Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces

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Despite the media's continued representation of communication as "utilitarian and objective" (Bolin), and the acceptance of this view by much of the public and even by many academics, research in rhetoric and composition over the past twenty years has moved toward a much more complex view of communication. Of particular interest to professional communication specialists is research suggesting that learning to write in and for new situations and workplaces is complex in ways that go far beyond texts and cognitive abilities. This research posits that for workers to be successfully enculturated into new communities of practice[1] (Lave and Wenger) or activity systems (Engeström; Russell, "Rethinking" and "Activity Theory"), including learning to write in ways that are appropriate to those new communities, neophytes must learn and conform to the conventions, codes, and genres of those communities (Bazerman; Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman; Berkenkotter and Huckin; Bizzell). However, *when and how much* each neophyte must conform largely depends on how much authority and cultural capital[2] the neophyte possesses or cultivates to accomplish work effectively. Additionally, issues of identity and values are important factors in neophytes' abilities and willingness to learn to write in and for new workplaces, as they must choose between ways of thinking and writing with which they are comfortable and new ways that seem foreign or at odds with their identities and values (Doheny-Farina; Doheny-Farina and Odell). Researchers who examine issues of identity and authority as important aspects of communicating in workplace settings find that workers' identities are bound up in myriad ways with the genres they are asked to appropriate (Dias et al.; Dias and Pare'; Pare'). According to Anis Bawarshi, "a certain genre replaces or . . . adds to the range of possible selves that writers have available to them" (105).

As composition widens its focus beyond academic writing, it is increasingly important to consider what it means to write in the workplace. Not only will such knowledge help us prepare students for the writing beyond the classroom, but, as Bolin points out, those of us working in rhetoric and composition must continue to respond to complaints by the media and general public that we have not fulfilled our responsibilities and "polished" students' language use so that they can convey information "clearly." We can respond to these complaints more effectively when we better understand the ways in which writing is bound up with issues of identity and authority. While we recognize the importance of identity and authority issues in the process of enculturating new workers, we do not always fully understand how these issues influence their writing.

Here I first outline theories of identity and authority that are useful in understanding how newcomers learn to write in and for new situations. The socio-historic theoretical perspective I offer draws on research from two groups: compositionists who focus on cultural-historical activity theory[3] (Russell, "Rethinking" and "Activity Theory"; Prior; Dias et al.) and sociologists who study apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger; Wenger). Combined, these lines of research expand genre theory (Bawarshi; Russell, "Rethinking") and describe the complexities of learning to write, both in school and the workplace (Dias, et al.;

Dias and Pare'; Prior). The socio-historic view usefully illuminates the construction of subject positions and subjectivities specifically within institutions and disciplines.

Second, I illustrate some of the difficulties inherent in writing and identity formation by telling the story of one new worker who struggled with written conventions and codes in his new workplace largely because of issues of identity and authority: how he saw himself versus how other members of this workplace community saw him. Most importantly, I argue that rather than assisting in the new worker's enculturation, members of the community expected a type of servitude: they perceived him not as a community member but as a tool, an identity that he fought strongly against.

Identity

To tease out relationships between identity and writing in the workplace, we need theories that consider the workplace as a legitimate and important influence on subject formation. Socio-historic theories provide one such perspective and describe identity construction within institutions. Like other postmodern theories, socio-historic theories see identity, the "subject", as a complex "construction of the various signifying practices . . . formed by the various discourses, sign systems, that surround her" (Berlin 18). However, socio-historic theories view the subject as not only *constructed* by signifying practices but also as *constructing* signifying practices: "writers' desires are [not] completely determined, as evidenced by the fact that textual instantiations of a genre are rarely if ever exactly the same" (Bawarshi 91). Socio-historic theories also provide specific tools for analyzing the "levers" within institutions, allowing for a detailed examination of power and the formation of subject positions. Activity theory (Cole; Cole and Engeström; Cole and Scribner; Engeström; Russell, "Rethinking" and "Activity Theory"), for example, which focuses on the relationships among shared activities within communities and individual participant's sometimes competing understandings of motives, conventions, and divisions of labor for carrying out the activities, provides a framework for understanding the interactions of individuals, groups, and texts, that enables researchers to illustrate the complex interactions among various aspects of an activity system (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Activity System Triangle
(Based on Engeström, *Learning by Expanding*)
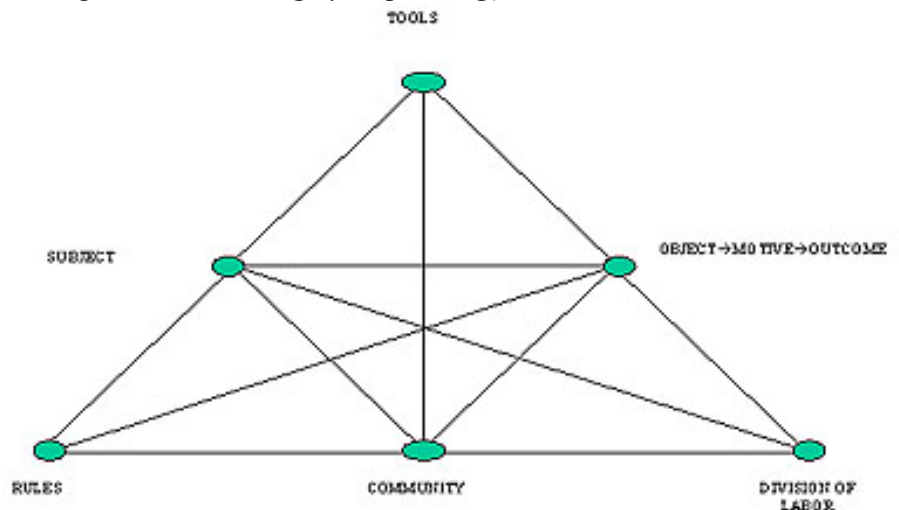
Activity theorists such as David Russell have also argued the importance of the relationship between writing and identity: as we encounter genres mediating new activity systems, we must determine whether we can and/or must appropriate those genres, thus expanding our involvement within those systems. We must also consider whether expanding involvement in one system forces us away from other activity systems we value, away from "activity systems of family, neighborhood, and friends that construct ethnic, racial, gender, and class identit(ies)" ("Rethinking" 532). Writers can sometimes "challenge the genre positions and relations available to them," thus changing genres rather than choosing between the genres and their various activity systems (Bawarshi 97). However, socio-historic theories do not view such resistance as the result of self-will or "inherent forces within each human being that love liberty, seek to enhance their own powers or capacities, or strive for emancipation" (Rose 35), but rather suggest that "resistance arises from the contradictions individuals experience in their multiple subject positions" (Bawarshi 100). As writers shape and change genres, the power of those genres also shapes and enables writers' identities (Bawarshi 97).

Sociologist Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice (shaped, initially, with Jean Lave) is particularly useful for describing workplace enculturation as it is affected by and as it affects written practices. Wenger specifically focuses on matters of identity within *workplace* groups and activities, describing identity as a "negotiated experience . . . a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other" (149). According to Wenger, "layers build upon each other to produce our identity as a very complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections" (151). To "find their own unique identities" within new organizations (Wenger 156), newcomers must choose levels and types of engagement; they must find modes of belonging. Wenger describes three interrelated modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment.

- *Engagement* entails defining a "common enterprise" that newcomers and oldtimers pursue together to develop "interpersonal relationships" and "a sense of interacting trajectories that shape identities in relation to one another" (184). While engagement can be positive, "a lack of mutuality in the course of engagement creates relations of marginality that can reach deeply into [newcomers'] identities" (193).
- *Imagination*, "a process of expanding . . . self by transcending . . . time and space and creating new images of the world and [self]" (176), entails newcomers "locating [their] engagement in a broader system . . . defining a trajectory that connects what [they] are doing to an extended identity . . . [and] assuming the meaning of foreign artifacts and actions" (185). While imagination can lead to a positive mode of belonging, it can also "be disconnected and ineffective . . . it can be so removed from any lived form of membership that it detaches [newcomers'] identit[ies] and leaves [them] in a state of uprootedness." Newcomers can lose "touch with the sense of social efficacy by which [their] experience of the world can be interpreted as competence" (178).
- *Alignment* entails "negotiating perspectives, finding common ground . . . defining broad visions and aspirations . . . [and] walking boundaries . . . reconciling diverging perspectives" (186-87). Alignment "requires shareable artifacts, boundary objects able to create fixed points around which to coordinate activities. It can also require the creation and

adoption of broader discourses that help reify the enterprise and by which local actions can be interpreted as fitting within a broader framework" (187). However, alignment "can be a violation of [a person's] sense of self that crushes [their] identity" (181).

To fully participate, according to Wenger, new workers must find ways to engage in the work that other community members do, including the writing they do; newcomers must be able to imagine their own work, and writing, as being an important part of a larger enterprise. And they must be comfortable that the larger enterprise and its smaller components, down to the writing conventions of that community, are compatible with the identities they envision for themselves. Joining new workplace communities, then, is not simply a matter of learning new skills but also of fielding new calls for identity construction. This understanding of identity suggests that people *enact* and *negotiate* identities in the world over time: "Identity is dynamic (Hecht, 1993), and it is something that is presented and re-presented, constructed and reconstructed in interaction (including written communication)" (Rubin 9).

At times, however, participation in new communities requires accepting for oneself identities that are at odds with the values of other communities to which one belongs (Lave and Wenger; Russell, "Rethinking"). One way newcomers reconcile the competing demands of various communities is to choose to participate in some aspects of a new community and not others. Such choices are a source of power in that "power derives from belonging as well as from exercising control over what we belong to" (Wenger 207). In addition, choices about participation impact newcomers' emerging identities within communities of practice. For example, the choice of non-participation can lead to marginalization within the workplace (Wenger 167). Identity formation in any new community, then, is a negotiation in which newcomers have some measure of "control over the meanings in which [they] are invested" and can "assert [their] identities as productive of meaning" (Wenger 188, 208), even if they do so by refusing to participate in some workplace activities.

Achieving enculturation in workplace communities requires neophytes to engage in new practices, including new *written* practices. Some new written practices may be opposed to newcomers' values and ethics; others may simply be foreign to them; still others may ask them to give up some measure of authority to which they believe they are entitled. The resultant struggles will often be visible in their written practices. If new workers fail to write in ways that a workplace community of practice recognizes as effective and appropriate, the reasons may be related to identity rather than ability: "Stylistic options 'leak' clues about writers' social identities. Rhetorical choices help writers construct the social identities they wish to project in given writing episodes" (Rubin 4). Thus, failing to write in ways communities establish as appropriate can be a form of resistance that "does not arise from ignorance of standard forms [but rather] entails considerable language awareness" (Rubin 7). On the other hand, new workers may not be consciously aware that their writing choices are matters of identification: "marking social identity in writing is . . . oftentimes quite below the focal awareness of the writer" (8). Because each individual "is heterogeneously made up of various competing discourses, conflicted and contradictory scripts . . . our consciousness [is] anything but unified" (Berlin 18).

Authority

As Wenger's theory implies, authority (like identity) is continually negotiated within communities of practice. Authority is bestowed by institutions, can be just as easily withdrawn by those same institutions or its members, and must be maintained through appropriate expressions of authority (Bourdieu). Bruce Lincoln argues that authority is best understood in relational terms "as the effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or . . . to make audiences act *as if* this were so" (4). When speakers possess authority, exercising that authority "need not involve argumentation and may rest on the naked assertion that the identity of the speaker warrants acceptance of the speech" (5). Those listening accept the speaker's pronouncement because the speaker *is who she is*. At any given time, however, faith in a speaker's authority can be suspended (either momentarily or forever) if "an explanation is requested . . ." because "the relation of trust and acceptance characteristic of authority is suspended, at least temporarily, in that moment" (6). Authority, then, is an intangible quality granted to persons through institutions, which renders their pronouncements as accepted by those in that institution's communities of practice, but which must be maintained through individuals' speech and actions.

Conversely, a person can understand clearly how to speak in ways that are acceptable in particular circumstances, but if not endowed with some recognized institutional authority, all the relevant and appropriate words in the world will not command it: "authority comes to language from outside . . . Language at most represents this authority, manifests and symbolizes it" (Bourdieu 109). Bourdieu, while not specifically explaining enculturation, suggests that authority may be a kind of "social magic," dependent upon the "social position of the speaker," and reinforced by her ability to appropriately adjust her speech acts:

> Most of the conditions that have to be fulfilled in order for a performative utterance to succeed come down to the question of the appropriateness of the speaker, or, better still, his social function, and of the discourse he utters . . . it must be uttered by the person legitimately licensed to so do . . . it must be uttered in a legitimate situation . . . in front of legitimate receivers . . . [and] it must be enunciated according to the legitimate forms (syntactic, phonetic, etc). (Bourdieu 111-12)

Thus, if the neophyte is granted some measure of authority by an institution but does not quickly learn the appropriate speech conventions of her new community of practice, she may soon lose the authority with which she began. While newcomers to a community normally experience a "grace period" for adopting community practices, it does not last forever and soon the neophyte must express her authority in her new community appropriately: "[L]earning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants" (Lave and Wenger 105).

If we understand writing as one tool among many through which knowledge, identity, and authority are continually negotiated, then we must view learning to write in new ways as a complex and often messy network of tool-mediated human relationships best explored in terms of the social and cultural practices that people bring to their shared uses of tools. If we accept these assumptions, we find ourselves faced with several questions: What happens when new workers find that to "get along" in a new workplace they must accept basic assumptions

about what is valuable and appropriate that are contrary to their own, or that, in fact, degrade them to the status of an object or tool? What happens when a new worker's assumptions are frequently made obvious to the community, and those assumptions fly in the face of accepted ways of doing things?

Learning to Write in a New Workplace: Alan's Story

My story of "Alan", a computer support specialist who did not learn/choose to write in ways his humanities department colleagues (primarily professors and graduate students) found appropriate and legitimate, illustrates answers to some of the questions about identity and authority as they intersect with writing in the workplace. For seven months, I observed and interviewed Alan, a new computer specialist in a humanities department at a large midwestern university. I also collected 140 email messages he wrote and many others that were written to him and spent time in public computer labs listening as people discussed their computer problems with Alan. Finally, near the end of the study, I conducted a written survey with all members of the humanities department regarding their use of computers and technology and their awareness of various initiatives Alan had discussed with them via email.

Alan and the other members of the humanities department were constantly at cross purposes, he did not write in ways the community members saw as appropriate, and he did not view their conventions as ones he should adopt, given his position in the community. Most importantly, the community of practice did not appear to view him as a fledging member but rather as an object, a tool enabling them to get work done. His discursive choices can be viewed as an attempt to reject the identity of tool and to appropriate authority for himself. Thus, Alan's story serves to illustrate some of the complexities associated with learning to write in new workplaces.

Who is Alan and what is his place in the humanities department?

Alan was a 23-year-old white male who received a B.A in art and design from a large midwestern university. He became interested in computers as an undergraduate and as his interest in computers grew, he performed two computer-related work-study jobs on campus. He decided he liked working with computers and looked for a computer job when he graduated. Alan's first professional position was as computer support specialist responsible for several thousand "users" in various locations at the same university from which he graduated. He was unhappy in this position, primarily because he felt his supervisor did not give him enough responsibility, instead assigning the most difficult tasks to student workers who had been in the department for a long time. He left this job for another in an academic humanities department within the same university, again as a computer support specialist.

In the academic department, Alan was the sole computer support specialist, surrounded by faculty members with varying computer abilities. While no one else performed a job similar to his, the department included other support staff, all women, primarily administrative assistants, and Alan supervised one student worker several hours per week. Alan's supervisor, the department chair (a white male in his early fifties with a Ph.D. and numerous publications and awards), initially left most computer-related decisions to Alan, though the chair's collaborative administrative style made the division of labor unclear to newcomers. A Computer Resources Committee also interacted regularly with

Alan, but whether they had authority over him was unclear. The mentoring he received was fairly hands-off, resembling what Lave and Wenger call "benign community neglect" (93), a situation that left Alan to find his own way, which he saw as a vote of confidence.

What was Alan's view of himself and his authority?

Alan's sense of what it meant to fill a support staff position was very different from the faculty's sense. He left his previous position because it had not allowed him much responsibility, his supervisors "relied on students' work more than" his, and he felt he "was getting no respect." This previous experience strongly informed his understanding of his current job. Because Alan had some measure of institutional authority by way of the cultural capital associated with technical knowledge, Alan did not initially have to prove himself knowledgeable or competent in the ways many new workers do. He was immediately ascribed authority and respect due to his assumed technical expertise in a place where such expertise was rare. When I asked Alan to name and describe his position he replied: "I am basically a systems administrator, which means I am God here. Anywhere in this department. Except for with the department chair." This continued to be Alan's attitude during his tenure in the department. He often indicated that there was no one "above him" but the department chair. During his fourth week in the position, Alan told me he "couldn't believe how much authority" he had, "how high up in the computer world responsibility-wise" he was. He stressed that his title put "only one other person above" him in the university or the department.

Alan's sense of his level of authority was evident in the way he talked about the faculty members in the department. He described the faculty members as "just users; nobodies [who] use the computers I set up." He indicated they were beneath him: "I put myself down on their level." To Alan, the faculty were simply "users" of his tools. He did not seem to understand, or care about, the faculty members' work or how his tools enabled them to do that work. His focus was on what *he* did: making machines work. His comments illustrate his attempt to find a mode of belonging through imagination; unfortunately, he imagined an identity for himself fairly removed from the reality of the situation.

In reality, he was hired in a support staff position, as a "tool" to fix things the faculty needed. The faculty clearly viewed Alan as support personnel. They were happiest when things worked smoothly and when Alan's work hummed along invisibly and successfully behind the scenes. When his assistance was required, they expected him to appear immediately; some faculty even went so far as to copy email messages to the chair and computer resources committee to ensure that Alan knew there would be repercussions if he did not appear when called upon. Alan's view of everyone else as "just users" came across clearly in his writing (which primarily took place via email) and eventually called his competence into question such that department members often failed to respond to him, were ignorant of his initiatives to help them, and laughed at him and his emails. This misalignment between Alan's imagined role for himself and the role imagined for him by others led to a lack of the positive engagement Wenger argues may help newcomers enculturate; Alan and the other members of the humanities department were not actively engaging or mutually negotiating their work together.

How did Alan relate to the department in writing?

A number of discourse conventions existed in the department that could have afforded Alan further authority. Had he adopted these conventions, Alan could have achieved alignment with the department, for example using emails as "boundary objects able to create fixed points around which to coordinate activities" (Wenger 187). Alan did not adopt the conventions of the department, however. Although it is possible for writers "to enact slightly different intentions" and "resist the ideological pull of genres in certain circumstances," their resistance will only be "recognized and valued as resistance and not misinterpretation, or worse, ignorance" if it is "predicated on one's knowledge of a genre" (Bawarshi 92). Alan's written interactions with the department were seen not as resistance but as ignorance, and identified him as an outsider without authority.

One of the conventions Alan did not follow when he wrote involved the department's approximately 15 or 20 listservs, each reaching a specific audience. Tailoring emails to a particular audience was an accepted writing convention in the activity system. During the beginning of each fall semester, listserv addresses were sent out and department members were encouraged to use the list that most directly reached their message's audience. Alan chose to use the list that reached all department members for nearly every email he wrote, despite the fact that he administered all the lists and knew lists more tailored to his messages existed. His email activity did not "fit within [the] broader structures," demonstrating his lack of alignment with the department (Wenger 173).

A survey of the department I conducted indicated that Alan's lack of audience awareness and tailoring had negative consequences for his identity in the department: most people were unaware of his efforts to better their computer system because they either did not read or did not remember reading the information he sent out via email. In other words, the members of the department did not see Alan as engaged in work with and for them. For example, much of his time was spent setting up a new departmental computer network that would benefit all department members by providing them private, disk-free storage space. He discussed this in emails many times, but usually in emails that mentioned a number of other items directed at more specialized audiences. As a result, over half the survey respondents did not know he was setting up a new network. People indicated on the survey that they stopped reading an email if the first item of business did not relate to them.

Other accepted departmental conventions governed the content and style of emails. The community members were highly literate, hyper-aware language users, in the traditional sense of the terms, who valued professional, grammatically correct, Standard English in written communication. The unspoken convention that email within the department be grammatically correct was pervasive and widely practiced in the community. Abiding by this convention was difficult for Alan, who explicitly said on several occasions that he felt his writing abilities were not good. His emails show a number of grammatical errors including sentence fragments, double negatives, and misplaced punctuation. In addition, Alan's emails often contained directives about the use of computers and labs; he frequently implied that people should respect his authority and position in the department by doing what he asked. His utterances were intended to be "*signs of authority . . .* to be believed and obeyed" (Bourdieu 66). However, he sent these emails to many irrelevant audiences and his grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure often undermined his authority

as understood by audience members.

Although Alan was institutionally authorized to speak about technology, and recognized as a technical authority, he was not able to "speak in a way that others . . . regard[ed] as acceptable in the circumstances" (Thompson 9). Survey respondents' comments suggested that people dismissed Alan's legitimacy because of his writing choices. While he appeared to feel this dismissal, he did not change his writing behavior and his institutional authority began to erode.

What was the outcome?

The fact that Alan, a newcomer, used email in ways that oldtimers saw as inappropriate, and that this use of email caused conflict, is not surprising; after all, newcomers are expected to make missteps. But rather than adapting and changing to communicate more effectively in his new workplace, Alan resisted and clung to his own ways of writing, causing conflict and breakdowns in the community of practice. Members of the department were similarly unwilling to change their view of what they found acceptable in email. They insisted on what Bourdieu calls "the dominant competence" and imposed their idea of linguistic competence as "the only legitimate one" (56). The community didn't negotiate or compromise its idea of linguistic competence for Alan; the only real possibility for negotiation had to come from Alan, and it did not.

Because our identities are shaped to some extent by the communities in which we choose to participate, as well as by those settings we inhabit and in which we choose *not* to participate (Wenger 164), workers such as Alan may also be demonstrating their desire to identify with communities of practice other than the primary ones in which they work by refusing to appropriate new ways of writing. By refusing to participate in communication conventions adopted by the majority of members of the community, Alan attempted to assert the identity he imagined for himself (powerful network administrator) and to resist the one imposed on him by the workplace. Pushing past resistance to work effectively with others requires people to relinquish aspects of their desired primary identities: "[L]egitimate participation entails the loss of certain identities even as it enables the construction of others" (Hodges 289). Clearly, Alan did not feel this was an acceptable proposition. The result for Alan, as Wenger might predict, was increasing marginalization. His emails were not only the butt of cruel and constant jokes in the department, but they also failed to garner support and convey necessary information. People ignored his emails or laughed at them, and neither response was conducive to getting work done. Ultimately, Alan's choice of non-participation resulted in "disturbances and breakdowns in work processes" (Hasu and Engeström 65).

Socio-historic activity theory argues that such situations can lead to positive developments because breakdowns can potentially serve as catalysts for change: "Discoordination and breakdown often lead to re-mediation of the performance and perspectives, sometimes even to re-mediation of the overall activity system in order to resolve its pressing inner contradictions" (Hasu and Engeström 65). However, for a breakdown to lead to positive change, those involved must be willing to consider and negotiate various perspectives and everyone must be willing to appropriate some new ways of seeing and doing. This did not happen in Alan's case. He clung to his own ways of writing and communicating, which demonstrated that he was not engaging, aligning, and imagining a role for himself as a member of the humanities department. Other members of the

humanities department no more changed to accommodate Alan than Alan did to fit in with them.

After a year and a half, Alan left and found employment elsewhere.

Discussion

Clearly, Alan's enculturation into the humanities department was not successful. He was an outsider, a worker unlike the other community members in age, education, occupation, linguistic abilities, and concern for conventions. Since new workers are often different in these ways and still manage to negotiate communication strategies that are effective and acceptable enough so that work can be done, what might account for Alan's resistance to writing in ways that his new community saw as legitimate and appropriate?

One reason for his resistance was that Alan and other members of his department had a different understanding of the division of labor in the department and, thus, a different view of Alan's authority. Alan might have viewed changing his writing habits as an admission that he did not play the role he imagined for himself within the department. Despite his vocal assertions to the contrary, he was not "God" in the department. While he entered the department with some measure of authority by virtue of his technical expertise, he had to prove himself and create his *ethos* continually through language, perhaps even more than through action for this particular workplace. This was something he could not or would not do.

However, a socio-linguistic analysis I conducted of Alan's writing suggests that he did not feel as much authority as he claimed to have, even from the beginning of his time in the department when he had the most cooperation and respect because of his technical capital. Of 150 sentences I studied for the analysis, only 39 were directives. While all of Alan's emails were usually sent to department-wide listservs, the overwhelming majority of his directives (28 of the 39) were addressed to graduate students alone. Only 3 were written to faculty or staff members, and 6 were written to the department as a whole. Alan's use of directives suggests that while he claimed to have authority and see the faculty as simply "users," he did not, in fact, feel much authority over them, so he confined most of his directives to graduate students. Even then, Alan used hedges over two-thirds of the time, suggesting that his felt sense of authority was shaky. This understanding best matched the department's understanding. He could make technical changes and monitor and limit operations; however, he could not force people to act in the ways he wanted them to or prohibit them from using equipment, as he threatened in more than one email.

Given the limitations of his actual authority, which conflicted with his desired authority, Alan's refusal to change his writing might have been one way of claiming an identity he wanted, one that included the authority and autonomy to which he felt entitled. However, his refusal to write in ways seen as acceptable by the department had the opposite effect: his method of writing stripped him of the institutional authority originally invested in him. Although Alan's words could be understood, they were not "likely to be listened to [or] recognized as acceptable" He lacked "the competence necessary in order to speak the legitimate language," which could have granted him "linguistic capital . . . a profit of distinction" (Bourdieu 55). Since authoritative language is useless "without the collaboration of those it governs," Alan's initial authority was lessened with each

utterance seen by the department as illegitimate (Bourdieu 113). We should keep in mind that Alan's choices are unlikely to have been conscious; quite often linguistic action is not "the outcome of conscious calculation" (Thompson 17).

A second reason for Alan's failure to adopt community writing conventions might have been his resistance to being used as a tool. As a support person, Alan joined this activity system as one of its tools, not as a community member. As a technical worker with a B.A. in a university humanities department filled with people who had M.A.s and Ph.D.s, he and the other members of the workplace were not mutually engaged. Rather, the community members used him as a tool to help achieve goals Alan did not share or value. Computer system administrators (like many other workers) are used as tools to do work that others cannot. As a result of his position, Alan was not part of the community of practice; rather, his ability to maintain computer networks figured in as one of many pieces of the humanities community: the community members needed him and his activity to use their computers.

Though Alan was hired to function as a tool, he did not sit quietly like a hammer or wrench until he was needed, he did not perform exactly the same way each time he was needed, and he did not remain silent when his work was complete. As a person, Alan didn't always choose to perform his tasks when and how community members wanted. In addition, he initiated and responded to dialogue, and (most frustrating for members of the humanities department) chose to do so in ways contrary to the community expectations. Alan's refusal to write in ways that the faculty felt he should was, perhaps, one means of flouting their linguistic authority, demonstrating that he was not a servant or tool to be used at will. Rather than quietly performing the tasks asked of him, and writing about them in the ways the community members saw as legitimate, Alan resisted the department by seeing *them* as *his* tools and by choosing non-participation over acquiescence to their written conventions. Alan's method of resistance did bring him to the conscious attention of department members; they quickly came to see him as a human being who did not silently serve them in response to their every need or desire. However, his method of resistance did not enable Alan to complete his own work successfully, nor did it lead the humanities department to include him as a human member of their community. Thus, Alan's method of resistance in this case was successful on one level, but detrimental to both himself and the workplace on other levels.

Alan's example illustrates that learning to write in new communities entails more than learning discrete sets of skills or improving cognitive abilities. It is a process of involvement in communities, of identifying with certain groups, of choosing certain practices over others; a process strongly influenced by power relationships, a process, in effect, bound up tightly with identity, authority, and experience. Alan's case also suggests that enculturation theories have overlooked an important point: not all new workers are expected, or themselves expect, to enculturate into a community. Some, perhaps many in our service-oriented society, are present in communities of practice not as members but as tools. Given these points, those of us interested in how people learn to write in new environments, in school and beyond, and those of us struggling to teach new ways of writing to students who resist what we ask of them, must continue to study and consider the importance of factors beyond texts and cognitive ability.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. "A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 98). (Back)

2. "Knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications" (Thompson 14). (Back)

3. Though relatively new to many in our field, activity theory is used more and more widely within composition studies; see, for example, Bazerman and Russell *Writing Selves/Writing Societies*; Berkenkotter and Ravotas; Dias, et al.; Dias and Pare'; Grossman, Smagorinsky and Valencia; Harms; Hovde; Kain; Russell, "Rethinking" and "Activity Theory"; Smart; Spinuzzi; Winsor; Wardle. Activity theory's implications for composition instruction are outlined in Russell's "Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction" and in Wardle's *Contradiction, Constraint, and Re-Mediation: An Activity Analysis of FYC* and "Can Cross-Disciplinary Links Help us Teach 'Academic Discourse' in FYC?." (Back)

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