her computer skills. In her interview with me, Penni17 confessed, “I’m not very computer savvy.” She also confessed to having a general, yet highly personal anxiety about others’ opinions of her work and her intellect, one that led her both to procrastinate and proceed slowly and carefully on tasks for which others would judge her performance.

When Penni17 worked on the Wikipedia assignment, she, like many other students, was initially concerned about the technology involved despite my lack of emphasis on the technology (I even directed students to tutorials within Wikipedia rather than teaching it myself). In this and in many other ways (her academic interests, her performance on the assignment, her reactions to the assignment requirements, etc.) Penni17 seemed to be representative of several student participants in my study. In particular, her reaction to my requirement to solicit feedback from Wikipedia’s core members, something my previous data analyses had revealed was my students’ most prominent concern, was representative of several students’ reactions. Many students, including Penni17, balked at the requirement and tried to circumvent it (some simply did not do it). Penni17 did so during a class-wide chat session about the assignment in which she asked who a friend was soliciting feedback from—a teacher or “someone random” on Wikipedia. Later during the chat, Penni17 added her name to a list of students who, hoping to avoid interaction with Wikipedia’s core members, opted to review each others’ articles (they dropped the idea upon learning that it would not count toward their grades). But as much as Penni17 seemed to have in common
with her classmates, those same similarities made her stand apart from her classmates in the end.

**Methods: Data Collection & Activity Theory Analysis**

As a teacher research study (one in which the researcher is also the teacher and a subject of analysis along with her students), this study is atypical of technical communication research. The qualitative methods I used to gather, analyze, and represent the data, however, are common within the rhetoric, composition, and professional communication disciplines, as is the practice of borrowing analytic theories and methods, such as activity theory. In this section, I describe how I conducted my own study as a teacher researcher.

**Researching in My Own Course**

Although I was a teacher researcher in my own course, after students signed the informed consent forms my research nearly invisible to my students. My assignment collection doubled as my data collection, and my initial perusal of the data occurred as I graded students’ work and jotted notes to myself about things that seemed interesting or questions that occurred to me. My additional research activity during the semester (backing up data, for example) was something students never saw. I collected several forms of written data: students’ ungraded responses to a list of targeted questions I used as freewriting prompts to help students recognize, navigate, and learn from contradictions in their activity (see Appendix B); students’ Wikipedia contributions; their email correspondence to me about the assignment; and activity logs that documented their work. I also held qualitative interviews with individual student volunteers. In these loosely structured (yet recorded) conversations, which we had after the semester had ended, I asked students to tell me their
Wikipedia assignment stories. I followed up with clarification questions and a series of open-ended questions about students’ writing processes, the audiences they wrote for, and Wikipedia itself. Since I was acting as a teacher researcher and would be a subject of my own research, I also kept my notes from meetings with students, assignment sheets, syllabi, and written correspondence with students (both email and assignment comments). The students’ data also proved a valuable source of data in this regard; both in their written work and interviews, several students expressed opinions about the assignment and about me that helped me understand how they interpreted what I said and did in class—how I presented myself, and the assignment, to my students.

**Analyzing & Representing Data**

Since my research began, I have analyzed the data I gathered using an ongoing, cyclical process. First, I identified recurring themes in students’ activity and perceptions based on statements in which students explained their reasoning or expressed their opinions about the assignment, their audiences, Wikipedia, the course, or myself. Then, I chose individual students whose experiences seemed to either exhibit or lack (to an unusual degree) these themes to focus on as my primary subjects in a series of activity theory analyses I designed to identify and describe changes in students’ perceptions. These analyses involved categorizing each student’s activity and statements into activity theory nodes, visually rendering relationships and contradictions between the nodes, and writing. I divided students’ assignment activity into short timeframes, and focused on one timeframe during each round of analysis (see Figure 2 for a timeline of Penni17’s Wikipedia assignment activity). I then compared each timeframe with the remainder of a student’s assignment
Figure 2: Timeline of Penn17’s Wikipedia Assignment Activity. To analyze the data, I broke students’ assignment activity into short timeframes and did a series of activity theory analyses, one for each timeframe, and then compared the analyses to each other.
activity searching for contradictions or other indications that his or her perceptions had changed (indicating development and learning) over time. In Penni17’s case, I also compared her interpretations of my intentions, which she expressed in both her written work and personal interview with me, with my own learning goals for the assignment.

To recognize contradictions between my intentions for the assignment (my learning goals) and the way I presented the assignment to students, I examined my own written artifacts (assignment sheets, syllabi, in-class activities, lesson plans, and grading rubrics). I rearticulated my learning goals for the assignment—what I now perceive them to be—and then compared what I had written for students’ benefit (e.g., assignment sheets) and what I did in class (e.g., talking about the assignment, assigning freewriting activities, and talking about Wikipedia) to those rearticulated goals. Finally, I spent some time drawing and visually rendering the relationships between my artifacts, activity, and assignment intentions. As I did so, I deliberately looked for material or actions that signaled contradictions in the ways I taught and thought about the assignment and/or the ways students understood the assignment.

Representing oneself or others in writing is never easy; we tend to want to portray ourselves favorably and risk portraying others in ways they might question or disagree with (for example, see Borland, 1991). This task becomes even more complicated when the “other” is both a subject of one’s research and one’s own student; power relationships come into play. To this end, one of the deliberate authoring choices I made was to include as much about my assignment design process (including its theoretical underpinnings and my evolving interpretations of them) as I included about Penni17’s execution of the assignment. In other words, I deliberately tried to follow the time-honored method of self-reflexivity and
self-representation by revealing my theoretical biases and my pedagogical methods (Chiseri-Strater, 1996; Wall, 2004; Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2007). I also chose to portray myself as a learner, who learned from my student, as well as a teacher and researcher (DiPardo et al., 2006; Fleischer, 1995) and to let my personal goal of learning to better my own teaching (thus, benefitting my future students) motivate my research (Fleischer & Fox, 2004). Finally, I chose to represent Penni17 with her own words whenever possible (Bishop, 1999) and to clearly differentiate between my own interpretations and hers (Borland, 1991). What follows, then, is my own account of the data and its meaning; it is one narrative of many that I could have told with this data (Fecho, 2003), and may differ from the tales that others, including Penni17, would have chosen to tell.

**Results: Narrative Representations & Implications**

Ultimately, the narrative I have chosen to tell is one of unintentional contradictions in writing assignments and their effects on student learning. This choice necessitates that I include data about my assignment design and learning goals for students as well as data about Penni17’s interpretations and execution of them. This section begins with my description of the choices I made when I designed the Wikipedia assignment and continues with a description of Penni17’s interpretations of the assignment and my goals. I interpret my choices and Penni17’s activity through the contradictions that emerged from our different viewpoints and the effect they had on Penni17’s learning. Finally, I consider the implications this research has on teaching and learning theory in technical communication.
Developing & Teaching the Wikipedia Assignment

I mentioned previously that my primary aim in the technical communication course was to prepare students to write in the technical workplace. To me, this involved helping students develop their sense of audience awareness and learn how to make use of that sense to write appropriately for diverse audiences. This was also one of the primary goals I had for the Wikipedia assignment; I designed it in hopes of triggering deliberate contradictions between my students and actual readers that would in turn initiate changes in most students’ habitual approaches to writing (particularly, students’ habit of writing without considering their audiences). But my assignment design and learning goals were informed by my knowledge and understanding of learning and development in activity theory, the pedagogical problems that situated writing presents for professional communication instructors, and pedagogical strategies professional communication instructors (including myself) often use to address those problems.

When I designed the Wikipedia assignment, I saw both value and flaws in pedagogical strategies professional communication instructors assign to address situational differences in writing. Assignments like workplace simulations and client projects could give students practice identifying readers and their needs and shaping texts to accommodate them, but students’ tendency to treat them as purely academic assignments and write accordingly was, to me, a serious flaw.

This tendency of students was both something I had observed as a teacher and something pedagogical and writing research confirms (Freedman & Adam, 1996; Kain & Wardle, 2005). My years of teaching writing, researching audience, and reading activity theory have led me to believe that this tendency is an operationalized activity on students’
part; in other words, I believe that many students’ approach to writing assignments—to composing texts—is a habitual response to the academic context, one that is largely automatic and unconscious. While students often shape texts for diverse audiences (a text message to a friend will read differently than a note to a parent), I believe they typically do so without conscious thought or preparation, based on their perception of and familiarity with the communication context. This was the flaw I saw with pedagogical strategies that tried to imitate or emulate workplace writing situations in school; individuals often form their personal (motivating) objects based on their understanding of the context, which then influence their activity. This process can be largely unconscious, performed out of habit. If students interpret assignments as purely academic, they are likely to adopt grades as their motivating objects (Kain & Wardle, 2005; Spafford, Schryer, Mian, & Lingard, 2006) and write for their instructor rather than clients or simulated readers (Spafford, Schryer, Mian, & Lingard, 2006). Whether this process is composed of operationalized activity or conscious, decisive action, it is understandable given that the person with the power to determine and assign grades in school is the instructor.

In my experience teaching writing assignments, students’ tendency to approach writing as operationalized activity manifests itself in the form of assumptions. Based on their previous experience, students, when given writing assignments, often assume they understand the communicative context (school), know who their audience is (the instructor), and what their audience needs (the assignment requirements). These assumptions—which students may not even realize they’re making, if they’re doing so out of habit—can easily override or neutralize instructor-prescribed or actual reader and/or contextual concerns during the writing process. For example, a few of my students wrote and posted unsourced,
five-paragraph essays to Wikipedia even after doing reader and context analyses and identifying references, chunked text, and headings as textual elements that Wikipedia contributors and readers used and expected. The rhetorical concerns these students discovered through their reader and context analyses were not memorable or impressive enough to change their writing habits. Thus, one of my primary concerns when I designed the Wikipedia assignment was to develop an assignment with the potential to initiate student learning by

- triggering an intentional contradiction between students’ assumptions about an actual audience(s) and context and the audience’s expectations and standards for writing and working within that context, thereby (potentially)…
- revealing to students their tendency to operationalize writing,
- interrupting students’ operationalized writing processes, and
- initiating students’ formation of new writing processes, saturated with reader and context identification and analyses, that could be applied in multiple communicative contexts and become operationalized over time.

In other words, I wanted to design an assignment that would deliberately generate and highlight contradictions between students’ activity and their audiences’ directing objects and activity that would illustrate differences in situated contexts and readers for students. By recognizing, reflecting on, and implementing new solutions to each contradiction in turn, I hoped students would learn to incorporate ongoing reader and context analyses into their writing processes. I envisioned this learning as a continuous cycle of transition—of deautomatization and automatization (Kaptelenin & Nardi, 2006), triggered by intentional
contradiction—through which students, upon confronting new contradictions, could move from operation to action and back again.

However, I realized that merely triggering and then revealing contradictions between the activity of students and their audiences might not motivate grade-oriented students to change their behavior and write for an audience other than the instructor (who would be assigning their grades). For many students, writing for the instructor means focusing on physical appearance (format), spelling, and punctuation rather than higher-order rhetorical concerns (Ford, 2004; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Spafford, Schryer, Mian, & Lingard, 2006). Grade-motivated students may even make conscious decisions to prioritize such latter-order concerns over rhetorical considerations for an “outside” audience or context if they perceive such considerations as contradictory to their instructor’s expectations or fail to perceive any “real world” consequences for not meeting them. For example, those students who posted five paragraph essays on Wikipedia after having identified criteria for good contributions—criteria their essays did not fit—may have done so deliberately, believing that the essays constituted good academic writing and were what I wanted from the assignment. When I designed the Wikipedia assignment, then, I wanted to prevent reactions like this to any deliberate contradictions the assignment may trigger. I thought it might be possible to circumvent (or at the least, take advantage of) my students’ grade-motivated tendencies to write for solely for me by

- exposing students to actual consequences of not meeting the expectations and standards of a non-academic audience(s) and context for written texts in a way that was still “safe” for the students (Wikipedia and its core-member audience with their ability to edit or delete student contributions met the first half of this
requirement, and students’ ability to post contributions under pseudonyms met the second); and

- emphasizing students’ writing processes and making the specific steps they took to do the assignment and try to meet the audience(s)’ and context’s rhetorical demands a large part of their grades.

I hoped that including these measures in the Wikipedia assignment design would be enough to motivate grade-oriented students to negotiate perceived contradictions between my concerns and Wikipedia’s and its core members’ rhetorical concerns. Ideally, this negotiation would interrupt students’ habitual writing processes and lead to their development of more effective operationalized writing strategies over time.

When I taught the Wikipedia assignment, I tried not to rely exclusively on intentional contradictions to initiate student learning. Instead, I began with what I thought was a more useful tool than traditional reader and context analyses: I adopted Kain and Wardle’s (2005) approach and taught my students to do basic activity system analyses of Wikipedia. As part of their introduction to activity theory, I had students respond to and discuss written prompts (see Appendix C) about basic activity system concepts introduced in Charles Bazerman’s “Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activities and People,” (2004). In particular, the chapter’s focus is on the ways people use texts to accomplish their work. Students practiced analyzing an activity system in class before doing so with Wikipedia for their assignments. As they explored Wikipedia’s activity system on their own, students paid particular attention to the tools Wikipedians use, including the editing, history, and talk pages; to the rules of posting and editing within Wikipedia; to the division of labor within the wiki (particularly the roles of administrators); and to the goals of Wikipedians for
the wiki. Students used a basic activity theory triangle to help them chart and visualize what they saw within Wikipedia, and further reflected on what they saw happening within the wiki in a written memo to me.

I also used a new (to me) grading system in which not only did I evaluate the quality of their work, but students also got credit for completing tasks designed to draw Wikipedia’s core members’ attention to their contributions (e.g., contacting a core member via his or her user page for advice). I hoped the tasks I asked students to complete would guide them from one stage to the next in their writing process activity and trigger contradictions that would provide opportunities for learning. What I did not do, however, was explicitly explain the writing process I wanted students to adopt for the assignment or operationalize as a result of the assignment. Instead, I used the freewriting prompts (see Appendix B) that served as my data, in-class exercises, and discussions about our supplemental readings to guide students through the initial stages of a writing process: exploring Wikipedia, joining and acting within Wikipedia, analyzing and reflecting upon Wikipedia and its readers, and eventual understanding. I hoped that students would continue cycling through these stages on their own, developing a new process by deautomatizing and automatizing their activity in stages (see “Contradictions and Development in Activity Theory” in the theoretical framework).

My vision for the assignment may be clearer if I illustrate it. Ideally, students would begin by reading the assigned Bazerman (2004) text about activity systems closely and working through difficult concepts by engaging in the comprehension questions, class discussions, and activities. By doing so, I believed students should develop (at least) a rudimentary understanding of activity theory that they could expand upon exploring Wikipedia. I suspected that most students would still approach Wikipedia in an
operationalized manner—they would think of and use it as they always had and merely go through the motions of fulfilling the assignment requirements without much thought. But I hoped that others would transition into a cycle of deautomatization by consciously searching Wikipedia for information in areas they had previously left unexplored (talk pages, editing tools, etc.) that would help them make sense of the readings, write their contributions, or analyze the activity system and their readers. I assumed that the most useful information in this regard would be that which contradicted students’ initial perceptions of Wikipedia and its readers and members. Similarly, I hoped that students would continue to encounter contradictions and begin cycles of deautomatization at each stage of activity. I believed that students who transitioned through these cycles would learn more from the assignment and be more likely to automatize analytic and reflective actions as part of their operationalized writing processes than those who did not. Those who did so, I reasoned, would find it easier to transition between school and workplace communication.

What I did not realize (and what Penni17’s experience helped me understand) was that my learning goals for the assignment and my students’ understanding of them could (and would) create unintentional contradictions that could interfere with students’ ability to learn from the intentional contradictions they would face. In fact, those unintentional contradictions worked in the opposite manner in Penni17’s case. Because she misinterpreted my learning goals, she made (and kept making) the very type of assumptions about her readers and their needs that I had hoped to discourage students from making by triggering intentional contradictions. Despite this, I recognized in her experience an almost-there quality—partial learning with the potential to continue to develop in other communicative contexts that would trigger similar contradictions (yet without my interference) in the future.
While the communicative contexts (and learning contexts) would constitute different activity systems, I believed that Penni17 could still take part in learning activity that enriched her audience and context awareness and her abilities to communicate effectively to various audiences through writing. In the next section, I examine Penni17’s experience.

Interpreting & Understanding Penni17’s Perceptions & Activity

It wasn’t until I began my analysis of Penni17’s activity that I truly began to understand the differences between Penni17’s interpretation of my learning goals and my own perception of them, or how those differences influenced her activity and subsequent learning. Our differences stemmed, in part, from the different cultural and historical influences on our beliefs and understanding of the assignment’s purposes. As a chemical engineering student, Penni17 understood the assignment as a straightforward exercise that would be directly applicable to her career as a chemical engineer. Her senior capstone design course, which she also took that semester, influenced her understanding of that career (and subsequently, of my assignment). I, on the other hand, approached the assignment with a background in learning and pedagogical theories and understood my learning goals to be indirectly related, but highly applicable, to the work students would be doing in the future. It was only by questioning the changes in Penni17’s Wikipedia assignment activity over time that I was able to tease out the contradictions between her actions, operations, and perceptions that prompted those changes and brought me to understand the differences in our perceptions.

During the first week of the project, Penni17’s assignment activity embodied hard work and understanding: She met deadlines, responded thoroughly to reflective prompts,
demonstrated a basic understanding of activity theory concepts, and chose and began researching “Heuristic (engineering)” as her topic—one that she was also learning about in her senior capstone design course. Penni17’s hard work continued into the second and third week of the assignment. She began drafting her rhetorical analysis although it was not due for several weeks, and she explored Wikipedia and spent several hours writing, posting, and editing her contribution. But between the third and fourth weeks of the assignment, something changed. Penni17 began failing to meet the assignment requirements, only soliciting feedback from one of Wikipedia’s core members although I had required two, and waiting until the day the assignment was due to revise to her contribution although I had asked students to work on their assignments twice weekly after posting their initial contributions. At the time, these warning signs were not enough to tell me that Penni17 had encountered an unintentional contradiction that had hindered her learning. Instead, her final analysis/reflection convinced me that she had met my learning goals. Having had completed her activity system and reader analyses and attempted to apply her findings to her work within Wikipedia, Penni17 appeared to have developed a basic understanding and awareness of communicating with different audiences, contexts, and their needs. What should have been telling, though, was the fact that her perceptions of the assignment’s object (and implicitly, my learning goals for her) and her contribution’s audience had remained relatively stable throughout the entire assignment.

Immediately before the second week of the assignment, Penni17 articulated her interpretation of the assignment’s object, “to first inform others as well as to learn more about technical communications,” in a mini-reflection. For an early statement about the object, Penni17’s interpretation was unwittingly sophisticated; she had framed two key
elements of my learning goals, writing for an audience (“to inform others”) and student learning (“to learn more”), in the object of the course (“technical communications”). She also articulated two personal (motivational) objects for the project: to give the audience “what they were looking for” and “to make me sound educated.” By the end of the semester, Penni17 seemed not to have changed her personal objects. Moreover, she had only changed her interpretation of the directing object in the sense that she had expounded on what she thought I wanted students to learn: “How to keep [their] audience in perspective.” Penni17 believed this had happened for her and other students because by working in Wikipedia students were “force[d] outside their comfort zones with respect to writing.”

Penni17’s interpretation of the assignment object seemed to align with my learning goals. I did want students to learn to keep their audiences in perspective. Even her belief that I wanted to force students outside their comfort zones was accurate in the sense that I wanted to use this unfamiliar communication context and unfamiliar, yet actual, audience members working toward a nonacademic object to trigger intentional contradictions that would have to negotiate. However, Penni17 seemed to associate her belief more with Wikipedia itself and assigned special significance to my choice of writing medium—particularly, its publicity and the technical aspects of working within it—rather than the unfamiliarity of the audience, activity system, and its object. This association was evident in her suggestions that I wanted students to learn “how to work Wikipedia” and practice writing for “the Internet.”

Later, in my interview with her, Penni17 gave me additional insight into her interpretation of the assignment’s object. When I asked if she thought the assignment would still have been applicable to the course if I had loosened the technical restriction on topic choice and, instead, allowed students to write about any topic, she replied,
Well, yes. Just because of the idea, you know, [that] you’re writing for an audience and no matter what you can apply, you know, even though, like my audience was very technical. But even if you weren’t [writing for a technical audience], you still had to keep that perspective and who you’re writing for. And you can put, you can move that idea into, you know, when you’re in the workplace.

Saying that I made the purpose of the Wikipedia assignment “very clear” in class (I had repeatedly told students that I wanted them to remember to think about their audiences when they write), Penni17 revealed that she had taken what I said at face value when she told me what she thought she had learned from the assignment:

I also like now, like I consciously think, of you know, … you have to convey what your message, and how you convey your message depending on who you’re, who you’re speaking to. So I actually do make a conscious effort. Like, I think, I definitely think about it. And when I read, you know, whether it’s a magazine or newspapers and that, I always, I kind of think about it. I definitely think about it. Who they’re gearing it to. So I think it’s kind of interesting.

By making general, audience-centered statements like these, Penni17 had convinced me, both during the interview and at the conclusion of the Wikipedia assignment, that she had learned the lessons I was trying to teach. In general, Penni17 recognized the importance of audiences to the writer, and she recognized that writers should tailor their messages for their readers and that this would be an important aspect of workplace writing. At the time, however, neither Penni17 nor I recognized the existence or significance of the unintentional contradictions between her definition of audience and interpretation of my learning goals and
my own. Partially because we never recognized them (or their causes) for what they were (thus, never resolved them successfully), these contradictions contributed to intense feelings of anxiety on Penni17’s part that I could not begin to understand until I analyzed the data.

Early in the second timeframe (the second and third weeks of the assignment), Penni17 made an assumption about her contribution’s audience. She wrote, “I believe my readers will be people who specifically search for engineering heuristics in order to solve engineering problems.” This conclusion, one she maintained throughout the assignment and into our interview, was not something that she had derived from her activity system analysis of Wikipedia. In fact, her analyses of the activity system’s community were always vague; she wrote of “the group of people that use Wikipedia,” “the public being the readers as well as the editors,” “curious readers,” and “the Internet.” Her mini-reflections made it clear that she did not believe these vague users and readers were an actual part of her audience. Instead, she claimed that her audience was “pretty specific”:

I … believe that the only people who will read my page are people that are specifically looking for engineering heuristics. … With respect to the [Wikipedia] readers, I believe that there are people who know exactly what they want to look for and people who are just curious.

For Penni17, the contribution’s topic—not the communication context or the people who worked within it—determined her target audience: “My readers [are] people who specifically would be looking for different short-cut methods with regards to process design. … [Someone like] a student in a computer lab working on a process design project.” And for Penni17, that topic carried strong associations with the academic chemical engineering
community, as well as the chemical engineering community she envisioned working with in the future. Engineering heuristics were the basis of her activity in her senior capstone design course, a course that featured a semester-long, academic project and was described on the chemical engineering college’s website as “the culmination of the engineering education for students.” The course was to give her an opportunity to “apply … engineering knowledge to real-world applications … in preparation for joining the workforce.”

Penni17’s perception of her audience as members of chemical engineering communities triggered a contradiction in her assignment activity that was both the intentional contradiction that I had expected and an unintentional contradiction that I had not expected. I had expected students’ operationalized assumptions about their audiences and Wikipedia to trigger contradictions between the students and their readers and the context. Many students did what I had expected; they posted or edited contributions in ways that contradicted Wikipedia’s object and/or the values its core members held, and triggered contradictions in the form of various consequences: reversal or deletion of their edits, reprimands from Wikipedia users, and (in rare cases) even banishment from editing Wikipedia. But Penni17 didn’t face any of those consequences, even though she had made assumptions about her audience; she posted her contribution on the due date, made a few edits the next day, and then waited. Nothing happened. This, too, was something I had tried to prepare students for; in fact, it is one of the reasons I required students to actively seek feedback from Wikipedia’s core members. What I had not expected was that when Penni17’s perception of the audience encountered my feedback requirement, it triggered an unintentional contradiction that Penni17 seems to have believed was between my assignment requirements and learning goals rather than between her assumptions about her audience and my own.
Earlier, I mentioned that I believed students’ primary audience for the assignment would be Wikipedia’s core members, the people who knew Wikipedia’s object and held values like the Five Pillars in common with others within the community. I based my belief on prior experience teaching the assignment, knowing that this was the audience that students could both find evidence of (a requirement for the analysis, and one Penni17 never realized she did not fulfill) and potentially interact with. But Penni17, like many other students in my course, rejected this idea. While other students claimed that the primary audience of Wikipedia (and subsequently, their own contributions) was the vague entity that Penni17 had described as the activity system’s community (and in one sense, they may have been right), Penni17’s perception was much more specific. As it turned out, it was much more specific than I had realized, and she had based this specificity on her interpretation of my learning goals and her own identity as a chemical engineering student and the “real world” experience of her senior capstone design course. Penni17 knew that I had designed the assignment to prepare students to write for audiences they would encounter in their future careers. Her senior capstone design course, I believe, gave Penni17 the impression that her future readers would be chemical engineers like those she encountered in her senior capstone design course, a course where teachers were the authority figures and students the learners and seekers of knowledge. The course, which included writing, was touted as a “real world” experience that would prepare her for the workplace, but was based on an academic (vs. industry) project. She had experience writing to this audience, and it was not, as I had suggested, an audience of Wikipedia’s core members or casual readers. Our perceptions of audience contradicted each other, but to Penni17, my requirements appeared contradictory instead. I wanted her to learn to write for an audience of her future coworkers—chemical engineers—but was asking
her to solicit feedback from Wikipedia members rather than other engineers. To Penni17, my
requests didn’t make sense.

There is strong evidence for this rendering of the contradiction Penni17 faced in her
comments about her audience, in her actions, and in her history as a chemical engineering
student. Most obvious is the comment she made to me during our interview when she told me
that her target audience was “essentially the audience that I’m going to be talking to … in my
career.” Less obvious, but still telling, were the comments that she made in the chat session
that brought her to my attention and the freewrites she wrote at the time that the level and
quality of her Wikipedia assignment activity lessened, between the second and fourth weeks
of the assignment. During the class-wide chat session, Penni17 asked a friend whether she
planned to ask “someone random” (someone within Wikipedia) or a “teacher” for feedback.
And in her freewrites, Penni17 confessed that she was anxious about the assignment. She
linked her anxiety to doubts about her ability to produce a quality contribution with sufficient
reference materials. But by the last week of the assignment, it was clear that there was more
to the issue; Penni17’s anxiety, it seemed, was driven by her fear of being judged. She wrote,
“I don’t feel comfortable having my work on the Internet as well as being a quasi-resource”
because she was afraid that others would think she herself (not just her contribution) was
“stupid.” Penni17 went so far as to describe the experience as an “internal conflict” that was
“inhibiting me from pursuing feedback to a greater extent.” She also admitted to agonizing so
much over the issue that she considered not completing the assignment: “Maybe I just don’t
even … put it [my article] up.”

During our interview, Penni17 tried to explain her anxiety. Struggling to articulate her
feelings, she admitted to being apprehensive about “how people are going to respond to it
[my work]” in several areas of her life, not just the Wikipedia assignment. It was only when I connected this anxiety with her perception of her audience, those people whose judgment she feared, and her history and concurrent activity and interaction with that audience that I began to understand the nature and significance of the unintentional contradiction she faced.

Penni17 feared the judgment of her peers: her “teacher[s]” (a group she seemed to think of as a reasonable choice to provide feedback), her classmates (“a student in a computer lab working on a process design project”), and other members of the chemical engineering community (“the audience that I’m going to be talking to … in my career”). But this audience did not belong to Wikipedia’s activity system; it was an audience belonging to a chemical engineering activity system to which Penni17 was told (and I believe struggling to believe) she already belonged. Penni17’s resolution to the unintentional contradiction she faced suggests that her anxiety stemmed from both a fear of rejection and a desire for validation from her target audience.

Penni17 chose to contact only one core member of Wikipedia to request feedback, DCDuring, who had contributed to the main “Heuristic” article. When she did so, she asked “who I should ask before I add [text and a link to] my article to the page.” In other words, she asked DCDuring who could (in effect) give her permission to edit the main “Heuristic” article by adding a link to her own contribution, “Heuristic (engineering),” to it. But when DCDuring responded with the Wikipedia mantra to “be bold” (to go ahead and make the edits), Penni17 expressed disappointment that DCDuring had not critiqued her content (something she had not actually asked him to do), but had only given her advice “about Wikipedia.” She waited four days after receiving his response to do as he suggested. Penni17 compromised on my requirement by asking a friend from her senior capstone design course,
one who occasionally edited Wikipedia, to act as her second core member. He obliged by leaving an anonymous compliment (traceable to the chemical engineering department’s computer lab) on her contribution’s talk page. During our interview, Penni17 argued that this compromise had, indeed, fulfilled my assignment requirement; however, the fact that she hadn’t tried to use his compliment as evidence that she had satisfied the needs of Wikipedia’s audiences (something I had encouraged students to do in their final analyses/reflections) somewhat belied her conviction in that belief.

But how did these actions, coupled with Penni17’s anxiety, suggest a fear of rejection and a desire for validation from her target audience? Penni17 had already expressed concern that if she produced a “quasi-resource” or made other mistakes, “even [in] the grammar,” her readers (members of the largely academic chemical engineering community) would think she was “stupid.” But when she did turn to DCDuring for help, she didn’t ask about her contribution’s contents, the acceptability of her resources, or even the accuracy of her grammar. Instead, she approached DCDuring as an authority figure within Wikipedia who could grant permission (which she didn’t need) to edit an established article. Penni17’s disappointment that DCDuring’s response had been to the question she asked, rather than a comment on her content, implied that she was hoping he would validate what she had already written as her chemical engineering classmate had done. I believe that because she could not turn to a “teacher” according to the assignment requirements (something she had considered during the second timeframe of the assignment) she tried to find a core member who could substitute for one and validate her work and her, in turn. But when DCDuring responded, she still lacked reassurance that she had not just produced a “quasi-resource.” Her classmate’s compliment didn’t carry the authority an instructor’s or even DCDuring’s assurance would
have (despite her uncertainty about his status); Penni17’s self doubt and lack of reassurance from a distinct authority figure could easily have contributed to her four-day delay in posting the content she had already drafted for the “Heuristic” article.

Finally, Penni17’s attitude toward her contribution after she had completed the course supports my rendition of the unintentional contradiction she faced. Rather than fearing that she had produced a “quasi-resource” with insufficient references, she he was proud of her work and thought the textbook references she had cited were “very good.” She considered the fact that she had completed the assignment an accomplishment, saying, “As much as … I was agonizing when I was doing it, like I felt actually really good after. You know, that I actually did it.” Penni17 seemed to have gained confidence in her own identity as an engineer and her subsequent right to create information for others’ use: She reported that she frequently bragged about the engineering heuristics article to the students who enrolled in the senior design course after her, telling them, “I made a page on Wikipedia [about engineering heuristics]. Take a look at it.” Penni17 believed that she was prepared to write to, and for, other chemical engineers.

Penni17’s story is one that carries implications for both writing instructors and researchers, but perhaps for none more than me. As I struggled to analyze and retell Penni17’s experience, the research process transformed me into a teacher-researcher-learner; I learned a lot from her (DiPardo et al., 2006; Fleischer, 1995), and the lessons I learned have changed my personal pedagogy and praxis and enabled me to provide better learning opportunities for my current and future students (Buehler, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In the following section, I discuss these lessons and the resulting changes to my personal pedagogy. I also consider the implications Penni17’s story may have for other
writing teachers and researchers by suggesting directions for future learning-centered studies in writing research.

**Implications: Lessons in Pedagogy & Directions for Research**

The process of analyzing and retelling Penni17’s story transformed my personal pedagogy, particularly in the ways I think about student learning. This, in turn, has had (and is having) a trickle-down effect in the ways that I think about and do teaching. But it has also reinforced and strengthened my belief in the value that teacher-research studies, particularly the individual and collective activity of doing teacher-research, can add to our understanding of student learning and writing within the professional communication discipline.

When I began this research, I was a student of situated learning and writing theories. I believed (like many others within the professional communication discipline) that learning and writing were situated within social contexts. Each social context had its own culture (values, beliefs, expectations, etc.), which its members shared and which influenced its members’ ways of thinking, learning, doing, and communicating within it. In order to act (or write) effectively within a culture, new members needed time and training; they needed to undergo a social learning process that could take weeks, months, or years to complete. I also believed that students, upon entering the workforce, often failed to recognize the social and cultural differences between the audiences and purposes of school and workplace writing; this failure was the primary reason new employers complained that these students couldn’t write. Students, as new employees, most often turned to what they already knew when asked to complete a workplace writing task: they wrote the way they had in school without considering the intricacies and nuances of their new rhetorical situation. It would only be
when they met with a contradiction—their new employer rejecting their written work and telling them to do it again, for example—that these students would recognize inadequacies in their writing philosophies and processes and work to correct the problem.

The Wikipedia assignment was my attempt to intentionally provoke such a contradiction before students entered the workforce. I hoped that if, by working through the assignment, students whose habitual writing processes skipped rhetorical analysis and reflection underwent processes of deautomatization and automatization through which students built those elements into new writing processes, they would be better prepared to write in the workplace. I reasoned that even if students fell back into their old writing habits, their encounters with the intentional contradictions built into the Wikipedia assignment could help them understand and rectify workplace writing contradictions sooner. But when I designed the assignment (and later, the research study), I failed to realize that the process I was trying to help my students develop would still be something they had learned in school and would associate with school writing. As such, it was (and many situated learning and writing theorists would argue, would remain) situated within the context of school for students. That it could remain situated within the context of school was problematic; if situated learning theorists were correct, students encountering workplace writing contradictions would not then return to school-learned solutions, but instead would struggle to learn a solution appropriate to the new situated context.

During the course of my research, I realized there was a contradiction between the premise and methods of my research and my intentions for the Wikipedia assignment—between the situated social writing and learning theories widely acknowledged among professional communication writing researchers on the one hand, and activity theory
concerning contradiction as a source of change, development, and learning on the other. One activity theorist’s caution that “empirical studies of local activity systems” could “degenerate into a version of … the situated social practice approach, which is losing its [contradiction’s] radical potential” (Miettenen, 2009, p. 168), particularly concerned me. By thinking of the intentional contradiction I tried to build into the Wikipedia assignment as a localized contradiction, one that would occur within or between the Wikipedia activity system and the classroom activity system, had I limited its power of the intentional contradiction to be a source of student learning? If so, how much more had this deeper, foundational contradiction interfered with students’ learning processes? Was this, perhaps, at the root of Penni17’s unintentional and unresolved contradiction as well?

But as well as being alarming (was my entire research project about to fall apart?), Miettenen’s point was also illuminating. Penni17 hadn’t yet changed much about her writing process, largely because the unintentional contradiction between our interpretations of my intentions for the assignment had gone unresolved. But I believed that she was in a better position to change (to learn) the next time she encountered a similar contradiction, one in which her interpretation of my intentions would no longer be applicable (thus, would no longer hinder her learning process). Penni17 did complete my course with a better understanding, in theory, of the role audience plays in writers’ decisions; she just wasn’t aware that she hadn’t put it into practice yet. If in subsequent writing experiences (perhaps, for example, in the workplace) she encountered similar contradictions that arose from assumptions that she made about the audience and its needs, she may have been able to identify more quickly the problem than she would have otherwise. In fact, this had been the premise of my assignment design, but this was not, as I had been thinking of it, an “answer”
to the problem of situated social contexts for writing and learning. Instead, it indicated a problem with the idea of learning and writing being solely socially situated; it also indicated that thinking of contradiction (or writing, or learning) exclusively in this way was not only problematic, but limiting the power of their potential.

Thus, the theory I base my pedagogy on has changed radically as a result of analyzing, reflecting on, and retelling Penni17’s story. I began to further investigate ideas of zones of proximal development and boundary crossing, particularly in relation to Engeström’s mechanisms for learning (2009). I also truly understood what it means to become a student of my students (DiPardo et al., 2006; Fleischer, 1995) and now strive to be more explicit and transparent in my teaching, particularly when I explain my motivations. When one of my students struggles, I try to look for unintended contradictions arising from miscommunication or misunderstanding. I hope that by doing these things, my current and future students are benefiting from the lessons Penni17 taught me (Buehler, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), and I hope other professional communication instructors and researchers benefit from the lessons I learned by gaining a little bit of insight into their own ideas about teaching or student learning.

The process of analysis and reflection, in particular, has also reinforced and strengthened my belief in the value that teacher-research studies, particularly the individual and collective activity of doing teacher-research, can add to our understanding of student learning and writing within the professional communication discipline. Each individual teacher learns from his or her students in the process of teaching and instructing, and many of us have similar experiences and problems that, if shared, could help others understand their own experiences better. By doing teacher-research, we reflect on our own teaching in ways
that are not possible on a day-to-day basis. This reflective action can lead to change and growth not only on the part of an individual, but also to changes and growth on a collective level—on the level of the system of professional communication instructors and writing researchers. In his discussion about types of activity and sources of change in activity systems, Lektorsky (2009) claimed, “Some actions can be re-mediated and as a result become different ones, generating new actions and even a new kind of activity. This is a process of re-mediation…. Re-mediation can be understood as a process of reflection” (p. 84). Explaining that “reflection is a mode of comprehending … contradictions and understanding possibilities of changing activity within the framework of [a] system by way of a new mediation” (p. 86), Lektorsky argues that this type of research as reflection can be this type of re-mediated activity. But re-mediated activity starts with an examination of individual activity, from which suggestions can be made for ways of transforming and changing the collective activity (pp. 79, 87). In other words, writing research in professional communication can benefit from teacher-research done by individuals if we as a discipline are willing to accept the idea that research as a type of reflection can identify contradictions that, while perhaps specific to individual classrooms, may make observations that are applicable to our discipline on a larger scale and could (potentially) change the ways we think about teaching, learning, and writing.
References


Heuristic. (2011, April 18).


CHAPTER 4. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK:

STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A WIKIPEDIA PROJECT

A paper to be submitted to Business Communication Quarterly

Rhonda L. McCaffery

Abstract

In this article, I explore the effects and implications that one introductory business communication instructor’s choice to replace a client project with a Wikipedia Authoring Project had on its realistic and motivational qualities for his students from their own perspectives. Students were required to draft, publish, and revise original Wikipedia articles for the project, with which the instructor attempted to replace both students’ clients and their teammates (their collaborators) with the strangers that were members of that wiki and the project’s context and the text’s purposes with the hierarchical, member-governed structure and organization of the wiki. But many of the students perceived the project as irrelevant, therefore unrealistic; this perception posed as a deterrent to student learning. In particular, this was evident in students’ misunderstanding of the project’s purpose and of the primary tool they were to use to achieve that purpose: Wikipedia itself. In part, these students’ misunderstandings contributed to their lack of motivation to complete the project as directed. These misunderstandings illustrate not only the importance of helping students understand a task’s relevance within its social context, but also indicate that students are rarely willing to accept the alienation and confusion that new working environments inevitably offer. Finally, the study suggests that commonly held beliefs about differences between workplace and
academic communication—the one being largely practical, and the other being epistemic—may be outdated, particularly in the face of the rapid advancements of communication technologies like those belonging to Web 2.0.

**Introduction**

As an effective, innovative, and engaging introductory business communication instructor highly respected by his students, Theo designed each one of his course lectures, assignments, and projects with care. Among these were the client projects he planned each semester to give students practical experience applying professional communication theory in situations akin to those that occur in the workplace. But one semester, a client tried taking advantage of one of Theo’s student groups by demanding that they produce an exorbitant amount of work and threatening to evaluate their work poorly if they refused. After that experience, Theo decided to assign a semester project that would protect his students from such abuses of power by providing them a degree of anonymity and autonomy, while still giving them the opportunity to author texts for real audiences and real purposes—texts that would be subject to others’ scrutiny and acceptance or rejection, just as they would be in a workplace writing environment. He decided to have his students write articles on topics of their own choosing for Wikipedia.

In this article, I explore the effects and implications that Theo’s choice to replace a client project with the Wikipedia Authoring Project had on its realistic and motivational qualities for his introductory business communication students from their own perspectives. Often these qualities attract both professional communication instructors and their students to assignments and projects that employ, imitate, or simulate actual workplace genres,
audiences, and writing contexts. But when a familiar technology like Wikipedia replaces more traditional components of an assignment, students are likely to perceive that assignment’s realistic and motivational qualities quite differently. Students’ prior experiences, values, and beliefs can influence the ways they perceive of, interpret, and execute assignments (Beck, 2006). They can also directly affect students’ learning; understanding students’ perspectives on such an assignment, then, can help instructors prepare assignments in ways that better shape learning opportunities for students.

There are, perhaps, no assignments more valued in business communication instruction than client and service-learning projects. They have been dubbed “the cornerstones of business writing curricula” (Siefert, 2009, p. 200) because both teachers and workplace writing researchers (Siefert) assign great value to their ability to motivate students and to “incorporate actual business situations” (Addams, Woodbury, Allred, & Addams, 2010, p. 282) into student assignments. Client projects provide opportunities for students to participate in realistic workplace activity because they are not isolated in the classroom context. As such, they have the potential to reveal to students the vast differences between the audiences, purposes, and social contexts of writing between work and school (Beaufort, 1998; Blakeslee, 2001; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Sauer, 1998). Most often, workplace writing consists of “task-specific demands” (Boiarsky & Liggett, 1998) that differ markedly from the knowledge-building (Dias et al., 1999) demands of academic writing, but all too often, students fail to recognize this.

What business communication instructors are ultimately trying to achieve with client projects, then, is to help students develop the strategies and skills that will make it easier for them to develop a context-specific literacy (Boiarsky & Liggett, 1998; Sauer, 1998) that
would prove useful upon entering the workforce. Communicating effectively within any context involves understanding the meaning and relevance of a task (Sauer) and identifying and interpreting the demands and expectations being placed upon the writer or reader. But it also involves understanding how that communication will function as a social action (Bazerman, 2004) and the possible social and political outcomes and consequences (Boiarsky & Liggett) that could result from that action within the context of the setting in which it is being used. Most of our research and literature indicates that client projects can help students, on a general level, begin to develop this sensibility—to begin to recognize and learn to negotiate the differences between school and workplace writing before they enter the workplace. This is not to say there are not possible pitfalls to client projects; Theo’s students’ experience with a client who tried to abuse her power is one such example. But many instructors, Theo included, believe that the benefits of client projects are too valuable to dismiss the idea of using such projects easily.

With the rapid advances in technology, it would seem that the workforce—those “real” social contexts and the “real” communication situations in which they take part—is, in some ways, much more accessible to academia than it was in the past. This is how it seemed to Theo. Having heard about my own an attempt to use Wikipedia and its contributors as a simulated workplace environment and nonacademic audience for her introductory technical communication course, Theo thought there might be a way to replace his course’s client project within something similar. Theo would replace both his students’ clients and their teammates (their collaborators) with the strangers that are members of Wikipedia. He would also replace the project’s context with the hierarchical, member-governed structure of the wiki.
Some instructors, however, argue caution against ever doing as Theo did in his classroom and replacing what they term “richer communication” (Cardon & Okoro, 2010, p. 437)—e.g., face-to-face communication—with technology. Doing so, they argue, would mean that we are “not sufficiently preparing our students for the workplace” (Cardon & Okoro, p. 437) as we would by focusing on skills and supporting technologies most relevant to the workplace, like interpersonal communication and email. On the opposite end of the argument, though, are those who enthusiastically argue that the pedagogical possibilities for using Internet technologies within business communication are endless (Jennings, 2010). Buechler (2010) argues that Internet technologies have good potential to update familiar assignments in the way that Theo did with the Wikipedia Authoring Project.

Theo purposefully tried to take advantage of the specific, social context that regular contributors to Wikipedia work within, and of the purpose for which they work in order to provide a basis for understanding the data in this study. As a member-governed wiki (a technology that allows users to communicate and collaborate with others to write and edit text quickly through their browsers), volunteers contribute all of Wikipedia’s contents. Wikipedia’s stated purpose is to compile an online reference base of free, verifiable (but not new), non-biased encyclopedic information (“Wikipedia:About”). Since anyone can contribute, millions of registered and unregistered users work on its contents. However, its core members—the administrators and countless other volunteers who work daily within Wikipedia—serve as the primary audience for each others’ writing. These core members work collaboratively through tools like discussion and history pages, each with his or her self-assigned tasks, to uphold Wikipedia’s principles (namely, the five pillars; see “Wikipedia:Five pillars”) and ensure that others’ contributions align with Wikipedia’s goal
(or their interpretations of it). In this way, the core membership of Wikipedia constitutes a social context working toward a purpose, but one that seems to defy the traditionally perceived differences between the purposes of writing at work and school. Wikipedia’s purpose is epistemic as well as practical, in that its members’ work is to build knowledge, but to do so in a way that serves a useful (practical) function for readers with access to the web.

But the majority of Theo’s students did not perceive Wikipedia in this manner. First, however, I describe the research study itself.

**Method**

The research I did in Theo’s business communication course was part of a larger study that also involved my own technical communication students. For the purposes of brevity, however, I have only described the research I did relevant to this article, beginning with the setting and participants.

**Setting & Participants**

I conducted my research in two sections of Theo’s introductory business communication course at a large, Midwestern U.S. research university. Theo as well as 39 of his 46 students, many of whom were juniors and seniors pursuing business degrees, were my participants. Theo was a friend of mine and was interested in the research I was already conducting in my own introductory technical communication courses using a Wikipedia writing assignment to teach the rhetorical concepts of audience, purpose, and context. When his students’ client attempted to abuse his power over them, he saw potential in the Wikipedia assignment as a replacement project. In particular, the possibility that his students might interact with Wikipedians who could act as editors, reviewers, collaborators and coauthors (thus mimicking workplace writing processes) while still allowing his students to
maintain a degree of anonymity and control over the process (thus being in less danger of becoming victims of clients) appealed to him. He agreed to adapt the assignment for his own course and purposes (these included replacing the client project with the Wikipedia assignment as his capstone project) and let me introduce my research, still aimed at gathering data on the assignment’s usefulness for teaching rhetorical concepts and helping students develop related rhetorical skills, and recruit participants from both of his sections. (Theo’s version of the assignment appears in Appendix D.) Assured that I would keep their decision to participate and anything they reported to me confidential from Theo until the semester had ended, a large majority of Theo’s students agreed to let me use their Wikipedia project work, use their electronic correspondence with Theo about the assignment, and contact them for an interview about the assignment.

**Data Collection & Analysis**

The majority of my data took the form of one-on-one interviews with Theo and his students and the students’ printed and electronic submissions for the Wikipedia assignment. My interviews with Theo were three, hour-long sessions (at the beginning, middle, and end of the project) in which he dominated the conversation by volunteering his impressions of the project, the students’ reactions to and progress on it, and his own teaching strategies connected to and uncertainties about the project. Since Theo did not know who had volunteered to participate, he only identified students’ whose projects he discussed by their topic choice; that way, I could link the topics to names if they were participants, but he had not betrayed students’ confidentiality rights if they had declined to participate. Likewise, I did not indicate to him whether or not I was familiar with students’ experiences unless it was a case he had previously mentioned.
My interviews with students took place during the middle and toward the end of the project. Mid-project, I interviewed a few students whose experiences with the project caught my interest because they were interacting with Wikipedians, having a particularly difficult time with the assignment, seemed to be handling the assignment particularly well, or were those whom Theo had brought to my attention. Toward the end of the project (and the semester), I requested interviews with the majority of the remaining participants via email. Those who responded made up the remainder of my fifteen-to-thirty minute student interviews, in which I asked them to respond to a series of open-ended questions, beginning with “Tell me your story. How has the Wikipedia project gone for you?” I interviewed seven students in all, and digitally recorded and transcribed the interviews with each participant’s permission.

The rest of my data came from student work on the Wikipedia project and from email students sent to Theo asking questions about the project. The project, assigned in January and ending during finals week in April, consisted of several components: a list of five potential article topics; an audience analysis of Wikipedia readers of one of those topics; a short article outline containing references; a new, original article, posted to Wikipedia; two progress report/reflection memos that included daily activity logs and were due mid-project and during finals week; and a portfolio of project documents due during finals week. With students’ knowledge, Theo granted me guest instructors’ access to his course management system (CMS), which allowed me to download any work students submitted electronically. In order to avoid having Theo discover who was and was not participating by viewing my activity in his CMS, I opened each student’s submissions (including those of non-participants) but only printed copies of those I needed. Likewise, before commenting on his
students’ printed work, Theo handed me any stacks of project submissions he received. I copied the submissions I needed and then returned the originals. Theo also forwarded all of the email correspondence between himself and his students to me; I kept participants’ messages, but deleted the rest.

I analyzed the data in intermittent rounds that stretched over a four-year period using several methods common to qualitative research, including summarizing and categorizing data, identifying both common themes and outliers, and presenting preliminary data at professional conferences. However, the two principal methods of data analysis for this study were activity theory analysis (with a basis in Cultural Historical Activity Theory, following Yrjö Engeström’s theories) and an extensive form of member checking, in which I asked Theo to prepare and present a discussion about the assignment with me at a professional conference. Activity theory analysis, which professional writing researchers often pair with North American Genre Theory or genre systems theories (Russell, 2009), involves analyzing the culture and history of a community (an activity system). In particular, it involves examining the work its members do toward a common goal (its object) and the mediations between the members themselves and the tools they use to accomplish their work through the viewpoint of an individual subject or subjects. This type of analysis may also involve examinations of other communities in which the subject(s) belong, since cultural and historical factors in those other communities often influence individuals’ choices and actions, whether consciously or unconsciously.

**Standing in Their Shoes: Three Individual Students’ Perceptions**

As I surveyed the data I had gathered from the introductory business communication courses, three students caught my attention. Each of the three had a perspective or an
experience of her own that interested me. The first student, Ms. Co-branding, was entirely
dismissive of the project; she did not perceive any direct connection between it and her future
career, so failed to ascribe any value to the project. The second student, Ms. Board of
Certification, Inc., held a degree of animosity toward the project; her original article had been
deleted, and coupled with her already low opinion of Wikipedia, the deletion had made it
hard for her to understand the project’s purpose. The third, Ms. Child Life Specialist, would
have been placed by me in “the Ms. Co-branding camp” as someone who was dismissive of
the project, had it not been for a comment that I made during our interview—a comment that
made her change her plans for the last two weeks of the project and had changed her
experience. In this section, I relate these three students’ experiences and perspectives on their
semester project, the Wikipedia Authorship Project.

**Ms. Co-branding**

Ms. Co-branding, a business student a week away from graduation at the time of our
interview, was confident and forthright in her opinions about the semester project. After
verifying that her conversation with me would not affect her grade in Theo’s class, Ms. Co-
branding leaned in and spoke to me as if I were a trusted girlfriend whom she was taking into
her confidence. In the spacious but crowded business school café, she confessed, “Honestly, I
don’t like Wikipedia. … I can’t believe I’m doing Wikipedia for my business class when I’m
graduating in May and I want to be doing more productive type business stuff.” Once she
began, Ms. Co-branding led the conversation and barely gave me time to interject a question
when I wanted to clarify something she had said or move the conversation in a different
direction. Speaking quickly and clearly, she made it clear that she did not understand the
purpose of the project or its applicability to her hoped-for future career in human resources
or, alternatively, with the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (she had declined previous job offers in hopes of being offered an internship with them). When I asked why she thought Theo had assigned this particular semester project, she replied, “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know what he was getting at with the whole thing.”

Given that the Wikipedia Authoring Assignment was a semester project, one that (in theory) would require a sustained effort on the part of students throughout the entire semester, Ms. Co-branding told me that she hadn’t put a lot of effort into it. “I didn’t have any motivation to make a whole lot of changes,” she said. To Ms. Co-branding, it was the established Wikipedians’ role to provide this motivation for her, for they were the ones from whom she was “to get comments and stuff.” But for her, the requirement to ask Wikipedians for feedback was “extra stuff”; she didn’t think it was necessary. Despite her opinion, Ms. Co-branding went ahead and requested feedback, addressed to no one in particular, on related articles’ talk pages, which established Wikipedians typically use to discuss an article’s content and development. Her typical request looked like this:

**Comment Please**

Hello!

I was hoping you could please look for my Wikipedia page “co-branding” This is my first page that I wrote for a class.

I would appreciate your input.

Thanks, [Ms. Co-branding]

But she didn’t get any feedback: “I even asked. … No one commented. No one even made a period change. No one even said add a comma here. Like I got nothing.”
The lack of understanding Ms. Co-branding displayed about Wikipedia is understandable, given her low opinion of the wiki. She approached Wikipedia from the standpoint of her other professors within the university (at least, her understanding of their opinions) and from her inability to see the project’s applicability to her future career. She told me, “None of my professors count Wikipedia as a credible source for any of our projects…. But—and learning how to do it I think was helpful, but I just wish I wouldn’t have spent that much time on Wikipedia. … I don’t find it anything beneficial to my life.” Her other professors just reinforced her opinion of Wikipedia when she broached the subject with them: “I talked to a couple of my marketing professors about it and they were like, ‘Please don’t quote me in your article. I don’t want to have anything to do with my name being in Wikipedia.’”

Her lack of understanding about Wikipedia, the roles Wikipedians play, and the ways Wikipedians communicate with each other made it hard for Ms. Co-branding to understand how or what immersing herself in the process could teach her anything of value. She told me, “I just don’t feel like it [the project] has any purpose. … I just feel like a whole bunch of people could have taken it a whole bunch of different ways to be unsuccessful and pointless. … Even I didn’t get anything out of it.” She continued, “I can honestly say to you, I will never get on my co-branding site again.”

**Ms. Board of Certification, Inc.**

Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. (a.k.a. Ms. BoC) had similar opinions about the project and Wikipedia, although she had quite a different experience than Ms. Co-branding. I interviewed her ten days before the end of the project. Sitting in my corner office, I asked Ms. BoC her opinion of the semester project. She glanced out the door and down both
hallways before answering. “Just making sure he’s [Theo] not walking by,” she explained. Then she continued,

I think it’s stupid. … In every other class that I have, we have been told not to reference Wikipedia. It is not a good source. So I don’t see … why we should be posting something on a website that is supposed to be so unreliable and that we are told in all these other classes not to use.

Ms. BoC thought the purpose of the project had something to do with Wikipedia itself, saying, “I don’t really see the point I guess. … It’s not a good source and we should be kind of promoting, like, good resources to look at.”

Like Ms. Co-branding, Ms. BoC’s perceptions of the project and Wikipedia stemmed, in part, from an academic bias, one that led her to believe its purpose was “just to allow other users to interact and be able to voice their opinion. Not really opinion, but be able to put their knowledge into it.” However, her perceptions also grew out of her experience with the project itself. An athletic training student, Ms. BoC chose to write about something important to her field of study, just as Theo had suggested. She settled on a corporate institution established to certify athletic trainers (hence, the article name). At first, activity on her article seemed stagnant—so stagnant, in fact, that she confessed, “I actually asked a classmate to go look at it because I needed some kind of feedback.” But then things went horribly wrong; her article was deleted. An administrator had seen her article and noted that it was both unsourced and a corporate entity. On Wikipedia, those two factors together typically add up to “blatant advertising,” one type of information that is banned on Wikipedia. But Ms. BoC never understood what had happened.
“I was like, WTF? I’m like, why? Why? … I was confused,” she told me. She then continued with her story:

I tried to contact him [the user who deleted it] and just ask him if he had any advice for me. … He didn’t respond to me for like two weeks, so … I put it back up. … And then he finally got back to me and then he made his changes on the page instead of just deleting it, so I thought that was nice.

But, she said, “He didn’t ever say why he deleted it.” What he did do was suggest some changes: “He suggested that I have more internal and external links, which we actually talked about in class, so I added those.”

Despite Ms. BoC’s rough start to the project, she did try to complete it. She did so, however, without much (if any) more understanding about Wikipedia and the way Wikipedians work than before. She said, “I’ve tried to contact some people through, like, related sites… to have them give me feedback.” From her Wikipedia contributions, though, it is evident that Ms. BoC only made one attempt to do so, on a talk page that she created for another article—one that was inactive and contained the warning tag, “This article may be written like <an advertisement>. Please help <improve it> by rewriting promotional content from a <neutral point of view> and removing any inappropriate <external links>” (emphasis in original. Brackets indicate phrases linked to other Wikipedia pages). She continued, “Somebody apparently looked yesterday and I guess somebody changed something,” but there isn’t any evidence of this edit in the article’s history. Her only other plans for the article were to “try to get on [link to] other pages that are related to mine and hopefully get some people to give me some kind of feedback, ‘cause I don’t have a lot of that right now.” She did link to several other articles, but did not get further action on her article.
The subject of feedback reminded me of Ms. BoC’s earlier comment about asking a friend to review her article. I asked if her friend had responded, and she confirmed that her friend had. “Just about the presentation of the article,” she said. “I think she just said something about like, my external resources. Because actually they weren’t links at the time.” A review of her written work for the assignment—the first reflection, her activity log, and her second (the final) reflection reveals that she initially tried to claim her friend’s comments as “the milestone of having feedback” on the article. Without identifying the source of the feedback as her friend in her first reflection (although her activity log indicated that it was her classmate), she wrote, “This feedback was about how to better allow my readers to access further information on related topics. … Based on this lone comment, it seems the reader did really want to learn more information about the topic.” It is hard to say whether this was an intentional attempt to mislead Theo or a misunderstanding about what he meant when he said he wanted them to solicit feedback from established Wikipedians. By the second reflection, though, she portrayed her experience differently, writing, “The only readers I have had interaction with include the user that deleted my page. … No other user has tried to contact me or has returned any of my inquiries.” It is no surprise that she ended this reflection by writing, “I would not recommend to keep this project in the future.”

**Ms. Child Life Specialist.**

Ms. Child Life Specialist’s (a.k.a. Ms. CLS) tale would likely have echoed Ms. Co-branding’s, were it not for me and the researcher effect. Sitting side by side in cozy chairs in our library’s lobby, we angled our bodies slightly toward each other as she told me about her studies. She identified herself as a student hoping to become a child life specialist (hence, the article choice) and ended her biographical information by adding, “I just want to work with
kids.” With my notes on my lap and her legs curled up under her, she proceeded to tell me her opinion of the semester project: “I do not want to create a Wikipedia assignment,” she said. “I don’t care. Like, I don’t care if I can create a web page or not.” Like Ms. Co-branding, she added, “I wasn’t hugely motivated to do it. … It’s not something that I feel I benefitted from. … I guess I don’t see why I need to be able to put this thing up on Wikipedia.”

When I interviewed Ms. CLS almost two full weeks before the final reflection was due, her words were an eerie foretelling of the words Ms. Co-branding would utter two weeks later. She hadn’t experienced any activity surrounding her article and seemed frustrated and discouraged by this fact. “I haven’t had anyone try and take it down; I haven’t had anyone comment on it; I haven’t had anyone to it.” Her solution was that of Ms. BoC’s: “[I’m] just having friends go on and look at it, and seeing what they think of it, editing and stuff themselves.” Her plan for soliciting feedback, which she had yet to enact, included more of the same: “I think what I’m going to have to do is start a talk page within this week and ask other people in the class to comment on it or go through and edit it.”

I questioned that immediately, asking, “So you’re not going to try to get anyone from Wikipedia to comment on it?” My question was a natural response on my part after having taught a similar assignment in my own courses, and after discussing the project and its requirements with Theo, but the answers I got from Ms. CLS—and her subsequent activity for the project—were revealing and revolutionary for both of us.

“Well, like the other people that are in my class are from Wikipedia because they have user IDs. Is that what you mean?”
“I meant outside of your class,” I replied. “Because I thought Theo said something about having people comment on it that have been established prior to this year.”

“Oh,” Ms. CLS said. “Yeah, if it’s in the assignment then I’ll do that.”

Ms. CLS’ final reflection to Theo and the history logs in Wikipedia reveal what happened next. In her reflection, she wrote, “I asked for five reviews from users,” and she had done so. But her requests were different from any that I had seen in my semesters of teaching a similar assignment, or from any others that I saw from Theo’s class: she employed the strategy commonly taught in business communication courses known as establishing goodwill. To Freechild, a Wikipedian who had been actively editing the wiki for four years, she wrote,

Hello. I’ve been a nonuser on Wikipedia for many years. I appreciate your work as I’ve benefitted from some of your articles! Recently, I became a user and created a page about child life specialists, and I’m wondering if you could check out my page?

Thanks for your help!

Similarly, she flattered the other Wikipedians she appealed to for help, making comments like, “I noticed your work on ‘Child development’ and value your wisdom and judgment…,” and “I noticed all of your work … and I value your insight….”

The results were immediate and positive. Within a week, Ms. CLS had received feedback from three of the five Wikipedians she had contacted and a fourth who regularly corresponded with one of the other three. Two of the four respondents were Wikipedia administrators, and all had been actively working within Wikipedia for one to four years. Their responses were complimentary but constructive and consisted of both comments and
edits to help improve the article. The entries in Ms. CLS’ personal activity log were all punctuated with exclamation points (e.g., “References were added by Freechild!” and “Freechild commented once!”), seeming to express her excitement over the responses her queries had generated. And her final reflection did indicate that these responses excited her: she wrote, “I have enjoyed it [the project] more and more as I learn new ways to interact with a user. … I wish that I would have begun interacting more sooner.”

Ms. CLS’ interactions with established Wikipedians had taught her a valuable lesson. “One thing that was definitely hammered home,” she wrote, “was the benefit of establishing goodwill and positive communication from the very beginning when interacting with others.” She explained,

My thoughts in the beginning of the project were along the lines of thinking that it was a useless project that I’d never learn anything from. I didn’t understand how creating a Wikipedia article would help me in business communication and I was intimidated because I feared failure. However, I am convinced that my article is a success! … I believe that much of this is because of the audience analysis that we were required to do.

Still, though, Ms. CLS wasn’t convinced of the value of the project. She concluded her final reflection by writing, “I’m quite neutral when it comes to suggesting it [the project] for future semesters. I don’t believe that I gained extraordinary benefit from it in regards to my business communication.”
Rearranging Desks: Situating Individual Perspectives
within the Classroom and the Discipline

Three individuals, three experiences, three perspectives. But Ms. Co-branding, Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. (a.k.a. Ms. BoC), and Ms. Child Life Specialist (a.k.a. Ms. CLS) were only three of the thirty-nine introductory business communication students who participated in my study (forty-six students took the course). Through their individual experiences, did they learn anything about or begin to incorporate the abstract rhetorical principles of audience, purpose, and context into their individual writing processes? And how did their experiences and perspectives compare to those of others within the course? In this section, I relate what became clear to me as I compared these three individuals’ perspectives and experiences with those of others in the course: that in many cases, students’ interpretations and execution of the Wikipedia Authorship Project posed deterrents to their learning. The two most prominent deterrents that arose were students’ misunderstanding of the assignments’ purpose and their misunderstanding of Wikipedia’s function, both within the world and within their own classroom.

Confusion Surrounding the Assignment’s Purpose

One of the most prominent deterrents to students’ learning that arose was students’ misunderstanding of the Wikipedia Authorship Project’s purpose, a misunderstanding that often led to students’ devaluing of the project and a subsequent lack of motivation on their part to work on or complete the project as directed. The majority of student participants were members of this group; only four of the thirty-nine participants were distinct outsiders who set themselves apart by displaying an understanding of Theo’s objectives. This was despite Theo’s efforts, both in the assignment sheet and in the classroom, to establish the semester
project as a type of workplace project that could mimic the experience of authoring a workplace document. Theo hoped that through building into the semester project a timeline complete with scaffolded tasks and deadlines within which to accomplish them, students would develop rhetorical sensibilities and skills necessary for successful workplace communication.

In some cases, as was the case for Ms. Co-branding, a student’s misunderstanding was a failure to recognize any purpose at all for the project. Subsequently, these students ascribed no value to the project and simply went through the motions (or pretended to) in order to fulfill Theo’s requirements. I write “pretended to” because of admissions, in their final progress reports/reflections, of students like Ms. Block & Bridle who wrote, “most students only worked on their projects at two points throughout the semester, even if they say otherwise,” and Mr. Delta Tau Delta Gamma Pi, who wrote,

I have not given this assignment the amount of time and effort it deserved, needed, and required. The majority of my work has been done quite recently and I feel that it does not show, in any sense, what I am capable of.

In other cases, as was the case for Ms. BoC, students failed to recognize the project’s purpose but, in their attempts to ascribe value to the project, tried interpreting and assigning purposes of their own. In large part, students interpreted the semester project’s purpose using their previous experience, knowledge, and understanding of school work to do this: their perceptions of writing assignments’ purposes in other classes, of an English course’s purpose in their education, of assignments’ and courses’ purposes in relation to their future careers, etc. But often, these students also assigned special importance to the writing medium itself—Wikipedia—and tried to incorporate that into their interpretation of the
project’s purpose. For example, Ms. BoC implied that she believed the main objective of English (writing) classes should be to teach students how to judge the credibility of, and then cite and use, published sources as reference materials. From her perspective, then, using Wikipedia as a writing medium didn’t make sense:

I think it’s stupid. … In every other class that I have, we have been told not to reference Wikipedia. It’s not a good source. So I don’t see … why we should be posting something on a website that is supposed to be so unreliable and that we are told in all these other classes not to use. … I don’t really see the point I guess. … It’s not a good source and we should be kind-of promoting, like, good resources to look at.

This was a sentiment and confusion that several of Ms. BoC’s classmates shared. For example, in their final reflections, Ms. PM Park wrote, “I struggled to see the significance of this project for anything that would be of use to me in the future. … I don’t see Wikipedia as a site that I would ever go to for information,” and Ms. Organic Coffee wrote, “I do not feel that the project was terribly advantageous. … I feel like a lot of the stuff we had to do on Wikipedia was for no real reason.” In my interview, Ms. Organic Coffee explained her impressions of the assignment further: “That is the first time I have ever gone to the website [Wikipedia] and probably the last,” she told me. “It is not a reliable source in all of my classes so I just as well [sic] look other places for information that people believe is credible.”

In a few cases, though (four, by my count), students both understood, and were able to articulate clearly, Theo’s objectives for the assignment. In each of these cases, the students recognized that Wikipedia was a tool Theo hoped would help them achieve these objectives
rather than an integral part of the project’s purpose. Ms. CLS took a mediate, yet begrudging
stance between these four and the larger majority who failed to understand or value the
project’s purpose. She claimed that she had not benefitted from the project and declined to
recommend its use in future courses, yet she also recognized that the audience analysis task
and the interactive element of the project were somehow significant in the project’s purpose.
Still, she couldn’t separate Wikipedia from her perception of the project’s purpose; after she
had interacted with established Wikipedians, she wrote the statement I quoted in her
individual account: “I guess I don’t see why I need to be able to put this thing up on
Wikipedia.” In contrast, despite not having the interactive experience that CLS had, Mr. Tree
Stands exhibited a greater understanding of the project. In his final reflection, he wrote,

The reason [the project] is successful, or could be, is because students can
write an article about something they like, and then they can get feedback
from others besides just a teacher. Hopefully their target audience is reading
the article and is leaving feedback. This will teach a student to write an article
towards a certain audience with success.

Here, Mr. Tree Stands recognized the rhetorical purpose of the semester project and the
supportive role (a provider of feedback) Wikipedia was to play in that purpose. Two other
students who understood and valued the project’s purpose were able to correlate the activity
of interaction with activity they imagined they engage in as part of their future careers. Mr.
Soybean Management Practices wrote,

I do feel that this type of project in which you have to create something and
get feedback from other people is very beneficial to individuals who are going
to graduate soon. This is what many jobs are like and a person in this type of setting has to be able to handle this type of pressure.

Likewise, Ms. Equine Pre-Purchase Exams wrote, “I think students can really get a feel for what it’s like to communicate in a real-world setting. That will inevitably prepare them for life situations, and help them become better communicators.”

It seemed, from these students’ contrasting interpretations of the Wikipedia Authorship Project’s purpose, that some students’ inclusion of Wikipedia as part of the objective of the assignment was becoming a deterrent to their learning. Upon further investigation, I realized that this was not only because they misunderstood the purpose of the project itself and of the writing medium’s intended role within that purpose, but also because they misunderstood the purpose and function of Wikipedia itself in the “real world,” apart from a school setting.

**Misunderstanding Surrounding the Purpose and Function of Wikipedia**

Many students’ misunderstanding of the purpose and function of Wikipedia in the “real world” (apart from a school setting) contributed to their lack of motivation to work on the project, and thus acted as a deterrent to students’ learning. Most of these students only had a vague impression of Wikipedia’s purpose and function: to generate a comprehensive, online resource tool of up-to-date, encyclopedic, established knowledge through an open, yet highly structured and hierarchical collaborative authoring and fact-checking process.

Likewise, these students did not understand what constituted knowledge within Wikipedia, or who worked within it and how they did so. Ms. BoC’s understanding of Wikipedia’s goal, for example, was both indistinct and broad in its description of the wiki and Wikipedians. In our interview, she told me the goal was
Just to allow other users to interact and be able to voice their opinion—not really opinion, but be able to put their knowledge into it. … The place for everybody to share that information and be able to change it. That’s what I don’t like about it. … Anybody can put something on there.

As I listened to Ms. BoC’s reply and considered it within the context of the entirety of her experience—having had her original article deleted, then restored, without any real understanding of why this had been done—two things leapt out at me. First, she didn’t understand the values that established Wikipedians hold and strive to maintain, or the ways they work together to synthesize knowledge and to eliminate “unreliable” information. In particular, Ms. BoC failed to understand what counts as knowledge (and what does not) on Wikipedia. Second, Ms. BoC was working to keep the project within the academic realm as much as possible. She formed her opinion of Wikipedia based on her interpretations of her instructors’ comments about it, and rather than contact an established Wikipedian for feedback, something she was required to do as part of the assignment, she asked a classmate to review it. Other students had considered soliciting feedback from other sources as well; Ms. CLS considered it before our interview, and one student turned to her friends and father for feedback when Wikipedians didn’t respond as she had expected. In Ms. BoC’s case, when she did get feedback—first, in the form of deletion, and then advice—from a Wikipedia administrator, she validated the feedback on the basis of her classroom experience (“we talked about those in class”). She even indicated that she had expected feedback to come in a form that mimicked her classroom experience of feedback and review when she stated, “I don’t understand why he couldn’t have just sent me a message and told me like,
‘Oh, you should change these things about your article’ instead of taking the whole thing down.”

Similarly, Ms. Co-branding had betrayed a lack of understanding about Wikipedia itself—the way it worked, the ways people worked within it, and the reasons those people worked—by asking for feedback on her contribution in the manner she did. In this, her actions were similar to those of many of her classmates. By making her requests on articles’ talk pages, rather than individuals’ talk pages; by naming her contribution, rather than linking to it; and by identifying herself as a student doing a class assignment, rather than a new Wikipedian hoping for guidance, Ms. Co-branding would likely have portrayed herself as an outsider who was both ignorant and nonchalant about Wikipedia’s conventions to established Wikipedians. This would have made it very unlikely that those Wikipedians would respond. But like her classmates, these were all things that Ms. Co-branding could have learned about Wikipedia if she had been spending the time on the semester project and making a genuine effort to learn about her readers and context as Theo had recommended. For Ms. Co-branding and these others, though, Wikipedia wasn’t worth this time or effort, largely because they did not believe it was a credible source.

Ms. Co-branding’s opinions of Wikipedia, particularly of its credibility and usefulness as a reference tool, were largely influenced by what she believed to be her other professors’ opinions of the wiki. What Ms. Co-branding’s professors probably understood (and I suspect, what she did not) was that theirs was an opinion informed by the value they placed on the long-standing academic tradition of careful research, peer review and publication—the validation process that we use to determine what counts as “knowledge” in our disciplines and what does not. Ms. Co-branding may have been correct in interpreting
their opinions; her professors may have had low opinions of Wikipedia because of the open editing process, the vandalism that can occur along with it, and the unsourced (and often incorrect) information that tends to characterize lesser-developed articles. However, they may also have understood that Wikipedia is not a venue for original research and that any material on the site should be sourced, or verifiable in that it has been published elsewhere in one or more reputable publication venues. They may even have understood that the more developed articles on Wikipedia undergo an extensive “peer review process” of their own, one to which they may or may not have ascribed value. Regardless of what they thought, Ms. Co-branding (and many of her classmates) interpreted what her professors said regarding Wikipedia as an excuse to devalue the assignment. This allowed her to avoid taking a closer look at Wikipedia and discovering for herself the roles that established Wikipedians play, or the ways they communicate with each other, as they go about their task of synthesizing published knowledge.

In some instances, students who used their understanding of Wikipedia and its apparent lack of importance to their academic or future workplace careers as an excuse to avoid examining Wikipedia and its users more closely took their attitude to an extreme. For example, one student wrote,

I would have much rather learned the proper way to label and site [sic] an appendix than to spend a full semester project on a Wikipedia assignment where the bulk of the work is responding to other users that don’t even have a high school diploma to give feedback.

But other students, while not fully understanding the role Theo had envisioned for Wikipedians as part of the students’ project yet still sensing the importance of interaction to
achieving the objective, claimed in their final reflections to have completed the project successfully, simply because they had not received any feedback. This was a common characteristic of many of their experiences, and one that seemed to contribute to students’ lack of motivation to work on the project. These students claimed that the absence of positive or negative criticism, together with the fact that their contributions hadn’t been deleted from Wikipedia, constituted acceptance of their contributions by the Wikipedia community. Several more students, however, perhaps recognizing the weakness of their classmates’ argument, recommended that Theo should give students more time to solicit feedback from Wikipedians if decided to keep the assignment (his deadline for contacting Wikipedians did not occur until well into the last month of the project). One student, Ms. Block & Bridle, who had admitted that students hadn’t put much effort into the project, recommended that Theo change the types of contribution he accepted and that students “only be given choices that would lead to substantial articles.” But whether that change would have actually been more motivating for the students is questionable, given that many of them did not perceive the project as relevant in the first place. I see at least three implications we can draw from these students’ experiences: one concerning the reality of projects that use Web 2.0 technologies such as Wikipedia as updates to, or substitutes for, traditional assignments like client projects; another concerning the affect such projects can have on students’ motivation; and the third about our continued notions about the differences between the purposes of academic and workplace writing.
Back on Our Side of the Desk: Implications Business Communication

Instructors Can Draw from Students’ Experiences with the Wikipedia Authorship Project

When Theo used the Wikipedia Authorship Project as his introductory business communication course’s semester project, he used it as a substitute for a client project, hoping to help students develop the rhetorical understanding and writing processes they would need to succeed in workplace communication. As Web 2.0 technology, Wikipedia appealed to him as a writing medium suited for this purpose, although a somewhat unconventional approach to teaching business communication since it was removed from the collaborative writing techniques his students imagined using in their future careers. The fact that many of Theo’s students perceived the project as irrelevant (therefore unrealistic) actually posed as a deterrent to their learning. In particular, this was evident in students’ misunderstanding of the project’s purpose and of the primary tool they were to use to achieve that purpose: Wikipedia itself.

The students’ misunderstandings illustrate how important understanding the “meaning of the problem or task at hand” (Sauer, 1998, p. 163) and of understanding its relevance within a social context. Clearly, most of Theo’s students understood neither the meaning of Wikipedia’s tasks nor the meaning of their own assigned tasks within the course. This resulted in a “divorced … reality” (Sauer, p. 166) that made the task “truly ‘meaningless’” (Sauer, p. 167) for them. Guth (2007), like Cardon and Okoro (2010), cautioned that when we choose to use a Web 2.0 technology such as Wikipedia in an assignment, we need to ensure that our choice of technology will benefit our students. But she advises examining our choices beginning with our own learning goals and determining
whether our choices align with the goals of each individual assignment and with the goals of the entire course. In hindsight, Theo would likely have concluded that his choice of Wikipedia did not align with the pedagogical strategies and the learning goals he had in the rest of the course. But had he concluded that they did, Guth also cautions that we need to work hard to make our learning goals, particularly those that focus on developing higher-order, or “meta” skills (Beaufort, 1998) and are not obviously practical, realistic, or relevant in students’ perceptions.

In part, these students’ misunderstandings contributed to their lack of motivation to complete the project as directed. But in another sense, some students’ lack of motivation to work on the project was the cause of students’ misunderstandings, at least where Wikipedia was concerned. Most students relied on their preconceived notions of Wikipedia and its worth rather than spending time investigating its social context and the ways, and reasons, Wikipedians used communication within that context. This was evident in their responses to the audience analyses they performed at the beginning of the project, which lacked any real evidence from the wiki itself and relied on students’ prior knowledge (on what they thought they knew about Wikipedia) instead. What this says about choosing an assignment based on its potential to motivate students is significant; while it is certainly easier and appealing to choose projects based on this potential, there also has to come a point where the students take responsibility to provide the motivation themselves. Students’ engagement and interest in projects cannot be the only basis for choosing projects, and is not the sole responsibility of the assignment or the instructor. Rather, students must also be willing to accept the alienation and confusion that a new working environment—a new social context—will inevitably offer if they are to have a chance at beginning to develop their literacy within that environment.
Finally, these students’ experiences with the Wikipedia Authoring Project suggest that our notions about the differences between workplace and academic communication—the one being largely practical, and the other being epistemic—may be outdated, particularly in the face of the rapid advancements of communication technologies like those belonging to Web 2.0. Within Wikipedia, knowledge is both pragmatic and epistemic, and Wikipedians work both to synthesize existing knowledge and to build, or create, a continuously updated reference tool for practical use. This indicates that, just as our students need to let go of their existing preconceptions in order to learn when they encounter new social contexts, we need to question the roots of our own preconceptions and question whether our theories about differences between school and workplace communication are still relevant today, or were ever as relevant as we perceived them to be. By doing so, we may find that we generate new ideas for teaching our students how to communicate successfully in the workplace.
References


CHAPTER 5. INTERSECTIONS OF INFLUENCE:
AUDIENCE, LEARNING, & A RESEARCH NARRATIVE

A paper to be submitted to Technical Communication Quarterly
Rhonda L. McCaffery

Abstract
In a narrative report of research, the author describes how and why her dissertation evolved from a study about introductory professional communication students’ ability to write for nonacademic audiences to a study on student learning. Asking what this experience teaches her about audience, she suggests the concept of situated contexts has become a trope on which writing researchers and instructors too strongly rely and which ignore the fluidity of audience members’ overlapping, intersecting social boundaries.

Introduction
My oldest brother-in-law is the family’s intellectual instigator. An artist and critical thinker, Matthew loves to question others’ premises for the discussions and intellectual stimulation that doing so can provoke. His approach to these discussions, which always hold the underlying hint of debate, can be intimidating: Although he is mild mannered and has a soft spoken voice, when Matthew is playing critic/devil’s advocate, he wears the hint of a smile—a secretive look that whispers, I know more than you do and I’m going to win—that can manage to make his opponents doubt themselves. Intimidating as he can be, however, he and his wife, a novelist and online educational tool developer, are also the only members of
my family who have consistently shown a genuine interest in my research and can listen to me talk about it without having their eyes glaze over (or worse yet, falling asleep).

Until this year, our annual conversations about my dissertation research had been much the same (annual, since my in-laws live more than 600 miles east of us). We’d be sitting and chatting comfortably in one of our homes when, inevitably, Matthew would turn to me with a quiet demand: “So, Rhonda, tell me about your research.” His wife would perk up; my husband and any others in the room would feign polite interest until they could no longer hide their boredom (about 45 seconds). My standard response had always been to explain that I was doing a study on writing for audiences—particularly, on teaching introductory technical and professional communication students to write for nonacademic audiences. I’d explain the problem of transfer as a problem of situated differences between writing for school and writing for work (Dias, Freedman, Medway, Paré, 1999). Employers often complaint that new graduates can’t write (Ford, 2004; Ruff & Carter, 2009), and students often seem unable to apply the lessons they learned in school to workplace writing and communication (Dannels, 2000; Dias, et al; Ford; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Paretti, 2006). I’d also explain an assignment I’d developed to address this problem: an assignment for which students were to contribute articles to Wikipedia over several weeks’ time, using the feedback they received (or did not receive) from other Wikipedia contributors to help them revise it. I’d explain my hopes for the assignment: I had hoped to use it to help students “bridge” (Blakeslee, 2001) those situated differences and be able to write successfully for workplace audiences upon entering the workforce. Essentially, I wanted students to break what I believed to be their habit of drafting their work without consciously considering their audience(s) when facing decisions concerning style, tone,
organization, contents, etc. Once that habit had been broken, I hoped that students would begin to build new habits into their writing processes, habits of analysis and mindfulness that could keep the audience(s) and its needs in the forefront of students’ concerns as they wrote. Matthew’s interest would turn to Wikipedia itself and my use of it; I would try to turn the conversation back to audience by arguing that, as the “gatekeepers” (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007) of Wikipedia, the contributors themselves were the audience that mattered—or should matter—to the students, although students needed to discover this for themselves through their audience analyses.

I suspect that my brother-in-law’s interest in Wikipedia itself was primarily a diversionary tactic on his part, one intended to get me to contradict myself more than anything else. It seemed to me that his interest was in the game—in creating an interesting conversation for the sake of conversation. But while this may have been Matthew’s primary purpose, his interest in my research was genuine, and his diversionary questions reflected interests that both he and several of my colleagues had. These were interests upon which I resisted focusing because they seemed either to represent others’ miscomprehension about my study or to be outside its scope. Matthew would question my assertion that, as a gatekeeper audience, Wikipedia and its contributors could function as a pseudo-workplace and coworker audience that could mimic social workplace writing processes for students. He found it an interesting concept, but would ask if the contributors were really the audience. Weren’t the Googlers, the day-to-day Wikipedia readers, the students’ real audience? My dissertation director would ask the same question several times. Not particularly, I’d reply; they were *an* audience, but not the most important given the way I had designed the assignment.
But then Matthew would raise the issue of the technology itself: an open-access wiki, one that is a popular tool for writing collaboratively online. How would my choice of Wikipedia, both as a piece of technology and as a public space, affect the students’ execution of the assignment? When I began my study, most of the existing research on wikis and student writing stemmed from disciplines other than composition, rhetoric, or technical and professional communication and focused on variations of this question (Bryant, Forte, & Bruckman, 2005; Guth, 2007; Ferris & Wilder, 2006; Forte & Bruckman, 2006). Much of that which has been done in our own field since still focuses on this question (Lundin, 2008; Walsh, 2010). But the technology wasn’t what was important to me; the people who used it were my focus. Precisely because Wikipedia was a public wiki—an element of the assignment that was essential, in my thinking—they could invoke serious consequences (such as deletion) on student writing that did not meet their criteria, and would do so as a natural part of their working processes regardless of the fact that these were students writing for a grade. Matthew’s diversionary questions would continue, and until this year I would continue to try to pull the conversation back to audience. This year, however, I answered Matthew’s demand by beginning, “It’s interesting—and unexpected.”

The fact is that, unbeknownst to me, my annual conversations with Matthew had merely been presages of the struggles I would face when I was finally able to delve into my data in earnest. My intention had been to do a study on audience, because the concept was (is?) my true passion. The concept had opened up the world of writing to me in ways I had not experienced before encountering it as an undergraduate student under the study of Dr. Ann M. Blakeslee, a recognized expert on the subject within technical communication (for example, see Blakesee, 2001, 2009). I believe that no piece of writing can truly be a success
unless its author carefully cultivates it for its audience(s), and it is this philosophy, and my understanding of what an audience is and what writing for audiences entails, that guides much of my teaching and classroom practices. But when I was able to devote my time and effort to analyzing the data and “writing it up” (Bishop, 1999), I struggled to answer my research questions in a way that kept the focus on audience and not on some other aspect of the research: the theories upon which my research and assignment design were based; the students’ and the other instructor’s interpretations of the assignment’s purpose (I had gathered data from both my own and another instructor’s classrooms); the students’ preconceived notions about Wikipedia; and—yes—the students’ and other instructor’s initial preoccupation with the Wikipedia technology. Ultimately, I did not succeed in my efforts to keep my focus on audience, but that fact in itself has taught me volumes about the nature of audience and audience research as I have reflected on the reasons for this failure.

This article represents my final efforts to bring the research back to my original intent with an exploration of the question “Why?” Why did the data, that which I had so carefully planned for and collected with a specific goal in mind, not help me answer the questions I sought? What happened to divert my data away from my intended goal? And what did these diversions teach me about the nature of audience and audience research? This approach to audience research—through the back door, so to speak, in the form of a research narrative—is to my knowledge unheard of among peer-reviewed research in technical and professional communication. But I have had too many conversations with mentors and colleagues in the field who considered my story interesting and its implications important to dismiss this form of research narrative out of hand simply because it is uncommon. For my research suggests to me that audience should not be thought of, theorized, taught, or researched within isolated
social situations. Rather, audiences are fluid entities whose members experience overlapping social boundaries on a daily basis (as do writers), and we could learn more about writing for audiences if we would, instead, explore the multiple directions from which these points intersect. In the following pages, I narrate my struggles and show how, through the process of analyzing and writing up the data, I came to this conclusion. I begin with a review of the disciplinary knowledge and theoretical influences that played significant roles in my research design.

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES ON MY RESEARCH & ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

After four years of discussion, my brother-in-law had a good understanding of what I was trying to do with my research and why I was doing it. Believing that good writers intentionally tailor their writing for their audience(s)—particularly good technical writers, whose texts have practical purposes and often help readers accomplish specific tasks in specific contexts—I wanted to help my students develop their own ability to do so in the workplace as well as at school. I wanted to help them to develop new, analytic writing habits (processes) based on rhetorical knowledge and skill that could become nuanced with additional practice over time. Matthew knew that I had developed the Wikipedia assignment to help them do so. He also knew why Wikipedia had been an attractive choice of writing medium to me; within it existed a number of writing/working communities whose members worked both independently and collaboratively toward a common goal (developing a free, online reference tool of verifiable, encyclopedic knowledge) and enforced their commonly-held values for the form and content of the contributions on their site. This, I told Matthew, was one of the most important features of Wikipedia for me since these members could
impose consequences on work done within Wikipedia (including student work) that did not meet their expectations. These consequences would not come from me, their instructor, but from the gatekeeper audience themselves and thus may motivate students to write for that audience rather than for me and for a grade. I hoped that such an audience-centered approach to writing would begin to be habitual for students, at least to the extent that they could employ it if they faced an unfamiliar writing situation beyond my course, such as the workplace.

While Matthew may have had a basic understanding of my research, there was quite a bit he could not know or understand from our annual conversations. Since I typically spoke of my own students’ experiences, Matthew may have forgotten that I had also observed, interviewed, and collected data from another instructor and his introductory business students (who did a variation of the same assignment) as well as from my own. My reasons for doing so—to triangulate my data and to help me develop a more balanced (objective [?]) perspective since, as both teacher and researcher, I was so close to my own research—wouldn’t have mattered very much to him. Neither did Matthew have my theoretical perspective; he was unfamiliar with the theories and praxis that had influenced both my teaching and my assignment/research design. That background knowledge, however, is necessary if one wishes to completely understand what I was attempting to do. Audience theory, situated writing and learning theories, technical communication pedagogy, and cultural historical activity theory all figured prominently into my planning. I briefly review each, and its relevance to my research, below.
Audience, Situated Writing and Learning, & Technical Communication Pedagogy

The academic field of technical communication exists, in part, because of employers’ complaints that engineers couldn’t write (Russell, 1991/2002). Despite the formation of technical communication courses and formal writing education for engineers and other students of technical disciplines, employers continue to complain about their employees’ lack of satisfactory communication skills (Ford, 2004; Ruff & Carter, 2009). As educators, most (if not all) of us are familiar with the pedagogical problem of transfer, with students’ seeming inability to apply what they have learned and practiced at school to similar situations in different contexts, such as the workplace. When that failure lies with writing, it is (in part) because students have failed to recognize that “regardless of the medium in which writers choose to work, all writing is social” (CCCC, 2004, p. 786).

For many students, posting to Facebook or Twitter is clearly a social activity, but one they do not consider to be writing; conversely, drafting letters, memos, and reports is clearly writing, but many students do not think of it as a social activity. Instead, students tend to think of writing as following rules-based forms or models (Kain & Wardle, 2005) rather than as taking social action (Miller, 1984; Bazerman, 1994) by employing forms of writing that are typified, yet mutable, responses to recurring social situations (Miller, 1984). Neither do students understand that writing, and knowledge itself, is socially constructed (Berkenkotter, 1990), that both writers and audiences contribute to the writing process (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). Within written communication, we have a complex understanding of audience; to us, the term both includes and implies “a sense of the social context in which text production and dispersion takes place, a sense of the forums (publications, talks, conferences) that shape audiences, and a sense of the shifting dynamics of discourse communities” (Kirsch & Roen,
1990, p. 14). But we have come to that perspective over time, and our introductory/undergraduate students do not have the background knowledge that contributes to our understanding. There is still an element of the linear in their understanding of the writing done for school or work, that “of writers as message senders and of readers as mere decoders of the author’s message” (Roth, 1990, p. 175).

My understanding of writing as social and of audiences as an integral part of the production process, then, colored my understanding of the problem of transfer when I began this research. So, too, did Dias, Freedman, Medway and Paré (1999) through their book *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. In the book, which my dissertation director introduced to me, the authors argue that the social acts of writing are so different between school and workplace contexts that they are different activities altogether. The authors’ use of situated writing and learning theories particularly appealed to me in part because Freedman’s prior work, with Adam (1996), had been in transfer between professional communication classrooms and the workplace.

The main premise of situated theory is that knowledge and writing are socially situated (Freedman & Adam, 1996) within communities (Dias et al., 1999) and only become meaningful for individuals when they participate in those communities (Dias et al.; Freedman & Adam; Paretti, 2008). In this view, “the context constitutes the situation that defines the activity of writing” (Dias et al., p. 17); in other words, individuals’ purposes for writing depend upon the context—the situation—in which they write. But these are fundamentally different between school and work. In academic contexts, the “*primary* goal of the classroom experience is always student learning” (Paretti, p. 494); writing is “knowledge oriented …
[and] an end in itself” (Dias et al., p. 45). In workplace contexts, however, the purpose of writing is to “get things done” (Dias et al., p. 45).

There are also marked differences between the ways people learn within the two contexts. In school, learning is often a case of “facilitated performance” (Freedman & Adam, pp. 398–399), a process of guiding, challenging, and supporting learners through problem solving using language and in which the goal is learning. In the workplace, learning is “attenuated authentic participation, a process that characterizes various forms of apprenticeship” and is “oriented toward practical or material outcomes” (Freedman & Adam, pp. 398–399; this is based on the notion of legitimate peripheral participation). These differences have a profound implication for the problem of transfer: “When students move from the university to the workplace, they not only need to learn new genres but they also need to learn new ways to learn those new genres” (Freedman & Adam, p. 395). From this I concluded that the problem of transfer was an unsolvable one and that the pedagogical gap between academic and workplace contexts was one that instructors would never be able to fill. I began this research believing that no matter what strategies they used to help students mind the gap, technical and professional communication instructors would not be able to escape the fact that they taught within a context that was worlds apart (Dias et al.) from the one they prepared students to work within.

Having held such a belief, it is a wonder I taught introductory technical communication at all. But I was dedicated to the profession and could not help but hold out hope that our work was not all for naught. I believed that several of the pedagogical strategies technical communication instructors used to facilitate knowledge and skill transfer had both problems and potential, including heuristic models of audience and context analysis
(Reiff, 2002), workplace simulations (Dannels, 2003; Fischer, 2007), case studies (Ford, 2004) and client and service-learning projects (Artemeva, Logie, & St-Martin, 1999; Blakeslee, 2001). I hoped that by examining both the problems and potential inherent in each strategy, instructors could identify strategies that would compensate for each others’ weaknesses and complement each others’ strengths and then combine those strategies in thoughtful and creative ways over the course of a semester. By doing so, I surmised, instructors might be able to both warn students to mind the gap between school and workplace writing and help them bridge it.

These notions of audience and situated writing and learning, then, were in large part the basis of many of the decisions I made when I created the Wikipedia assignment. Most notably, I believed that our standard pedagogical strategies for teaching workplace writing fell short because, as I noted above, students often interpret them as templates or models and ignore or fail to recognize the social dynamics that play a “co-constructive role” (Reiff, 2002, p. 102) in their production. Simulations, for example, stressed workplace contexts and processes but did so in an unreal situation, the classroom. Client and service learning projects compensated for that weakness by involving individuals from outside the classroom, but these individuals (as well as the students) often privileged the classroom by making exceptions for student writing that was not up to par with workplace standards (Blakeslee, 2001). The Wikipedia assignment blended elements of both simulations and client projects by emphasizing a writing process that took place outside of the classroom (although in the online environment of Wikipedia) and by involving outside readers (the Wikipedia contributors/“gatekeepers”; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007), whom I surmised would not know or care that the writers were college students completing a class assignment. They would just
care that it met their standards for writing. But in order to understand who their readers were and what they expected of written work, students would need to undergo a learning process similar to those within workplaces. I believed that reader and context analyses could help with this. But even with all of these elements, there would have been one crucial element missing to the assignment design had I stopped there: the element of contradiction. Contradiction belongs not to situated writing and learning theories, but to cultural historical activity theory, another theory that played a prominent role in both my assignment and research design.

**Audience & Cultural Historical Activity Theory**

Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) is both a socialist theory of learning and development and an analytic method for investigating the work people do as members of communities. A number of respected writing researchers within technical and professional communication use activity theory (e.g., Artemeva & Freedman, 2001; Berkenkotter, 2001; Bracewell & Witte, 2003; Dannels, 2000, 2003; Dayton, 2006; Ford, 2004; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Russell, 2009; Winsor, 1999), but when I began this research, it was my impression that they valued CHAT’s usefulness as a method of analytic research more than the theory itself.

As an analytic method, CHAT researchers use activity systems, organized groups of people committed to a common object, as their main units of analyses (Kain & Wardle, n.d.) and consider as part of their analyses the influence the historical development of and visible changes to each system’s social culture (rules, values, etc.) has upon its members. In CHAT, change is a sign of growth, or learning (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) and has been since its
inception early in the twentieth century from the theories of Russian cognitive/developmental psychologists Vygotsky and Leont’ev (Kaptelinin & Nardi). One measures change by noting the differences in subjects’ degrees of dependence on others (mentors) and sophistication in using tools to mediate their work—to complete tasks and solve problems (Lektorsky, 2009). The tools themselves are a system’s cultural artifacts, “the historical evidence of their development” and “an accumulation and transmission of social knowledge” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, p. 100). An investigation of change within an activity system involves examining the relationships and contradictions between nodes of that system from subjects’ points of view and often depicting these visually in what is known as the activity theory triangle (Kain & Wardle, n.d.; Kaptelinin & Nardi) or a variation of it (e.g., Russell & Yañez, 2002). The nodes of activity systems are the community; its tools, rules, and division of labor; and its object, its members’ motives for pursuing that object, and the outcome of their efforts.

Contradiction, a concept developed by Engeström over the past two decades as part of CHAT and expansive learning theory, is a catalyst of change (Lektorsky, 2009; Miettinen, 2009) and is thus an important constituent of activity theory. When individual or collective members of an activity system encounter contradiction either within or between that system and another—something that interferes in some way with the successful completion of their tasks or object—they must eventually act, either consciously or unconsciously, to change their own activity or object in order to continue their work (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Miettinen). When I designed the Wikipedia assignment and my research, my concepts of audience and context encompassed the concept of an activity system and its nodes, and I relied on the notion that contradiction is a catalyst of change. I saw the classroom and the workplace (and Wikipedia, too) as separate activity systems, and in my own courses, inspired
by Kain & Wardle (n.d.; 2005) and Bazerman (2004), I taught students a simplified version of activity theory analysis alongside reader analysis in hopes that it would prove a more useful tool than reader analysis alone. Using a basic activity theory triangle, students charted and then reflected on several nodes of Wikipedia’s activity system, including the tools Wikipedians use, the rules of posting and editing within Wikipedia, the division of labor within the wiki (particularly the roles of administrators), and the goals of Wikipedians for the wiki. I predicted that, upon drafting and uploading their initial Wikipedia contributions, would ignore the implications of their activity theory and reader analyses and (consciously or unconsciously) rely instead upon their own understanding of Wikipedia, the assignment, and what they needed to do to get a decent grade. When they did so, I hoped that they would encounter contradictions in the form of edits, comments, or deletion from those Wikipedia gatekeepers, or even contradictions between what those gatekeepers expected and what I, as their instructor, expected. It was through these contradictions and the process of recognizing and negotiating between them that I hoped students would learn: I wanted them to recognize that audiences should not be ignored, but rather play an important role in text production. I also hoped that, by using activity theory analysis, students would develop as part of their writing processes a conscious recognition, upon entering a new writing context and encountering contradiction, that several factors influence others’ perception of “successful” writing. I hoped students would understand that these factors and perceptions can differ from one context/situation to the next, and should in turn influence the decisions they make as they write.

These nuances of activity theory, situated writing and learning theories, and even my understanding of audience were, then, beyond my ability to communicate to my brother-in-
law in our brief, annual conversations. And while Matthew was not interested in my research methods, if he had been I could only have discussed them on a superficial basis that would not communicate the integral relationship between these theories and my research design. Nor would he have understood the historical unease with which technical communication has regarded teacher research, one of my primary research methods. If he had, I would have given this intellectual instigator more fodder for debate—a debate that would have served me well since I have needed to defend my choice on more than one occasion.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

Occasion (or, A Rude Awakening): My second year at the annual conference for the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), I was a master’s student. Having just begun my first research study requiring human subjects approval (a teacher research study in which I tackled the problem of transfer by observing and interviewing my first year writing students), I was eager to attend that year’s research workshop. Sitting in small groups, each attended by a respected expert in technical communication research, everyone took a turn describing their research and discussing it with the group. My turn finally came. Heart racing, I described my study and then waited expectantly for the discussion to begin. The expert sitting at our table said perfunctorily, “I don’t think there’s any value in classroom-based research. But if you do it, you should never study your own class. Next.” Needless to say, no discussion ensued.

Occasion (or, Explain Yourself): It was nearing the end of my preliminary oral exam for my doctorate. I was standing in front of my committee and felt under attack. We were discussing teacher research, and I had the distinct impression that one of my committee
members (also, ironically, acknowledged as a research expert in her field) was not a fan. “How are you going to defend your choice?” she asked, looking at me over her reading glasses. “There are valid concerns with this type of research. Why is this method a good choice for you? You’re going to need to be able to answer this in your work and during your defense.” I don’t remember how I responded, but I do remember that she looked dissatisfied with my response, and that another committee member came to my aid shortly afterward by changing the subject.

In Defense of Teacher Research

My personal experiences with others’ reactions to teacher research left me with rather distinct, and negative, impressions about the method’s status within technical communication. Others, I thought, saw teacher research as something to be avoided and warded against (think of warding off a vampire with a crucifix) or denied and dismissed out of hand (it isn’t “real” research; believing that would be just as silly as believing that vampires are real), as the expert in the first occasion had done. And because I still stubbornly insisted on using it (as if it were real), I felt the sharp eyes of the second occasion expert on me whenever I wrote in defense of teacher research, as if she were standing over my shoulder and breathing down my neck (which may well have been her intent, since she was a part of my doctoral committee and was thus a stakeholder in my success).

Indeed, within many universities, teacher research (and pedagogical/classroom research in general) is discounted as being something other than real research, particularly by tenure boards (Blakeslee, 2009). In reality, though, our scholarship indicates that our discipline has accepted classroom research as valuable for over a decade (e.g., Barton &
Heiman, 2012; Dannels, 2000, 2003; Ford, 2004; Miles, 2009). In fact, much of our published classroom research takes place in the author’s own classroom, with or without a collaborating teacher/researcher and author (e.g., Artemeva, Logie, & St.-Martin, 1999; Blakeslee, 2001; Cargile Cook, 2002; Fischer, 2007; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Lutz & Fuller, 2007; Paretti, 2006, 2008; Walsh, 2010; Walters, 2010). But in most articles of this sort within our field, the author’s position as teacher is often buried. Instead, the researcher’s voice is privileged and is properly detached. A researcher’s voice offers an analysis and interpretation of events from a safe distance in order to avoid objections based on the belief that participatory research—that in which a researcher not only affects the outcome of the research, but aims to do so (Ray, 1996; Walters, 2010)—is rife with problems of subjectivity, verifiability, and power. But burying the teacher’s role and muffling her voice out of a fear of objection (and rejection) is a mistake; teachers are in a unique position to see what outsiders do not see, and to lend perspective to classroom situations that outsiders do not have (Ray, 1996; Fecho, 2003). To remove the presence (Fecho) of the teacher from the written record of the research, then, is to deny that position and perspective and to lose valuable data that could otherwise contribute not only to localized efforts in individual classrooms, but also to our discipline’s body of knowledge, particularly concerning both the theory and praxis of teaching (e.g., Scott, 2008).

What I argue here is that through teacher research, technical communication can benefit from this type of knowledge if we adopt the approach English educators take to teacher research, coupled with a historical understanding our cultural beliefs surrounding issues of subjectivity, verifiability, and power in research. Our discipline originated as a service to technical disciplines (Russell, 2002), and historically and socially, our attitudes
and values toward research have developed strong bonds to those disciplines’ attitudes and values, particularly in favor of the scientific method and its ideals of objectivity, verifiability, and repeatability. But as writing researchers, we have also adopted ethnographic research methods from anthropology and have recognized that all written accounts of research are interpretations, thus subjective to some degree (Clifford & Markus, 1986). And to interpret another’s words, actions, or experiences is to hold a degree of power over that other (Bishop, 1999; Sullivan, 1996), sometimes to the point that it constitutes an act of violence (Spivak, 1999). Thus, we have established methods of tempering our subjectivity and positions of power: we triangulate our research, gathering data from diverse sources (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994); we often ask subjects to check our research accounts (Bishop; Blakeslee & Fleischer; Miles & Huberman); we may position ourselves in attempt to reveal and let our readers judge our biases (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Teacher researchers in English education, who openly practice the method (particularly in secondary schools) more often than technical communicators within the university, face the same objections to subjectivity, verifiability, and power (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; DiPardo et al., 2006; Fleischer, 1995; Fleischer & Fox, 2004; Wall, 2004).

Although their historical and social ties differ markedly from ours in some areas, we would do well to imitate their approach: Not only do they participate in their research by playing the roles of teacher and researcher, but also of researched: they become subjects in their own research (DiPardo et al.; Fleischer).

At its core, teacher research within English education is driven by the question of how researchers can use their power—whatever power they have in their classrooms, communities, and educational institutions—to provide better learning opportunities for
students (Buehler, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Ray, 1996). Questions of subjectivity, bias, and verifiability become questions of power and motive as teachers/researchers become aware of the pitfalls that various aspects of their participation in the research represent: the personal ties and relationships with participants, the temptation to rely on one’s own perceptions rather than recorded data, the potential of misrepresenting participants’ views and experiences, etc. Thus, the real question becomes, “For whom do we really do these research projects? Whom does the research most benefit?” (Fleischer, 1995, pp. 49–50). To answer this, teacher researchers must examine their own actions and positionality as closely, if not more so, as their students’. They strive to perceive themselves not only as persons who hold power over students, but also as learners alongside and of their students (DiPardo et al., 2006; Fleischer). In other words, students are people from whom teachers can (and do) learn and work to improve their theory and praxis. Assuming this persona of learner infuses teacher researchers’ entire research process, from formulating research questions (Fleischer & Fox, 2004) to analyzing and writing up the data, and becomes a constant cycle of self-reflection (Wall, 2004) that serves to heighten both their awareness of their own actions’ consequences and their sense of responsibility toward their students (Ray, 1996). This is how, and why, I continue to do teacher research. As I glance back over my shoulder, I imagine my committee member looking at me over her reading glasses. “Does that answer your question?” I ask. My question is met with silence.

**Settings, Participants, & Data Collection**

A large part of my study was the qualitative teacher research that I conducted in four sections of my introductory technical communication course filled, for the most part, with
junior and senior-level engineering and science majors. But rather than the classrooms themselves (we split our time between traditional classrooms and computer labs), the most important setting of my research was virtual: that of Wikipedia, a public, online encyclopedia in the form of an open wiki. Within this setting, volunteer members of numerous writing/working communities within a larger system worked both independently and collaboratively toward a common goal, developing a free, online reference tool of verifiable knowledge. Contributors complete self-assigned tasks using a variety of tools: talk pages attached to specific articles or individual contributors; history pages and archives; links; community pages, defined by disciplinary fields for organizational purposes; etc. While anyone with Internet access and a web browser is welcome (and encouraged) to contribute to Wikipedia, there is still a definite hierarchical structure among contributors. Administrators, who have proven themselves to their peers through longevity and the quality and quantity of their work, have both the ability and responsibility to uphold the larger community’s values and to delete articles, or even ban contributors that do not do so. Regular contributors and administrators strive to be welcoming and helpful to newcomers, and although various mentoring programs have sprouted up in Wikipedia’s history, the mantra newcomers most often encounter is, “Be bold!” Learning to write and collaborate within Wikipedia, then, is a matter of trial and error, of knowledge accumulated over time and through experience, more than it is attenuated authentic participation (Freedman & Adam, 1996).

As a research site, Wikipedia overshadowed the third setting for my research, too. Up until this point, I have focused on the research I did within my own courses because my beliefs so strongly influenced my practice (as a teacher) and the research itself. I did, however, conduct research in one additional setting: two sections of another instructor’s
upper-level business communication course. I conducted the research in my own course over two semesters when I was a doctoral student and graduate teaching assistant. Theo, a fellow graduate teaching assistant, became interested in my study after hearing about it during our own coursework and agreed to adapt the Wikipedia assignment to his own course’s purposes after having a bad experience with a client project assignment. We both taught in a large research university where our students were accustomed to being asked to participate in research studies with human subjects approval such as mine. In all, 105 students agreed to participate in my study—65 of my own (over two semesters) and 39 of Theo’s (over one semester). That was 78% of our enrolled students—73% of my own, and 85% of Theo’s.

I collected a variety of written artifacts for the study: written work on the assignment, including audience and (from my own class) activity theory analyses; reflections and/or progress reports; activity logs; drafts of Wikipedia contributions; correspondence between students and other Wikipedia contributors; and electronic (email and chat) correspondence between the instructors and students regarding the assignment. This collection process was invisible to the students since it was integrated into the assignment submission process. I also interviewed students who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed—my own students after the semester had ended and I had submitted final grades, and Theo’s beginning during the middle of the project and continuing toward the end of the semester. I conducted 13 student interviews in all; four were my own technical communication students, and 9 were Theo’s business communication students. For each of these interviews, I used a standard, generalized set of questions and tailored follow-up questions based on their answers or individual experiences. I digitally recorded and later transcribed both student interviews and those I held with Theo, three hour-long conversations that took place monthly while his
students worked on the project. Theo directed these conversations; he spoke (without using names, in case the students he spoke of had declined to participate) about students’ experiences with the assignment from his perspective, and about his own experiences teaching the assignment. I analyzed the data using an ongoing, overlapping, cyclical process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994) based on activity theory analysis. In the end, the most important data were the reflections, progress reports, and interviews, and the most productive and revealing phase of the research process was the data display phase in which I would draw (or, for one article, depict in Prezi) activity systems and map relationships and contradictions between systems and nodes at different times during a participant’s experience.

**Looking Into a Mirror**

Until this past year, I continued to stubbornly define my research as a study of student writing and audience. I had originally intended to examine changes in students’ perceptions of audience and of authors’ social motives for writing, and to determine causes of these shifts in perception (or the lack thereof). My annual conversations with my brother-in-law reflected my determination to carry through with my intentions. But this year, when Matthew quietly demanded, “So, Rhonda, tell me about your research,” I began the conversation by saying, “It’s interesting—and unexpected.” Unexpected, because the research took me where I never intended to go, to an exploration of learning itself. It also led me to the position in which I find myself now: writing an article about myself and my research, about why my research questions would not be confined to audience alone.
When I approached this paper, I was reluctant to reveal so much about myself and my research. Fecho (2003) refers to writing up teacher research as the “risky venture of publicly examining one’s practice” in which we open not only our research, but also “our practice to scrutiny” (pp. 283–284). But asking why my research had strayed so far from audience and what this implied about the theory and pedagogy of audience seemed important, and others I spoke with about my research agreed. My study seemed to imply that, for too long, we have been researching and teaching the question and concept of audience as only identifiable in, and belonging to, highly isolated social situations, when in fact audience is much more complex and broad in its context. But in order to tell this part of the story—the “story of the story: what went on in terms of consideration and thought as the story was evolving” (Fecho, p. 282)—I had to figure out how to do so: How does one examine one’s own research process?

I decided the best way to treat my own data was to treat it as I had my other participants’. I would draw from as many primary, written sources as possible and consider my own perceptions, and the reasons and ways they changed, at different stages during the research process. I drew from a number of sources in this process: drafts and final copies of my assignment sheets, lesson plans, dissertation prospectus, comprehensive exam answers, reading notes, annotated bibliographies, conference presentations, and dissertation chapters. I also used my correspondence with others throughout the dissertation process, from email to my dissertation director to notes from conversations with co-presenters, colleagues, and another dissertation committee member. I worked my way from a broad outline, into which I copied and pasted work from all stages of my research. From there, I drafted an article and then scrapped it all and started again. With the first version of the article, I had tried to write
within the confines and restrictions of APA format, to make the paper “conform, within a range, to the expectations and needs of the university research community” (Fecho, p. 286). In the end, though, I found I needed to use a “strong narrative voice” (Fecho, p. 287) in my research, to work my thoughts out through my writing process by feeling “lived and present rather than detached and distant” (p. 287). I also met with and discussed my drafts with my dissertation director and another committee member, who both offered invaluable insight and encouragement throughout the drafting process. The culmination of these efforts is what you see here.

**STRUGGLES WITH CONFINING THE RESEARCH**

“It’s interesting—and unexpected.”

I remember that day clearly. I was standing in a patch of warm summer sunlight that streamed in through the skylight in my kitchen. The phone was to my ear, and I was trying to listen to the voice on the other end of the line—to calm down and force back the growing sense of panic and dread that threatened to overwhelm me. I was in full crisis mode, having had just spent the previous eight months working on my first dissertation chapter only to come across a comment in my reading that made me think, in my melodramatic fashion of viewing the world, that I would have to throw my entire dissertation out the window. I read,

> If empirical studies of local activity systems focus on the secondary contradictions distinct or abstracted from the primary contradiction, the approach is subject to criticism, in that it tends to degenerate into a version of … the situated social practice approach, which is losing its radical potential. (Miettinen, 2009, p. 168; emphasis mine).
At the time, I did not understand what Miettinen meant by secondary versus primary contradictions, but I knew my study was one of a local activity system. I would later discover that primary contradictions are those between one system and another, while secondary contradictions are those within an activity system. Not knowing this, however, I feared that I would fall into the trap that Miettinen described. What disturbed me even more was that Miettinen would refer to the “situated social practice approach” as degenerate, as something that actually robs contradiction of its potential to affect change. What was wrong with socially situated theories? What was it about these types of theories that could render contradiction powerless? My study counted on that transformative potential of contradiction, yet all along, I had believed that the problem of transfer, at its root, was that school and work were distinct and separate socially situated contexts that made it difficult to adapt communicative skills learned and used in one context to the other.

**Struggling with Contradiction**

This passage, and the questions that followed it, marked the point at which my dissertation research veered almost completely away from questions of audience and turned to questions of learning instead. Up until that point, I had managed to maintain an uncomfortable partnership between audience and learning (I was intending, after all, to study how students learned to write for nonacademic audiences) and an emphasis on audience. But months earlier, my preparation for a joint conference presentation with Theo, together with some reading I had been doing (most notably, Guth, 2007 and Walsh, 2010, both of which I discuss in the following paragraphs), had begun to nudge that emphasis away from audience and onto learning.
Theo and I had been Skyping about our presentation quite regularly, and as we did so we continued to hold conversations about the ways his students had executed his version of the Wikipedia assignment. As I shared my data with him (I was able to do so since he had long since submitted final grades for the students), we discovered a difference between the ways he and I were defining feedback and review. As it turned out, there was also a difference between the ways he himself had defined review as it applied to the Wikipedia project and the other projects in his course. An important part of the assignment structure in both of our courses had been to require students to solicit feedback from regular Wikipedia contributors. To me and my students, feedback could be an edit that another Wikipedia contributor made to a student’s contribution or comments on the article’s talk page or on user pages (a student’s or a contributor’s) in which other contributors gave students specific advice about developing the contribution further or general advice about working within Wikipedia. Thus, feedback could take many forms; virtually any evidence that another user (particularly one with an established history contributing to Wikipedia) had engaged with the student’s contribution counted as feedback. But when I had interviewed Theo’s students, some of whom I had chosen precisely because they seemed to be getting more feedback than others, they would often claim they hadn’t received any feedback at all. Rather than perceiving edits as feedback, some of Theo’s students thought, as Theo himself observed, that the edits were bothersome intrusions on their work.

When I mentioned our differences in perceptions of feedback to Theo, he quickly identified the disconnect between my own ideas and his students’. He said,

I think that’s an artifact of my class because every other assignment they had to do, I added a peer review or an outside review or both as a requirement of
the assignment. So for everything they submitted to me that term, they had to get reviews from peers in that class or from out of their class—they had to get reviews from some outside expert on their work. So my theory is that they were bringing in the meta-assignments from everything else in the class and applying it to this.

In other words, for Theo’s students, the term review (what I was calling feedback) meant exactly what it had meant throughout the rest of the semester: Students were to ask a peer (a classmate) or an expert (a professor, workplace professional, etc.) to read their work and offer comments and suggestions for improvement in return. This was not how Theo conceived of the term review for the Wikipedia assignment, but he realized that he had probably not communicated that well to his students:

It strikes me that to make this a more successful assignment, I would have either needed to restructure the way the other assignments treated review or made a very explicit attempt to tell them, “The way you get review on this—the way you need to conceive of review—is that interaction with other folks on Wikipedia. Interaction with the other people who are taking their own kind of ownership of your work.”

This realization—that there were contradictions between the different ways Theo conceived of the term review throughout the course, and between the way he spoke about review for the Wikipedia assignment and the ways his students understood what he said—was the first nudge away from an emphasis on audience and onto learning. For me, the contradictions drew together two snippets of readings that I had only previously connected through the authors’ interest in wikis as teaching tools. The first was a study (Guth, 2007)
about using public (vs. private) wikis in education. The author’s findings suggested that in an examination of student learning (how well they learned the lessons of a particular assignment, for instance), the important question to ask was whether the lessons students did learn, intended or not, actually benefitted the students (Guth). She concluded, “The answer might depend on the aims of a given course” (Guth, p. 66). In the second study (Walsh, 2010), the author surmised that in a failed client project involving wikis for which both she and the clients had process (vs. product) related motives for her students, they had failed to “successfully communicate these … adequately to the students” (Walsh, p. 206). For the author and the students’ clients, the social process of obtaining input from each of them in turn and using that input to draft and revise texts was more important than the final product itself, but her students hesitated to let the clients read drafts of their work because it was unfinished. The author surmised that her students had turned to her grading rubrics for guidance—rubrics that described a polished, finished product—and “probably and reasonably assumed [the rubrics] to represent all motives for the activity” (Walsh, 2010, p. 206).

Together, these readings and Theo’s realization made me wonder what other disconnects existed between Theo and his students and me and my own students regarding our Wikipedia assignments. Had our students understood our learning goals for them—what we had wanted them to learn from our assignments? Had we, as instructors, been successful in communicating these goals to our students? For that matter, did the assignments fit into the larger scheme of our courses and teaching strategies? I knew that the circumstances in which Theo had adopted the assignment, a client project gone horribly awry in a previous semester, were substantially different from my reasons for creating it. Would that matter? If
contradictions existed between our own perceptions of the assignments and our students’, how would these contradictions affect students’ learning—or would they?

Still hoping to highlight the lessons students had and hadn’t learned about writing for audiences, I decided to focus my first dissertation chapter/article on contradictions between my own and Theo’s perceptions as instructors’ and our students’ perceptions of the learning goals we had for the Wikipedia assignments. In hopes of coming to an understanding of our students’ perceptions, I planned to feature one of Theo’s students and one of my own. I would compare what each student said, wrote, or did about and for the assignments with what Theo and I had instructed them to do and look for similarities or contradictions. I would also look for evidence of change (development), and the source(s) of this change, in each student’s perceptions. From the conversational interviews I held with Theo during the semester he used the assignment, I suspected that there would be multiple contradictions between individuals’ perceptions in Theo’s course since he was often unsure how to administer the assignment even as it was ongoing. But I also had misgivings about making Theo the focus of such attention; I knew that he was an excellent instructor and did not want anything I wrote to reflect on him negatively. With this in mind, I started work on the chapter/article by choosing one of my own students, one for whom I had a wealth of data, including an interview. She was also a student who had learned the audience lessons I had set out to teach—or so I believed. In our interview, the student claimed that she had learned to consider the audience when she writes, and I saw no reason to doubt her:

Now, I consciously think of, you know, … you have to convey what your message, and how you convey your message depending on who you’re speaking to. So I actually do make a conscious effort. … And when I read,
you know, whether it’s a magazine or newspapers and that, I always … think
about it. I definitely think about it. Who they’re gearing it to. So I think it’s
kind of interesting.

As I delved into data analysis, though, I became more and more convinced that I was
wrong and I realized that I would have more than enough to deal with if I featured just this
one student and myself. Both her statement and her work indicated that this student had at
least come a step toward learning the lessons I had hoped she would learn about writing for
audiences. But it became startlingly clear that there had been a clear contradiction between
her perception of my learning goals and my own, a contradiction I would later identify as a
secondary contradiction (Miettinen, 2009). The root cause of this contradiction, I would
discover, was primary in nature (Miettinen). I had hoped to help students develop writing
processes that would help them write for nonacademic audiences in general and their future
workplace audience(s) in particular. This student, an aspiring chemical engineer, took me at
my word: her workplace audiences were to be other chemical engineers, upon whom she
projected the traits of those she knew within chemical engineering—her professors and
fellow students. Therefore, she was to write for chemical engineers who might read
Wikipedia. She knew her audience (she thought) because she had been learning to work and
communicate as part of this audience since she had been admitted into the College of
Engineering, a college that taught her to think of herself as someone who was already an
engineer, and already knew how to communicate with other engineers. Thus, this student had
reached outside our classroom (the localized activity system; Miettinen) to her membership
in another activity system, the engineering college, to help her interpret my intentions for the
assignment. This was a possibility I had failed to consider since I had grouped my students
together as upper class engineering and science majors that formed our classroom community/activity system. While I had hoped that students would learn the importance of asking, *Who is my audience? What do my readers need? How do I determine the answers to these questions?*, this student believed she had no real need for such analysis and so could not understand why interacting with regular Wikipedia contributors in an effort to further develop her text’s contents was a required part of the assignment (after all, these contributors weren’t a part of her “real”/future workplace audience).

This understanding of my learning goals and, in effect, my definition of “nonacademic audiences,” interfered with the student’s learning in that it caused confusion on her part—confusion that contributed to her inability to negotiate a successful response to the contradictions she encountered. Despite the fact that she hadn’t fully completed the lessons I had hoped students would learn, I was convinced that this student had begun to learn and could continue to learn if she encountered similar contradictions without my interference (contradiction) in the future. I believed this because even months after our class had ended, she still spoke of making a conscious effort to try to identify her own audiences and the intended audiences of the literature she read. But shortly, learning itself (not just what this student, or others, had learned about audience) was to force its way into prominence in my dissertation research.

**Struggling with Theory**

My analysis well underway, I began to write. I also began to reread activity theorists’ definitions and studies of contradiction, since I wanted to frame the concept for my own readers. That’s when I came across Miettinen’s (2009) statement that using contradiction as
part of a situated social practice approach was to rob it of its potential transformative power. The person on the other end of the phone that day had been one of my committee members, and what I had come to realize and was trying to relate to her (although I doubt she understood much between my sobs) was that there was an unmistakable contradiction built into my Wikipedia assignment and research design. I had hoped to help students develop a writing process that would include meaningful analysis and problem-solving steps, which, from my experience, students often either performed by rote (thereby rendering any analysis meaningless) and/or skipped altogether. And from what I saw in my data, I was convinced that this one student, at least, had, in recognizing that audiences of writing exist, taken small steps toward developing such a process and could continue to do so in the future. But Miettinen’s (2009) statement gave me pause and made me ask myself, What is wrong with socially situated theories? What is it about these types of theories that can render contradiction powerless? For I had founded much of my research, and the Wikipedia assignment design, on the notion that school and work were “worlds apart” (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999), a notion that grew in large part out of situated social theories of writing and learning.

The contradiction within my assignment and research design was one of learning more than of writing or of audience. Situated learning theories claim that learning itself is an altogether different task at work than it is in the university, and these differences manifest in unique ways to hamper transfer between school and work. Tasks at school are often simplified, sequenced, “clearly demarcated occasions for learning” (Freedman & Adam, 1996, p. 419), while learning at work is often complex, messy and indirect, and implicit rather than explicit; it is a side effect (rather than the focus) of the process of performing
daily, ongoing tasks (Freedman & Adam). “The upshot is that, on the whole, when students leave the university to enter the workplace,” claim Freedman & Adam, “they not only need to learn new genres of discourse but they also need to learn new ways to learn such genres” (p. 424). The implication, then, of situated social theories of learning is that learning itself is tied to socially situated environments. Not only do differences between one social situation and another make it difficult to transfer and adapt the skills and lessons learned from one situation to another, but also the very ways in which one develops those skills and learns to assimilate those lessons is markedly different. Thus, lessons one has learned will not be useful from one situation to the next. I had built the Wikipedia assignment and my research project around my hopes of doing just the opposite: of teaching students a meta-process, so to speak, for writing that would work effectively in either school or work contexts and counted on contradiction as its impetus. The major contradiction that I saw in this was that I was still teaching this process from within the confines of the university, a socially situated environment so different from that of the workplace that, in the end, even contradiction could not hope to escape.

Believing I had finally understood how situated social theories could undermine the power of contradiction (after all, my own students’ learning had been hampered, in part, because of my failure to see that she was more than just a student of introductory technical communication), my first reaction was panic. I instinctively believed that Miettinen (2009) was right, but I wasn’t sure what it meant for my own research. Writing (and genre, as an extension) itself is a social act (Bazerman, 2004), and—I was convinced—was most effective when tailored for specific audiences and purposes, situated in specific social contexts. But I was just as convinced that the ways people learn (and the very skills and lessons they learn)
in one situated environment could be directly useful in another with minimal adaptation. I believed I had seen this potential in my student, and as a teacher of technical communication, I needed to believe this in order to feel that my own classroom efforts were not for naught. I began to explore in more detail the way cultural historical activity theorists, particularly Engeström (2009), understood learning and tackled the problem of transfer. In particular, I honed in on the notion of zones of proximal development, which Engeström uses in his expansive learning theory. I finally put my ruminations into writing to my dissertation director via email:

So here’s a fun question (and don’t feel like you have to answer—I’m just thinking my way through this: How do activity theorists differentiate between activity systems and zones of proximal development—especially since Engeström (2009) defines a zone as “a terrain of activity to be dwelled in and explored” (p. 312)?

I find it interesting that activity is used as a major feature to delineate both systems and zones, but I’m thinking that the activity of a zone may not need to be as concise/targeted/(narrow?) as that in a system. Perhaps talking about types of activity would more accurately describe what I’m thinking about zones, although activity could be anything from very general to very specific. It also seems as if systems and zones could be/mean the same thing, depending on how you’re defining the lines, but the idea of zones seems to make “breaking away” and “boundary crossing” (Engeström, 2009, p. 312)—trying to forge your own way and transferring ideas/actions/operations from one culture to another—much easier than the idea of activity systems, perhaps
because I tend to think of activity systems as more situated (the problem that was bugging me about the workplace/school situation).

Does any of this make sense? Does my thinking seem to be on the “right” track?

My dissertation director responded in a Skype meeting to my email with encouragement, telling me that my questions were intriguing and important. Panic set aside, I was able to ponder the primary contradictions between my student’s perceptions and my own in this new light. What was to result was an increased understanding on my part of the social and historical influences that each culture to which we, as individuals, belong can have on our perceptions and learning. Eventually, I was also to understand their influence on our notions of audience, but at this point in my dissertation research, learning itself held my attention. My understanding of these influences was only to increase with the analysis and writing process I undertook for the second dissertation chapter/article I wrote, focused on three of Theo’s students and their perceptions and execution of his assignment, and on how their perceptions and interpretations compared to those of others in the course.

**Struggling with Data**

When I began data analysis for the second dissertation chapter/article, it was with a bit of fear and trepidation. The truth was that I had been putting off dealing with the business communication students’ data for quite a while; eliminating Theo and his student from the mix for my first chapter/article had been a relief. This was because, from what I had seen when I had surveyed the data for conference presentations, I feared there was nothing there for me to find about audience. Going into this article, then, I had to admit that although my
motivation for teaching the assignment was to teach students to write for nonacademic audiences, Theo’s purpose in adapting the assignment was distinctly different from my own. Theo had adopted the assignment as a substitute for a client project, and he presented it to his students as an authoring project in which they would learn to work collaboratively with other users of Wikipedia to create a Wikipedia article. Once I was able to admit this, I reasoned that I should still be able to pick out, through bits and pieces, what Theo’s students had or had not learned about writing for audiences. After all, my interview questions focused on audience; that should give me something, right?

Thus, my third struggle in keeping my dissertation focused on audience occurred because of the nature of the data itself. I had been trying to fit Theo’s version of the assignment, and his students’ perspectives, into my own perceptions of the original assignment, the ways I had used it, and the ways my students perceived it. Once I let go of these erroneous perceptions, I was able to analyze the data fairly and recognize that, for the most part, Theo’s students hadn’t learned much about writing for audiences. Instead, these students faced two contradictions that most of them were unable to resolve. The first was a secondary contradiction, that of the differing definitions of the term review in Theo’s course, and the second was a primary contradiction that was along the same lines as my own students’. Either students could not get beyond their own preconceived notions of the tasks they would perform in their future careers (notions influenced, and sometimes supported by, their membership in their respective colleges), or students could not get beyond their biases against Wikipedia, biases that had grown out of their previous academic experiences and their perceptions of other instructors’ biases against Wikipedia. While I could point to data that answered my questions about audience negatively, though, the study still seemed more
focused on how students learn—or, rather, on those things that get in the way of their learning—rather than on audience. After having drafted two-thirds of my dissertation, one thing was certain: I had drifted far from a study on audience and had, instead, charted a course toward student learning.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

“It’s interesting—and unexpected.”

I never expected to do a study on learning rather than on audience. In retrospect, I suppose I should have considered that this was a possibility. After all, I had designed a pedagogical study focused on determining what, if anything, students could learn about writing for *audiences* by completing an assignment that required them to write for Wikipedia. All it took was a slight change in emphasis to divert my attention: What could students *learn* about writing for audiences through the assignment? In the end, the data itself, that which I had so carefully planned for and collected with a specific goal in mind, nudged my attention toward learning, and my reading of Miettinen (2009) provided the diversion that let learning, rather than audience, become prominent. I understand why and how this happened, as unexpected as it was. But I would be remiss if I did not return to my original intention by asking myself what this means. What does this diversion teach me about audience itself? What does the diversion teach me about teaching and researching audience? Two points in particular grew out of my analysis.

First, I have learned that although within the rhetoric, composition, and professional communication disciplines we have long acknowledged that audience itself is complex in that there are often multiple audiences for writing (Ede & Lunsford, 1984) and that these
audiences themselves become authors, in a sense, because of the influences they have on and in our texts (Phelps, 1990), as writing instructors and researchers, our practice is such that we often simplify our sense of audience by relying on the trope that writing is situated in specific social contexts. Doing so does allow us to narrow the field of possible audiences of writing, and it can help lend a purpose and context to our writing. But it can also lull us into believing that once we have done our initial groundwork—defining our setting, as researchers, or doing initial audience analyses as writers—we know our audiences in a specific context, and that there is not a need for determining their needs or how best to meet them.

The same holds true for writing instructors and their student audiences. Instructors may not often think of their students as audiences, but they are: they are audiences of our writing, through our assignment sheets, syllabi, written comments on their work, etc., and they are audiences of our speech when we meet face to face and give lectures and verbal instruction. But as instructors, we also tend to plan our courses based on our prior knowledge of (our assumptions of) the situated context: we know what department offers the courses and the types of majors who typically enroll, and we know what we have to teach them. But do we then question ourselves too closely about how our students’ needs might differ from those of other students’? Do instructors frequently ask themselves how, given the students enrolled in a course and their unique needs during a specific semester, they should adapt their texts or verbal instruction throughout the semester (even from one assignment to another) in an attempt to meet those needs for students? Theo and I both failed to do this with our student audiences—he with the term review, me with clearly communicating my learning goal that students learn to write effectively for nonacademic/future workplace audiences—and our
failures to recognize and then address our audiences’ needs became barriers to students’ understanding and learning.

Second, I have learned that because audience is so complex, it cannot be taught, or researched, in isolation from outside influences. What I mean by this is that we think of social situations as isolated or contained. My mistake in thinking of my students was to group them together as upper class engineering and science majors that formed our classroom community/activity system without considering the influence those other communities (the engineering college, for example) would have on their interpretations of the Wikipedia assignment or my learning goals (Beck, 2006). Moreover, each of my students belonged to multiple communities, and the culture and history of these communities (none of which could be termed an isolated social situation in and of itself) has the potential to play a part in my students’ interpretations. The same is true for audiences; each member brings his or her own past experiences and cultural influences to bare upon the immediate communicative context, so even a fairly predictable (seemingly situated) audience will have numerous inroads and outgoing paths from and to other communities that will affect, to differing degrees, its members varying interpretations of a text’s contents. But when we teach, we often encourage students to analyze the collective audience(s) and context within a particular social situation (which we have often contrived for the purpose) rather than having them trace the roads and paths that intersect with and cross the community’s boundaries. We do this, in part, to simplify the process for students (as we do for ourselves when we try to reduce data in a research study), but in doing so we do them a disservice by failing to prepare them for the messiness that writing for workplace audiences involves. Likewise, when we research audience, we cannot try to examine it as if it were somehow separate from other concepts or
issues. I tried to determine whether a specific assignment helped my and Theo’s students
develop a better sense of audience, but my own and Theo’s parts in the process (as well as
learning itself, in the more general sense) seemed tangential when my research began. I tried
to ignore those roads, but found that I could not do so if I wanted to honestly allow my data
to direct the research (Bishop, 1999).

What does this mean? My thoughts on this are in the elementary stages, but I have
come to think of audiences and contexts for writing not as isolated, social situations but as
conglomerates of communities with major and minor intersections of influence—connections
to other conglomerates and communities—that can, and should (at least the major
intersections), be explored if audiences are to be understood. Engeström’s (2009) take on
zones of proximal development, as well as his concepts of breaking away and boundary
crossing, are at play here, and I think it would be wise for teachers of technical writing to
consider adopting these concepts as an alternative to situated social theories, particularly
because they render the idea of transfer obsolete (Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009). In
my own research, I intend to explore these ideas more, particularly as they apply to writing
pedagogy. How would one teach this concept? What might a map with these conglomerates
and intersections look like, and what could it teach us about audience and about teaching
audience? As my dissertation draws to a close, I can’t help but think that I have a lot more
work ahead of me. But it’s interesting—and unexpected.
References


CHAPTER 6. WRAPPING UP THE RESEARCH:
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS OF WIKIPEDIENCE

My intent for this research was to judge how effective the Wikipedia assignment was in teaching introductory professional communication students to write for nonacademic (workplace) audiences and encouraging transfer. But I could have just as easily titled it *The Problems and Potential of Contradiction in Student Learning*, for the most striking results of the data collection and analysis pertained to student learning and the roles contradiction plays within it. The data not only supported the notion that the learning potential of contradiction can be limited if one attempts to isolate it within a situated social environment (Miettenen, 2009), but also suggested that doing so can create unintentional contradictions that can actually hamper student learning. In my research, the most common areas for unintentional contradiction to arise were between teacher and student perceptions of learning goals and of the application of the lessons to students’ activities in their future work environments. These unintentional contradictions manifested as students’ confusion and misunderstanding and led to anxiety, frustration, and/or apathy as students either struggled to accomplish their tasks or gave up altogether and simply went through the motions. But my research also indicated that when an instructor intervenes and helps students recognize and negotiate a contradiction, students perceptions may change, which can lead to revised action and further development, or learning, on the students’ part. This suggests that it is important for instructors to be prepared for, and able to recognize, unintentional contradictions that may arise for their students. As a part of ongoing, reflective activity, teacher-research of one’s own classroom...
can help instructors learn to do so more easily and the lessons one learns from teacher-research can be insightful to others facing similar situations.

Lessons of student learning and the roles of contradiction aside, the question of the Wikipedia assignment’s effectiveness in helping to teach introductory professional communication students to write for nonacademic (workplace) audiences and in encouraging transfer still remains, as do my original research questions, which were patterned as part of an activity theory analysis. Was the assignment effective in either of our courses? How did the students’ perceptions of our teaching units affect their work? How did the students’ perceptions of audience change during the teaching unit? How did the students’ perceptions of the social motives change during the teaching unit? Why did these perceptions change? And, as I asked in “Intersections of Influence: Audience, Learning, and a Research Narrative,” what can the answers to these questions teach me about teaching audience?

Returning to the three previous chapters/articles for answers, this chapter will address each of these questions in turn and conclude with suggestions for further research.

**How Did the Students' Perceptions of the Teaching Unit Affect Their Work?**

How did the students’ perceptions of the teaching unit affect their work? The article best able to provide an overview of students’ perceptions is “The Other Side of the Desk: Students’ Perceptions of a Wikipedia Project.” This article features the perceptions and experiences with a Wikipedia semester project of three students of Theo’s introductory business communication course and situates them in relation to the rest of the student participants in the course—in all, 39 of the 46 students enrolled. For most students, two primary contradictions (Miettinen, 2009) affected their perceptions of the teaching unit, and
subsequently, their work: one, between students’ perceptions of their future careers and the
tasks being required of them, and two, between students’ perceptions of Wikipedia and
Theo’s reasons for using it in the project. All three of the main participants encountered at
least one of these contradictions, that of the project’s perceived pointlessness because of the
Wikipedia connection. Of the three main participants, two called it “pointless” (Ms. Co-
branding) and “not something I benefitted from” (Ms. Child Life Specialist). The third was
openly hostile to the project, which was understandable since a Wikipedia administrator had
deleted her original contribution to Wikipedia as blatant advertising (a contradiction of the
type I had hoped students would encounter, recognize, and negotiate—one between their own
standards for writing and Wikipedia’s—but one which she never quite recognized or
understood). When I asked Ms. Board of Certification what she thought of the pro-
ject, she peeked out my door to make sure her instructor wasn’t standing in the hallway, and then
confessed, “I think it’s stupid.”

Thus, these three students, along with the majority of the student participants, had a
negative perception of the Wikipedia teaching unit in the business communication course.
My research pointed to two prominent reasons for this: first, most students did not
understand the purpose of the project: what they were to learn from it, and why. Many of
these students, failing to find a purpose in the project itself, attempted to adopt for it a
purpose from their previous academic experience or their preconceived notions of what they
would be doing in their future careers. By doing so, these students created a primary
contradiction that many of them were unable to negotiate. They did not recognize that their
previous academic experiences were inadequate to interpret Theo’s goals for the Wikipedia
project, a project with purposes and tasks quite different from anything they had encountered
outside his course. Neither could their notions of their own future work, which were incomplete and possibly erroneous (facts that were unrecognizable to most students), offer insight to interpret the assignment as Theo did. When this failed, the students grew dismissive of the project and unmotivated to make anything but a cursory effort to fulfill the minimum requirements. Others looked to Wikipedia itself assuming it must have something to do with the project’s purpose, but this, too, fell short. The idea that learning how to work within Wikipedia would help them succeed in any practical way in their careers was incongruous with what they thought they knew about their futures. Those students who could not successfully negotiate this contradiction often failed to attribute any value to the project as a result.

This leads me to the second prominent reason for students’ negative perception of the teaching unit: many students misunderstood the purpose and function of Wikipedia itself apart from the project, which contributed to a lack of motivation to work on the project. This point is slightly different from failing to understand the project’s purpose, because students may have understood what they were to learn from the project and why but still fail to attribute value to it because of the preconceived notions they held about Wikipedia. These students tended to rely on their previous, personal experience with Wikipedia as a quick source for information and/or their previous academic experience, which taught them that the information within Wikipedia was not suitable material for academic papers and research projects. As part of the project, students were to have explored Wikipedia to gain a better understanding of it and how people worked within it. Not having done so, the majority of students failed to understand the nature of knowledge within Wikipedia or the identity of people who contributed to it regularly and their reasons for doing so. Instead, their academic
biases often led students to believe Wikipedia was all unreliable and useless for any real work, and one student revealed his and others’ ignorance of Wikipedia contributors when he referred to them as a bunch of high school kids and excluded the possibility that others may work within the wiki.

Thus, for the majority of students in Theo’s business communication course, primary contradictions between their interpretive framework and the teaching unit left them with confused and/or negative perceptions that negatively affected their work. Most of these reported that they hadn’t been motivated to work in the project beyond the minimum requirements, and a few admitted to not even doing that or to making it appear as if they had done more than they actually did. This is not surprising, considering that this ultimately resulted in a contradiction of object and individuals’ interpretations of the collective object are directive (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) in the sense that individuals often base their actions on them. Not understanding the assignment’s purpose and intended outcome, the students saw no reason for completing the tasks set before them. The students’ Wikipedia contributions reflected this lack of motivation, too; many of them were sparse and did not resemble contributions that followed the community’s standards for its articles. They often used incorrect headings or formats, wrote introductions that read more like essays than the leads Wikipedia contributors preferred, used bulleted or numbered lists where other articles would have used a paragraph form, etc. If students requested feedback from Wikipedia contributors (many did not, relying on friends to provide comments instead), those requests also reflected this lack of motivation: students like Ms. Co-branding put little effort into targeting contributors who might have been able to provide valuable feedback or into discovering how contributors interact with each other on Wikipedia. Instead, these students
chose random talk pages to post their requests, and many became frustrated when those requests went unanswered.

**How did the students’ perceptions of audience change during the teaching units?**

How did the students’ perceptions of audience change during the teaching units? There is little evidence of change in students’ perceptions of audience in either “(un)Intentional: Using Contradiction as a Catalyst of Student Learning” or “The Other Side of the Desk: Students’ Perceptions of a Wikipedia Project.” At first glance, Penni17’s case seemed promising because she claimed to have learned to identify her audience before she writes. Penni17 was the introductory technical communication student and chemical engineering major from “(un)Intentional.” But a closer look at the evidence revealed that while Penni17 did work hard at trying to draft a quality contribution that would impress her readers, her perception of who those readers were never changed throughout the project. Penni17 did not try to identify various audiences among her own readers because she already knew (or thought she did) who they would be: other members of the chemical engineering profession, particularly those within academia with whom she was already acquainted. She had created a primary contradiction, influenced by her membership in the College of Engineering, between her own perception of the appropriate audience for the assignment and my intended audience. The reader analysis of Wikipedia contributors that I required as part of the assignment was not, in Penni17’s mind, representative of any part of her audience; this is the reason she was so hesitant over asking Wikipedia contributors, rather than a classmate or professor, for example, to provide feedback on her contribution. Neither did she consider
the popular audience of Wikipedia a part of her audience; in fact, she argued that day-to-day readers would not be interested in or even understand her topic and would only read her contribution if they mistakenly stumbled across it.

Penni17’s perception of her audience, then, did not change during the introductory technical communication course’s teaching unit. But what about the students featured in “The Other Side of the Desk”—the introductory business communication students? I think it is safe to quickly dismiss Ms. Co-branding as a possibility; she could not resolve the primary contradiction that existed between her perceived irrelevance of Wikipedia itself (against which she held a strong academic bias that she believed her marketing professors shared) and her preconceived notions of her future career. There is no real evidence that Ms. Co-branding thought about an audience at all.

Neither is there much evidence that Ms. Board of Certification, Inc., an athletic training student, thought of any particular individuals or groups other than her instructor as audiences, at least in the sense of audiences that she should target (aim to meet the expectations of) with her writing. When her original contribution was deleted, she reported having contacted the administrator who had done so asking for advice. After two weeks and no response, Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. just posted the contribution again. This did elicit a response from the administrator—some edits and a suggestion to add both internal and external links to the contribution. Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. did so, but not because the Wikipedia administrator, one who could be argued to be her gatekeeper audience, suggested it; she added the links because they had “talked about it in class.” In other words, her instructor, whose expectations Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. was trying to meet, had told them to do so. Thus, Ms. Board of Certification tried to keep the assignment entirely
within the activity system of the classroom and became frustrated and angry when she encountered contradiction between her own standards of writing and Wikipedia contributors’ standards. To Ms. Board of Certification, the true audience was, and should have been, her instructor and no one else.

But what about Ms. Child Life Specialist? For this the evidence remains inconclusive. It is clear that Ms. Child Life Specialist had hoped there would be a response from the Wikipedia community to her contribution and grew frustrated when nothing happened. It was also clear that, upon my suggestion to contact Wikipedia contributors other than her classmates for feedback—those who had been working within Wikipedia for a year or more—her perception of appropriate reviewers changed. In this sense, Ms. Child Life Specialist had experienced a secondary contradiction that she had not worked incredibly hard to correct, that of different interpretations of the word review (and the appropriate people from whom to request that review) between herself and Theo as detailed in the assignment requirements. She recognized this contradiction when I pointed it out to her, and from that point proceeded to negotiate a solution by changing her plans. She targeted five seasoned Wikipedia contributors and employed the business communication strategy known as establishing goodwill (a rhetorical strategy for developing positive, common grounds with readers) when she contacted each of them. When four of the five contributors responded, Ms. Child Life Specialist began to write of them enthusiastically, referring to them as users she could interact with.

What is unclear is how much Ms. Child Life Specialist thought of these Wikipedia contributors as an audience. In her final progress report, she referred to them first and foremost as other “users” of Wikipedia. But did she attempt to establish goodwill because
she saw these individuals as audiences of her feedback requests? Did she think of them as an audience of her contribution? The only hint that she might have done so (and that her perceptions of audience may have changed during the teaching unit) was one comment in her final progress report: “I am convinced that my article is a success! … I believe that much of this is because of the audience analysis that we were required to do.”

**How Did the Students’ Perceptions of the Social Motives Change**

**During the Teaching Units?**

How did the students’ perceptions of the social motives change during the teaching unit? This is an even harder question to answer than the last because it begs another question: whose social motives? Wikipedia contributors’ motives for writing? Wikipedia readers’ motives for reading? Their instructors’ motives for teaching the assignments? Or perhaps the students’ own motives for completing the assignments? Evidence that students’ perceptions of anyone’s social motives had changed seems as if it would require an “Aha!” moment, one in which the student had a sudden revelation that made her admit she had been previously mistaken. But could evidence of such a change be more subtle?

Once again, I will dismiss Ms. Co-branding from “The Other Side of the Desk.” Like many of her classmates, the only social motives she seemed to consider were those of Wikipedia’s readers, who would use the wiki as a reference (although in her opinion, this was ill advised), and her instructor’s, which she could not fathom. Ms. Board of Certification, Inc. had similar perceptions on both of these counts, but she also anguished over the social motives of the Wikipedia administrator who had deleted her original contribution. Although his deletion comments and suggestions for improvement on her
second contribution both stated his reasons for deleting the first (it was an unsourced article on a corporate entity, which implied blatant advertising), Ms. Board of Certification never recognized this or understood his social motive. And while Ms. Child Life Specialist changed the targets of her own requests for feedback, there is no evidence that she considered what the social motives might be of those who worked within Wikipedia on a regular basis.

An argument might be made for circumstantial evidence indicating that Ms. Child Life Specialist’s perspective on her instructor’s motive for assigning the project had changed, however. When I met with her two weeks before the project was due, she stated, “I guess I don’t see why I need to be able to put this thing up on Wikipedia.” After interacting with several Wikipedia contributors, though, she wrote, “One thing that was definitely hammered home was the benefit of establishing goodwill and positive communication from the very beginning when interacting with others.” Ms. Child Life Specialist also indicated that her understanding of her instructor’s social motive had changed when she wrote, “In the beginning of the project … I didn’t understand how creating a Wikipedia article would help me in business communication.” She did not, however, continue to describe a change in her perception; instead, she concluded her final progress report by claiming to be “neutral” about the project because it did not have any “extraordinary benefit.” This indicates that, if her perception of her instructor’s social motive had changed, she was either unsure if she was correct in the new interpretation—that hers was a lesson her instructor may not have intended as an outcome of the project—or still believed it to be of little value.

Penni17 of “(un)Intentional” is the only of the featured students whose evidence seemed to clearly indicate a change in her perception of social motive during the teaching unit. This was a change in her perception of social motives of writers; she went from not
thinking about social motives at all to thinking about writers’, at least in the sense of who they were writing to, when she wrote and read:

I also like now, like I consciously think, of you know, … you have to convey what your message, and how you convey your message depending on who you’re, who you’re speaking to. So I actually do make a conscious effort.

Like, I think, I definitely think about it. And when I read, you know, whether it’s a magazine or newspapers and that, I always, I kind of think about it. I definitely think about it. Who they’re gearing it to.

But is this a change in Penni17’s perception in social motive—in a writer’s reasons for writing—or in her perceptions of audience, having gone from non-existent to present? It is hard to say in this case.

Why Did These Perceptions Change?

Why did these perceptions change? Only two of the featured students seemed to have slightly changed their perceptions: Ms. Child Life Specialist’s perceptions of her audience and of her instructor’s social motive may have changed, and Penni17’s general perception of writers’ social motives (or perhaps, writers’ audiences?) may have changed. If these changes did, in fact, occur, my own communications with the students probably played a direct role in each of these cases. I pointed out a contradiction to Ms. Child Life Specialist when I told her that requesting feedback from classmates who were Wikipedia users because they had “Wikipedia IDs,” rather than established Wikipedia contributors, was probably not what her instructor had intended. As a result, she sought out and contacted several Wikipedia contributors with whom she interacted for the remainder of the project. This interaction then
taught her a valuable lesson about establishing goodwill and positive communication from the outset, which led to her possible change in perception of her instructor’s social motive. It is possible that Ms. Child Life Specialist would have come to the realization on her own; she could have reread the assignment sheet or asked her instructor about it, but many of her classmates also had these resources available to them and only requested feedback from each other. My influence on her actions seems fairly clear.

Likewise, Penni17 was forthright in attributing her new attentiveness to writer’s social motives and text’s audiences to me. She said that I had made the purpose of the Wikipedia assignment “very clear” in class: I had repeatedly told students that I wanted them to remember to think about their audiences when they write. It was for this reason, together with my insistence that the purpose of the assignment was to help them learn to write for audiences in their future careers, that she paid so much attention to the audience she thought she would write for in the future, chemical engineers. And my repeated mantra of “remember your audience” seemed to have stuck with her—just not in the way I had originally intended.

I believe, too, that Penni17’s intense anxiety during the teaching unit and her feelings of success at the end contributed to the slight changes in her perspective; she had focused so much effort on meeting her imagined audience’s expectations that it became an experience she remembered, at least as long as the following semester.

Perhaps the more interesting question to ask is why students’ perceptions did not change during these teaching units. This troubled me as I analyzed my data, particularly the data from the introductory business communication courses that Theo taught. I had been seeing more evidence of small changes in other case studies of my own students that I had done for conference presentations, but Theo’s students seemed to offer little data about
audience itself, let alone changes in their perceptions about writing for audiences. I finally realized that I had been trying to push the data into an unnatural shape, like trying to push a large square peg through a small round hole. Although I had designed the original Wikipedia assignment with a strong emphasis on audience, of necessity, Theo changed the assignment to one that suited his course and his students better. What resulted was his semester project, formally titled the “Wikipedia Authorship Project” (see Appendix D) in which he stressed interacting with other users to develop students’ writing in a process that would mimic workplace writing processes. This may seem just an issue of semantics, but the result seemed to be that students rarely thought about the audiences of their writing outside of the initial reader analyses they did for the project—analyses that, for the most part, contained descriptions of assumed readers. In other words, most students relied on their imaginations to describe Wikipedia readers’ characteristics rather than pointing to any real evidence from Wikipedia itself to support their claims. Instead of thinking about audiences, Theo’s students thought about reviewers: classmates and (sometimes) Wikipedia contributors whose only function was to provide constructive criticism so students would have a few small revisions to make in fulfillment of the project requirements. Most of the data I got from Theo’s students, then, was not the type I could use to seek answers to my research questions.

But there was another reason that these students (both Theo’s and my own) did not change their perceptions much throughout the project. Each of these students encountered contradictions, either of primary or secondary nature or both, that they only recognized in the sense that they experienced confusion and frustration over the problems that resulted. In other words, these students did not understand the problems they were facing and could not pinpoint their origins. Without being able to do so, they were unsure how to negotiate
What Have the Answers to These Questions Taught Me About Teaching Audience?

What have the answers to these questions taught me about teaching audience? Primarily, I learned that while we have a complex understanding of the concept of audiences of writing in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies (including the fields of technical and professional communication) our students do not. Over two decades of theorizing and research (the 1980s through the 1990s), writing researchers came to understand that “all writing is social” (CCCC, 2004, p. 786) and that as such, it is produced within social contexts (Kirsch & Roen, 1990). We recognize that these contexts and the “forums (publications, talks, conferences)” (Kirsch & Roen, p. 14) in which they intersect work to “shape audiences” (Kirsch & Roen, p. 14). We realize that these audiences in turn help to shape texts in the sense that they interpret (Barthes, 1968/1977), influence, and converse with authors and other texts through both the spoken and written dialogue of their discourse communities (Kirsch & Roen; Phelps, 1990; Roth, 1990). We came to understand that using a genre is performing social action (Miller, 1984) by employing typified responses to recurring needs within social contexts that can be adjusted, as needed, to the nuances of particular situations. Thus, writing theorists such as Miller (1984, 1994) and Bazerman (2004) also brought to the discipline an understanding that audiences within these social contexts play active roles in the creation and communication of genre and of knowledge itself (Berkenkotter, 1990) in the
form of social facts (Bazerman, 2004). Knowledge itself is considered “indeterminate, contingent, and socially derived as opposed to foundational, cumulative, and capable of verification or falsification” (Berkenkotter, pp. 193–194). Knowledge, as well as genre, can change from context to context and situation to situation, and its acceptance and effectiveness in each case is dependent on the audience.

Within the rhetoric, composition, and writing studies disciplines, then, we use the term *audience* with a sense of its rich history and disciplinary associations (Lunsford & Ede, 2009) that our introductory technical and business communication do not have. Students’ concept of audience is overly simplified; when they encounter a more complex notion of audience, many of them react by rejecting it (as did many of my own students) or giving up on it (as did several of Theo’s students). In particular, the students in my own and Theo’s courses seemed to reject the idea that writing is a social activity and that audiences contribute actively to the writing process. Most of my students rejected my assertion (if they picked up on it in class—many did not) that Wikipedia contributors were an important audience of their contributions, the audience that served the gatekeeper function. Some students, such as Penni17, looked to their own disciplines for the real audience since I required that their contributions be on technical topics related to their discipline. Others looked to the global Wikipedia audience (anyone who may happen to read or use Wikipedia casually) and surmised that these users, the real audience, were just like themselves. While thinking of audience in disciplinary terms could have been beneficial to students’ efforts, the nearly global, anyone and everyone approach to thinking about audience is useless in helping an author to determine what or how to write.
Likewise, Theo’s students rejected the idea of an audience that contributed actively to the writing process. These students wanted reviews in the form of comments on their work, but most of them did not seem to want feedback in any other form. In fact, many students seemed affronted when others edited their contributions instead of replying in comment form to a request for feedback. Theo and I could point to at least one student who came to recognize the value of others’ contributions to her own article, Ms. Rabbit Faeces. A student whom we featured in our joint conference presentation, Ms. Rabbit Faeces was initially indignant and then appreciative of the meaningful interaction and contributions a British contributor made to her article when she came to better understand Wikipedia and the ways people worked within it. But most of Theo’s students considered their contributions as something they owned, and they interpreted edits larger than punctuation or spelling corrections to be intrusions.

What is encouraging in all of this is Ms. Child Life Specialist’s ability to successfully negotiate the contradiction she faced once she recognized and understood that a contradiction existed. Her development, as insignificant as it might have seemed (especially to her), supports the activity theory claim that contradictions can be catalysts of growth and development of individuals and collective activity systems. But it also indicates that instructors have a critical role to play in this development. Instructors employing contradiction in this manner may need to intervene and point out the existence of a contradiction to students before any productive learning can take place.

One thing seems clear: Professional writing instructors need to complicate the concept of audience when we are trying to teach it to our students, and teach them how to recognize the source of problems that may arise as a result. It is unrealistic to think, however,
that introductory technical and business communication instructors can communicate the historical and disciplinary complexity of the concept to students within the context of one course, particularly if it is a service course for majors of other disciplines. There is simply too much else to teach within the few short weeks of a semester or term. But talking about multiple audiences by breaking them down into categories like primary, secondary, tertiary, and gatekeeper readers for our students does not seem to be impressing upon our students the social aspect of writing or the roles that audiences often play in the writing process. Like our attempts at situating assignments such as simulations and client and service-learning projects in more realistic writing contexts, our efforts at teaching our students about audiences of writing seem to fall short, particularly in light of recent workplace research (Spilka & Blakeslee, 2012) that shows that workplace audiences’ roles in the writing process are even more complex than we have yet considered.

**Directions for Future Research**

I do not have any easy answers for this problem. While the Wikipedia assignment certainly complicated the concept of audience for students and had potential to teach them valuable methods of investigating and writing for and with audiences, for most students it was too complicated. It was too far removed from what they believed they would be doing in their future careers or what they should be doing in school that they lacked motivation to work on the assignment from the outset. This may have been resolved had Theo and I directly intervened in more students’ assignments and pointed out areas of contradiction, but these contradictions were not always obvious and frequently did not surface until students’ work was submitted. Too often, the lack of motivation that students experienced by not
understanding the project continued for students who did not see much (or any) response to their articles or requests for feedback. Their work indicated that many of my own students, who performed activity theory analyses of Wikipedia and its contributors before drafting their contributions, had a better understanding of the purpose of Wikipedia and the way people worked within it to produce texts than most of Theo’s students, who did not have an activity theory analysis requirement and whose work rarely indicated that they had attempted to discover how Wikipedia worked on their own. This method of analysis, then, still holds the same potential that it did for me when I first read about Kain and Wardle’s (2005) experiments with it in introductory writing courses.

Even more important than investigating the use of activity theory analyses in my introductory courses, I think that introducing a simplified version of contradiction to students, one that alerted students to the fact that contradictions can exist between their purposes and understandings and others’, may help students better recognize and negotiate contradictions when they arise. But I would also like to try to complicate my students’ concept of audience by investigating the notion of intersections of audience that I introduced in “Intersections of Influence: Audience, Learning, and a Research Narrative.” These three possibilities raise a number of questions that could be interesting to incorporate into a research project:

- If students were not only taught a simplified version of activity theory, but also taught to look for and recognize contradictions within and between activity systems, would they have better success at identifying these problems and negotiating solutions to them? Would this even be possible in an introductory level course? Or is it still too complicated?
• Could the notion of intersections of audience be a helpful theoretical construct? How might it be useful pedagogically? Might I be able to encourage students to think of audiences as individuals who belong to multiple communities, each of which influence (and have influenced, historically) those individuals’ cultural and historical perceptions and play an important role in the ways they interpret and create texts rather than homogeneous groups situated within a particular context with multiple characteristics in common? This might give students an idea of the complexity of audiences, but would it be too complex? Or could it help them be able to better target audiences or better understand the social roles audiences play in the construction of texts?

• How well would any of these pedagogical strategies work to alleviate the problem of transfer? Would they help better prepare students for workplace writing? What might a longitudinal study using these pedagogical strategies look like? Would one even be worth it, considering that the introductory course in professional communication is often a service course or an elective for students from other disciplines—students whose membership in other activity systems is likely to be a much stronger, much more lasting influence than my own?

The answers to these questions remain to be seen, but you can be sure that I’ll be one of the people asking them.
APPENDIX A: TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

WIKIPEDIA ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment: Wikipedia Article

Learning Outcomes

- Understand & apply rhetorical principles to technical communication
- Understand the generic requirements of important forms of technical communication
- Understand the influences of organizational settings in the composition of technical documents
- Understand the conventions of your own discipline and be aware of the variety of conventions across disciplines
- Understand how ethical issues influence research and application in your discipline

Assignment Components

- Wikipedia article, including evidence of revisions
- Daily activities log
- Rhetorical analysis/reflection

Due Dates

- Initial Wikipedia article: Friday, October 5
- Daily activities log: periodic checks in class; final due date Friday, October 26
- Rhetorical analysis/reflection: Friday, October 26
- Final Wikipedia article: Friday, October 26

In the technical workplace, the ability to write to meet different readers' needs will be invaluable to you. You may need to write different types of documents—task logs, product specifications, etc.—and some of these documents may have several types of readers, all with different needs. Your supervisor may want short summaries, but the marketing department may want to know what type of consumer will want your product. The legal department needs to be sure that the company won’t be held liable for what you write (or don’t write). So the first step in any writing task, large or small, is to figure out who your different readers are and what they want.

As you may find with this assignment (and the workplace), determining who your readers are and what they want is not always easy. You may submit a draft, only to find that it ends up on the desk (or computer screen) of a reader you didn’t expect. Suddenly, you need to meet needs or expectations that you weren’t even aware existed. Or you may be faced with the opposite dilemma: you write a draft, send it to the people you believe should provide feedback, and hear nothing in reply. In either case, you are under a deadline and need to complete your task: To submit a polished, revised version of your assignment and its components that meets your readers needs the best you can.

What is the assignment? You will write an article and publish it on an online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Your article will be subject to feedback, revision, or even deletion by other users of Wikipedia, just as a workplace document is subject to feedback, editing, or rejection from your coworkers, supervisors, or other departments. Your goal is to use the feedback you receive (or lack thereof) to shape the article to meet the needs of the Wikipedia.
community the best you can.

**Audience:** The Wikipedia community (the rest is up to you)

**Purpose:** To convey information on a technical subject in a manner that pleases your readers

**Context:** Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia that anyone can contribute to and anyone can edit (it’s a wiki)

**Assignment components**

This assignment has three main components: the article itself, a daily activities log, and a rhetorical analysis/reflection. We will develop the rubric for this assignment as a class. It will be available on Moodle by Monday, October 1.

**The Wikipedia article**

Begin by familiarizing yourself with Wikipedia and choosing a topic. As you spend time on Wikipedia, be sure to complete your daily activities log (see below). Choose your topic carefully; it should be on a technical subject related to your discipline, should pique your interest, and should be one that you are fairly knowledgeable about but can research without difficulty. It also needs to be original to Wikipedia, since Wikipedia editors delete duplicate articles. You can either write a completely original article or expand a stub (a topic that someone began but didn’t get far enough on to call an actual article). I strongly suggest that you get your topic approved by me before moving forward with it.

Next, write a rhetorical analysis of your readers (see below for more details). Then, using this rhetorical analysis, research, write, and publish your Wikipedia article, doing your best to meet your readers needs. Your initial article needs to be published by the beginning of class on Friday, October 5. Send the URL, as well as your Wikipedia user name, to Rhonda. When you have published your article, contact at least three other Wikipedia users (I suggest contacting users you see making frequent contributions to your area of expertise) and ask them to provide feedback on your article. Check your article at least twice a week for feedback or revisions from other users, and make changes of your own based on that feedback. If you don’t receive any feedback, contact additional users and make revisions
that you believe may be necessary. Don't forget to log your activities in the activities log. Your final check-in/revisions should be complete by the beginning of class on Friday, October 26.

*daily activities log*

Employers frequently want to know what their employees do with their time, and as an instructor, I am no different. Therefore, I have attached the following activities log, which you should complete every time you log on to Wikipedia. This can tell me things about your use of time that aren't immediately apparent from your article, such as the amount of time/effort you put into obtaining feedback or preparing your rhetorical analysis.

Please make your activities log as complete as possible. Include your user name (or, if you forget to log in, the IP address of the computer you are using), the URLs of any pages you visit, the user names of any Wikipedia users you contact, the types of revisions/activities you do, and the time spent doing them. Make notes for yourself, as well: if you are responding to specific feedback when you make a revision, include that in your log—it will come in useful when you write your rhetorical analysis/reflection. I may check your log periodically during the course of the assignment, so have it with you when you come to class. The final log is due on Friday, October 26.

*rhetorical analysis/reflection*

As an instructor, I want to know that you are thinking about your readers and whether you learn anything about writing for readers for this assignment. The more thought you put into writing for your readers, the better your documents are likely to be. For these reasons, I would like you to write a combined rhetorical analysis/reflection, which you will submit on Friday, October 26, along with the other final components of the assignment. However, the late due date does not mean that you should put off writing this portion of the assignment until October 25.

For this rhetorical analysis, it should benefit you to apply both types of strategies our readings and class discussions have covered (chapter 3 and an activity theory analysis). When you have chosen a topic, explore similar articles on Wikipedia. What do they have in common? Who contributes to those articles? What do those
contributors seem to value? Who do they seem to think their readers are? How do the answers to these questions translate into an activity system theory? What are the boundaries of this activity system, and who are its subjects, what is its object, what are its tools, and what is the division of labor present? Be sure to keep track of your explorations in your daily activities log, and begin drafting a rhetorical analysis of your readers and context. How do your findings affect your purpose? What do your findings indicate about the type of information that needs to be in your article? Write all of this down and save it; it will become part of your final rhetorical analysis/reflection, and it will help you write your article.

After you have posted your article and requested feedback, take a close look at any feedback you do receive. What do your readers seem to want? What type of readers do they seem to be? Look at their profiles and comments they've made to other users in the past, as well as the contributions they've made to Wikipedia. You can use this information to revise/complete your Wikipedia article and your analysis. In your final analysis, don't be afraid to be reflective; whether your analysis changed or remained the same, tell me why—and how it affected your writing.

The final rhetorical analysis/reflection should be in memo format, single-spaced, between 2-3 pages in length.
Completing large, ongoing projects successfully can be difficult, but is usually made easier with some careful research, planning, and preparation. The same is true when it comes to writing. As you are learning, it is important to investigate both your readers and context before you begin a large project, particularly when you are unfamiliar with both.

For the Wikipedia Analysis, your task is threefold. You will:

- Analyze the readers of a featured article in Wikipedia by using the categories defined by the textbook
- Analyze the context (activity system) connected to a featured article in Wikipedia by using the categories we will discuss in class
- Determine what content an article needs to successfully meet the expectations of the readers and the context

Write up your findings in a 2-3 page memo addressed to me. Don’t forget to use applicable design principles, but even more importantly, don’t forget to provide evidence for your assertions. For each assertion you make (e.g., “Readers are students like me”), you should answer the questions, “How do you know this? Where did you find evidence of this on Wikipedia?” (This means, of course, that you’ll have to cite your sources.)

Since you will have to write a Wikipedia Article yourself, you would be wise to pick a featured article within a category that you would be interested in writing within. Featured articles can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_articles

For this assignment, I will use an A-F grade scale
(A=Excellent, B=Good, C=Average, D=Fair, F=Poor) to evaluate the following categories: Content (three subcategories: audience, context, meeting expectations), Design, Organization, and Style. Content refers to the information provided to accomplish the three tasks. Do you identify different types of readers? Do you identify the context? Do you determine what these mean, in terms of what needs to be in a successful Wikipedia Article? Do you provide evidence to back up your assertions? Design refers to your design choices in the memo. Does your memo follow the conventional format of a memo? Do you use applicable design principles, such as grouping and alignment? How well do you do this? Organization refers to the order of information, your use of transitions, and your use of a logical organization that makes your memo easy to follow. Style refers to your choice of words, phrases, and language and the ways you use these to relate to your audience (me).

More than five spelling, punctuation, or grammar mistakes in the memo will result in a 10% deduction of your final grade.
Assignment (Part 2): Wikipedia Article

Rhonda L. McCaffery, Instructor

learning outcomes

▪ understand & apply rhetorical principles to technical communication
▪ understand the influences of organizational settings in the composition of technical documents
▪ understand the conventions of your own discipline and be aware of the variety of conventions across disciplines
▪ understand how ethical issues influence research and application in your discipline

assignment components

▪ see the following page

due dates

▪ see the following page

submission form

▪ reflective memo: Moodle

We’ve been talking about writing for different audiences, and this is your chance to do it. For this assignment, you will either (a) write an original Wikipedia article; (b) edit—and substantially contribute to—a stub; or (c) add a substantial section to an existing article that has been active within the last thirty days (an active article will have several recent edits in the history and several recent discussions in the talk page).

The hardest part about this assignment for many students is choosing a topic. You need to choose a technical topic, because you’ll be using elements of technical definitions and technical descriptions as you work (besides, it’s a technical communication class). However, many technical topics are covered on Wikipedia, and duplicate topics are not allowed by the Wikipedia community. My advice to you is to think about your topic carefully and to choose a topic you are somewhat knowledgeable about but can research with ease. Wikipedia is picky about the sources you use, so making sure there are sources available before you start is a good idea.

Writing for Wikipedia, though, is only a small part of this assignment. We’ve been talking about analyzing readers, contexts, and organizations (activity systems), and you’re doing an assignment right now to help you do that on Wikipedia. But you’ll soon realize (I hope) that this type of analysis is ongoing, and your impressions can change as you continue working. Your main goal for this assignment is to figure out what the Wikipedia community that you are working within wants out of an article and give it to them. To do so, you’ll have to watch your own article, watch others like it, watch the talk pages associated with them, and yes, communicate with the people that are active, valuable contributors to Wikipedia. You’ll get their opinions on your article (be sure to make specific requests for help rather than just saying, “Can you look at my article?”), judge their opinions according to what you know about the other readers and the activity system, and edit your article accordingly. You’ll do this for the next two months, and
are required to work on the assignment in some capacity at least once a week during that time. At the end of the two months, you’ll write a reflection telling me how the process went; how your perception of the readers, context, and organization/activity system/community changed/did not change throughout the process; and what you did to try to meet their needs.

**format & due dates**
Here’s a quick glance at the requirements and due dates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>task</th>
<th>due date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare a list of three possibilities for a new or existing article or a stub you could work on and discuss it with Rhonda in a conference between February 18-20</td>
<td>February 18-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upload first article draft/edits</td>
<td>February 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact first Wikipedia contributors</td>
<td>March 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit your article and discuss it with Wikipedia contributors weekly</td>
<td>March 14, March 21, March 28, April 4, April 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Includes ongoing research, substantial edits to the article, discussions on article talk pages, discussions on personal talk pages, etc. You may miss one week, but should have some work to show the other four weeks.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write your final reflection</td>
<td>April 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**evaluation**
For this assignment, 50% of your grade will be judged on the article itself: content, organization, style, extent of edits, etc. The other 50% will be judged on our interaction with, and descriptions of (within your reflection), the readers, context, and organization/activity system/Wikipedia community. I will look to see if you made a continued, substantial effort to interact with the community members and take their opinions into account.
Assignment (Part 3): Wikipedia Article Reflection

Revised Version  ■  Introductory Technical Communication
Rhonda L. McCaffery, Instructor

A few of you wanted more information about the Wikipedia Article Reflection, so here it is.

I’d like you to write a reflection, in the form of a memo, telling me

• how the process of writing the article went
• how your perception of the readers, context, and organization/activity system/community changed (or did not change) throughout the process
• what you did to try to meet your readers’ needs
• what you learned (if anything)
• what recommendations you have for changes I should make to the assignment in the future.

This is your opportunity to convince me that you deserve an A on this assignment, so take it. Give me a good idea of what you went through to get the article where it is. You can use parts of your mini-reflection, or you could use the assignment sheet as a guide and tell me what requirements you fulfilled and which you didn’t (and why—I'm assuming you'll have good reasons if you didn't do something). The reflection will probably be 2-3 pages, although I’m open to longer or shorter memos as long as I get carefully written reflections covering the topics I've asked for. Make a good argument; it could help your grade.
APPENDIX B: FREEWRITING PROMPTS FOR WIKIPEDIA ASSIGNMENT

Students in introductory technical communication had a few minutes during weeks two, four, and five of the Wikipedia assignment to reflect on the work they had done so far. I administered the prompts, below, through our course management system; students responded using the same system.

Week 2
Periodically, I will give you directed journal questions to help you work toward your rhetorical analysis reflection. I’d like you to spend a few minutes today reflecting on your Wikipedia Article assignment by answering one or more of the following questions. If you answer the questions before leaving class, you’ll receive in-class credit for this assignment. At this point, don’t worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation—just get your thoughts down so you’ll be able to reference them later.

1. You have your initial Wikipedia Article due Friday. What has the process so far been like for you? What have you done, and what have you put off for later? Since there is pressure to submit your article so soon, are you worried about anything? If so, what is it and why?
2. Describe your readers and tell me how you know what you know about them.
3. Describe the activity system you’re working within and tell me how you know your analysis of the activity system is accurate.
4. If you’re far enough along on your article, tell me about some choices you made specifically because of your readers and/or Wikipedia’s activity system (e.g., choosing a specific title for the article, etc.).

Week 4
Instead of a quiz today, I’d like you to answer two or more questions from the questions below. You can use parts of your answers to help you write the rhetorical analysis/reflection, due at the end of next week.

1. What frustrations have you had regarding the Wikipedia assignment? Describe them in detail.
2. What satisfaction have you had from working on the Wikipedia assignment? Describe it in detail.
3. What has the nature of the feedback you’ve received on your article been like? Direct ("you should...")? Indirect (tags like "needs sources" or "wikify" on your account)? Who put the feedback there (experienced Wikipedia users? someone
from class?)? What have you done/not done in response to this feedback? Why did you make these decisions?

4. What do you know about your readers and/or the Wikipedia community at this point? Who are they? Are they who you (or Rhonda) expected them to be? Why or why not? How do you know this? What have you done to satisfy their needs, values, and expectations?

**Week 5**

As your in-class activity today, answer at least 2 of the questions below. You may use your answers as part of the final rhetorical analysis/reflection, due on Monday.

1. What do you honestly think of the Wikipedia assignment? What does it have to do with technical communication? (What do you think--not what do you think Rhonda wants to hear.)
2. The assignment's due on Monday, three days after it was originally due. What do you have left to do before the final deadline? Were you able to keep up with the requirements throughout (e.g., checking up on and working on your article at least twice a week) the course of the assignment? Why or why not?
3. What type of revisions have you made to your article, and why?
APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION PROMPTS AND HANDOUT FOR BAZERMAN READING

As a prelude to the Wikipedia assignment in my introduction to technical communication course, I asked students to read Charles Bazerman’s “Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activities and People” (2004). Students then took part in a two-part discussion I designed to help them understand the reading. The first part consisted of an online discussion, which took place in a forum in our course management system; the second was an in-class discussion using a handout with a selection of their online responses.

Part 1: Online Discussion Instructions and Prompts
Instead of a quiz today, I am providing three reading comprehension questions designed to help you understand the reading. I would like for each of you to reply to these questions in at least one forum post that has a descriptive title and answers in 300-500 words. However, I would also like you to read others' posts, respond to them if you like, and rate the posts you find most useful in helping your thinking (ten = most helpful, one= no help at all).

We will have a class discussion regarding this reading and Chapter 3 on Friday, and it may be useful to review the discussion before class and (perhaps) even print out portions of the discussion to help you in class.

1. What are examples of social facts and ways of defining social situations? Provide your own examples rather than examples taken directly from the reading. Try to avoid using examples someone else has used in a post.
2. Define "felicity conditions" and paraphrase what it means for a writer who is able to meet them. Do so in your own words rather than taking words directly from the reading.
3. How will "considering the activity system" help you in your own writing? Provide specific, original examples with your answer.
what is a social fact?
“A social fact is something that someone’s believes to be true. These social facts can dictate how people live their life.”

- J.V., Section 3

“Today’s assignment was given to us in the normal fashion through the English 314 webpage. Like most activities in this class I have read the instructions posted online and listened to any modifications on the assignment given to us from our instructor. Based on my previous experiences with this system, I, and I believe the rest of the class, take it as a social fact that we will receive credit by doing as instructed by reading the assigned article and then posting our answers. This social fact, receiving credit for our work, defined how I reacted to this situation: I believed that if I read the assignment and followed directions I would get a grade.”

- M.E., Section 4

“Social facts are things that are not necessarily true... In a way it is like high school drama... High schoolers are very clique oriented, and they want to believe what their friends say is true, rather than what really is true. Examples of this are: Did they really get in a fist fight with the teacher? Was that person really raped? And so on.”

- J.P., Section 3

“One example of social facts comes from an experience I had at the Spring Career Fair last year. I was speaking to a representative from Aegon. I asked her if they had any summer internships and she replied that they did not. I took this information to be true in this situation... However, a peer of mine had a summer internship with Aegon. There were in fact approximately eighty summer interns. In this case it is unknown if she was just naïve about the summer positions or if there was some other misunderstanding.”

- K.O., Section 4
“Social facts are what is generally believed to be true. They are things that are socially understood, inherent in a culture, and affect the way people act. These social facts are important factors in defining a situation, for people would act differently if they had reason to believe these social facts were false. For example, as a citizen of a Westernized nation, I believe that an appropriate social custom is to shake hands when I meet someone. However, I may meet someone from another culture who does not understand this social gesture. They would act differently because shaking hands is not a social fact to them.”

- E.B., Section 3

Perhaps it would have been better for me to ask, “What are social facts, and how are they created? Give an example here.” Although many of the answers you gave to the original question had great examples of social facts, they didn't really address how they came to be social facts. People believe a lot of things, but how do they come to their beliefs? I'd like you, as a group, to think about this, and come up with an answer you think Bazerman would approve of.

**what are felicity conditions?**

“Felicity conditions are conditions that must be met for something to be legitimate. For a writer this means that they must do the proper research or have the proper credentials in order for their writing to be taken seriously. Without meeting these felicity conditions the writers work is meaningless or it holds no real value other than for entertainment.”

- A.R., Section 3

“Felicity conditions are requirements that need to be met in order to achieve what is set forth to be accomplished. A very simple example is your mother stating that you must finish your supper in order to receive dessert. If you think about eating dessert as being a sought after accomplishment and the only way to obtain it is to first fulfill the requirement of eating supper, which means eating all parts that make up a complete meal including meat, vegetables, grain, fruit, dairy, and whatever else there is that I am missing.”

- M.R., Section 4
“Felicity conditions are a foundation of rules which must be followed for a certain set of documents or agreements to be completed. If any of the rules or parts of rules are broken then there is potential for the situation to be voided or become not applicable. One example would be permission slips for underage kids. Obviously you need the signature of the kid but the parents as well for it to be legal. Many other types of documents are made under certain rules which protect them in case of some potential fraud or mishaps. If there were no conditions then anything could be put on paper and considered legal.”

- N.C., Section 3

“Felicity conditions are the pre-established algorithms/steps that must be fulfilled in order for any action to have any bearing. Pre-established conditions include written documentation and proper social context based on social norms. For a writer to be able to meet these conditions they must base what he or she has written on these pre-established conditions, which may be based on more pre-established conditions and ultimately on some concrete evidence in order to be regarded as a fact or a truth.”

- B.F., Section 4

“Felicity conditions are the necessary conditions that must be in place in a given situation in order for a set of words to become a speech act. If a writer is able to meet these conditions, their work will be able to do what it is supposed to do very effectively.”

- J.F., Section 3

Let's think some more about felicity conditions. Who decides what the conditions are? How are those conditions produced? Are these conditions always explicit? How do people know which conditions they need to meet, and which may be negotiable? As a group, think about these questions and try to come up with a set of answers that you think Bazerman would approve of.
how can considering the activity system help you in your writing?

“Considering the activity system will help me write documents that focus on the specific needs of my audience. For example, when I write an essay for a class, the activity system I would focus on would be a response to a given topic as well as how far the class has progressed, the needs of the instructor, and the character and rubric of the course. I would form my answer around this activity system and focus on the needs of the audience, in this case the instructor and/or the rest of the class.”

- M.W., Section 3

“‘Considering the activity system’ is the backbone to any real persuasive piece of literature in my opinion. In a general sense, if I’m writing for fact, I need to know why I’m writing what I am. Is it to help others? Or to prove a new testing procedure to a panel of my superiors? Let me play devil's advocate here for a minute and assume that I don't know who I’m writing to or why I'm writing. The piece will not do much to impress or persuade anyone, nor will it serve much purpose. In order to write an effective article I have to take into account the audience's needs and what they will do with the information in the future. If I decide to write about the possibility of a government conspiracy, I should realize my audience is going to have to mull over the facts and opinions and decide for themselves in order for my piece to be effective. If I give the reader the tools they need by predetermining what they will need before I write, I'll be 'considering the activity system.'”

- A.P., Section 4

“Considering the activity system relates what you are writing to what is being done. It helps you focus your text on how to help the action to be accomplished, rather than just writing for the sake of writing. Considering the activity system with make your writing more focused because there will be a goal in mind in order to make an action occur, or occur in a better way. It will make deciding a style easier because you will know who your audience will be and what they will need to hear. In short, it gives writing a purpose.”

- A.P., Section 3
“Considering the activity system’ will allow me to convey my intended message to the reader more efficiently and hopefully have an intended response occur. As a community advisor in the residence halls, my interactions with the residents in the building will be impacted by how I consider the activity system. It will be important for me to consider the needs of others and how I can be an effective resource for those looking for guidance. If I am able to find the strengths in each of my residents, then I will be able to use those strengths to provide an insight on an engineering problem, or recognize that someone needs a positive outlet for stress.”

- B.L., Section 4

Let's think a little more about activity systems. What are the boundaries of an activity system? How do you differentiate between one activity system and another? It may be helpful to think about activity systems that you yourself are a part of. What are a few, and what defines them as activity systems? Think about this as a group, and come up with a few answers that you think Bazerman might have used in his article as examples.

So, how exactly do we go about considering activity systems before we write? That'll be a separate handout, and we'll go over it in class on Monday, but when you look at an activity system, there are at least six parts of it that you should consider:

1. Its **subject**, or the person/group of people you are studying (it may be easy to think of them as “research subjects,” although they may not be aware that you are researching them.
2. Its **community**, or the group the subjects take their cues from and contribute to.
3. Its **object(s)**, or the goal(s) of the community, which includes its members' motives for doing their work.
4. Its **tools**, the things the community uses to do its work.
5. Its **rules**, including the requirements, habits, and shared conventions of the community.
6. Its **division of labor**, or who does what.
APPENDIX D: BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

WIKIPEDIA PROJECT

Wikipedia Authorship Project
10% of final class grade (total)

In this assignment, you will write an article and publish it on an online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Your article will be subject to feedback, revision, or even deletion by other users of Wikipedia, just as a workplace document is subject to feedback, editing, or rejection from your coworkers, supervisors, or other departments. Your goal is to use the feedback you receive (or lack thereof) to shape the article to meet the needs of the Wikipedia community as best you can.

This assignment will give you a chance to be the original author of a real document, for use by real people for real purposes. You’ll also gain some practice in seeking, using, and incorporating feedback and criticism.

Project Scope
This project will include the following components, each of which will count toward your final grade on the assignment:

- A proposal memo (due by 2/4)
- A new, original article, posted to Wikipedia by 2/22
- Two progress report/reflection memos, including your daily activity logs (due 3/24 and 4/18)
- A portfolio of project documents (due during finals week)

Step 1—Decide on a topic, and submit a proposal
Begin by familiarizing yourself with Wikipedia and choosing a topic. As you spend time on Wikipedia, be sure to complete your daily activity log (see below). Choose your topic carefully; it should be on a subject related to your career path, or something that piques your interest, and should be one that you are fairly knowledgeable about and can research without difficulty. It also needs to be original to Wikipedia, since Wikipedia editors delete duplicate articles. You can either write a completely original article or expand a stub (a topic that someone began but didn’t get far enough on to call an actual article).

When you have chosen a topic, explore similar articles on Wikipedia. What do they have in common? Who contributes to those articles? What do those contributors seem to value? Who do they seem to think their readers are? Be sure to keep track of your explorations in your daily activities log. How do your findings affect your purpose? What do your findings indicate about the type of
information that needs to be in your article? Write all of this down and save it; it will become part of your proposal memo, and it will help you write your article.

**Proposal Memo**

*(25 points, due by 2/4)*  
Once you have chosen a topic, you must submit your proposal memo to me, your supervisor. Your proposal memo should be approximately 1.5-2 pages in length. Refer to Appendix 1 in your textbook for examples of formal memos. Make sure your memo includes the following:

- Introduction stating the purpose of the memo, and highlighting the content
- Description of your topic, including:
  - Your reason(s) for choosing that topic
  - The current “state” of that topic on Wikipedia (i.e., is it a stub? Is it related to existing material? Is it completely new?)
  - A tentative outline of your article (base your outline on the standard format for other, similar articles on Wikipedia)

Turn this memo in to me by the beginning of class on 2/4. **Do not** begin working on your Wikipedia article until I've approved your proposal: for that reason, it may be to your advantage to turn your proposal in before 2/4.

**Step 2—Write the article**

*(due by 2/22)*  
Once I’ve approved your topic, you’ll write your article and post it on Wikipedia. Your initial article needs to be published by the beginning of class on February 22. Submit the URL, as well as your Wikipedia user name, to me via the assignment on the class website.

Because you are choosing a topic that interests you, each of your articles will be unique. However, the following general advice applies:

- For the purposes of this assignment, the original text of your article needs to be **at least** 350-400 words long: about one page, single-spaced. (It may expand or contract over the course of the semester… and that’s okay, as long as it started out at the minimum.)
- Spend some time familiarizing yourself with Wikipedia publication standards and guidelines. A fast way to get your article rejected (which will require you to revise and resubmit) is to ignore Wikipedia formatting standards.
- Be sure to provide adequate and appropriate citations for everything you include in your article, and make sure that any images you use conform to Wikipedia’s open source requirements. Again, a fast way to ensure that your article is rejected (and open yourself up to extra work) is to do a poor job with citations.
• Be sure to edit your work carefully for grammar, spelling, and correctness issues. Wikipedia editors will be quick to delete an article that displays a poor command of English. Keep a printed copy of your original article, and of each major iteration of your article: you’ll need these copies for your project portfolio at the end of the semester.

Step 3—Maintain your article, and write and submit your progress reports
Once you have published your article, contact at least three other Wikipedia users (I suggest contacting users you see making frequent contributions to your area of expertise) and ask them to provide feedback on your article. Check your article at least twice a week for feedback or revisions from other users, and make changes of your own based on that feedback. If you don’t receive any feedback, contact additional users and make revisions that you believe may be necessary. Don’t forget to log your activities in the activities log, which you’ll turn in twice during the semester.

Progress Reports and Reflections
(50 points each, due 3/24 and 4/18)
Employers frequently want to know what their employees do with their time, and as an instructor, I am no different. You’ll submit two Progress Report and Reflection Memos to me over the course of the semester to keep me informed about the work you’ve done on your project. Beyond standard memo formatting and introduction, these progress reports should include your daily activity log and a reflection on your project experience to date.

Daily Activity Log
Keep a record of your activity every time you log on to Wikipedia: that record can tell me things about your use of time that aren’t immediately apparent from your article, such as the amount of time/effort you put into obtaining feedback. I’ll leave the format of this log up to you, but make it as complete as possible. Include your user name (or, if you forget to log in, the IP address of the computer you are using), the URLs of any pages you visit, the user names of any Wikipedia users you contact, the types of revisions/activities you do, and the time spent doing them. Make notes for yourself, as well: if you are responding to specific feedback when you make a revision, include that in your log—it will come in useful when you write your reflection.

Reflection
As an instructor, I want to know that you are thinking about your writing, your readers, and whether you learn anything about writing for readers for this assignment. The more thought you put into writing for your readers, the better your documents are likely to be. After you’ve posted your article and requested feedback, take a close look at any feedback you do receive. What do your readers seem to want? What types of readers do they seem to be? Look at their
profiles and comments they’ve made to other users in the past, as well as the contributions they’ve made to Wikipedia.

In your memo, describe how you feel about the article you’ve created, and whether your feeling has changed since you posted the original or remained the same, tell me why—and how it affected your writing. (For each of the progress report memos, I may ask you to reflect on some additional topics. I’ll announce those in class.)

**Step 4—Submit your final assignment packet**

*75 points, due at the final exam*

Have the final version of this assignment ready to turn in at the beginning of class at the final exam meeting. Your final assignment must include paper versions of the following items:

- The final version of your proposal memo
- Printed copies of each iteration of your article
- Printed copies of both of your Progress Report and Reflection Memos
- A final Progress Report and Reflection Memo (content TBA)
REFERENCES


http://ecu.academia.edu/DonnaKain/Papers/485796/Activity_Theory_An_Introduction_for_the_Writing_Classroom


Spilka, R., & Blakeslee, A. M. (2012, March). Writing for a workplace audience: We don’t know what we don’t know. Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, MO.


Heuristic. (2011, April 18).


Rhonda Lorraine McCaffery (maiden name Rhonda Lorraine Copeland) was born September 3, 1974 in Dearborn, Michigan. She received a Bachelor of Science in Written Communication in 2002 from Eastern Michigan University and a Master of Arts in the Teaching of Writing in 2004 from the same university. She has served as a Teaching Assistant in the English Departments of Eastern Michigan University and Iowa State University, and as a lecturer at Schoolcraft College (Livonia, MI) and at Eastern Michigan University. Rhonda is a member of several professional organizations and has presented her research at their annual meetings and other professional conferences for the past several years.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation director, Dr. David R. Russell, for his invaluable guidance, encouragement, and patience throughout the dissertation process. I could not have completed the process without you. I would also like to thank my guest committee member, Dr. Ann M. Blakeslee, for her interest in my research and the insightful discussions we had about audience theory. I appreciate you as a mentor, colleague, and friend. Finally, I would like to thank the remaining members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Michael Mendelson (especially for your belief in my abilities as a writer), Dr. Gloria Betcher, Dr. Barbara Blakely, and Dr. Ann Thompson for your thought-provoking questions and suggestions for improvement to the final dissertation draft.