Student Struggle with Career-oriented Assignments: An Analysis of Résumés and Cover Letters

Aaron A. Toscano [iD]
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, U.S.A.

To cite this article:

Student Struggle with Career-oriented Assignments: An Analysis of Résumés and Cover Letters

Aaron A. Toscano

Article Info	Abstract
	Résumé and cover letter formats have altered with the many digital platforms available (e.g., LinkedIn). However, constructing one's identity as an ideal candidate is still the main goal for career-oriented documents and should be the focus of related lessons. The classroom activity system mediates the résumés and cover letters students create in business and technical communication courses. Students write these assignments for teachers, who are outside of professional activity systems. Because students are not immersed in the professional contexts for which they write these career-oriented assignments, they have difficulty constructing effective identities for being ideal candidates for assumed positions. Although résumés and cover letters are ubiquitous assignments for professional communication courses, little research has looked at how students struggle with composing a professional identity. Most résumé research analyzes materials submitted to employers after applicants leave school. The author reviews student texts in this genre and argues that career-oriented assignments are actually a classroom-specific genre with little connection to the assumed professional contexts to which students aspire. The author concludes that students should focus on more immediate attainable goals rather than future career goals many years away.

Introduction

Career-oriented assignments seem to be ubiquitous in technical and business communication courses. Especially for introductory courses, résumés and cover letters are typical assignments, and nearly all technical and business communication textbooks include guidelines for effective résumés and cover letters. Recent scholarship on résumés and cover letters call for rethinking these ubiquitous assignments (Quick, 2012; Randazzo, 2016), but they often have a professional focus and review what those hiring think about these documents (Gubala, Larson, & Melonçon, 2020; Randazzo, 2019). Even with the attention teachers and textbooks give to résumés and cover letters, little research has been done about student performance on these career assignments within the last decade. Résumés and cover letters are genres of writing, and some research has focused on the move to digital formats for these career-oriented genres (Amare & Manning, 2009; Killoran, 2006; Killoran, 2009). In fact, the transition of résumés from print to electronic was considered nearly 30 years ago (Quible, 1995), but a close reading of actual texts from this genre is missing. Some research has discussed the possibility of having a class

mimic the workplace (Cooke & Williams, 2004; Yu 2008; Yu 2010), but others have addressed the limits of trying to provide the same rhetorical situations of the workplace in the classroom (Blakeslee, 2001; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994; Kastman Breuch, 2001; Russell, 1997; Spinuzzi, 1996; Wickliff, 1997). Although there is no consensus, teachers will have great difficulty getting students to remove themselves from the educational context when doing assignments: As Dorothy A. Winsor (1994) found when observing engineering students in a co-opt situation, "the students wrote not to the industrial community they were nominally addressing but to their teacher" (p. 245). Because the teacher is the audience to whom most students *address* their workplace/career-oriented assignments, there exists an inherent, virtually impossible-to-overcome artificiality in the documents.

Outside of the classroom context, résumés and cover letters are tools a job seeker uses to obtain an interview and, ultimately, secure a job. These same documents are of a different genre when created in the classroom activity system. Students are familiar with classroom contexts by the time they reach the college level, and that context is heavily biased towards the students' socially constructed penchant to perform for the teacher and not for an unknown or little-known future activity system. However, there is evidence that suggests that students engaged in pseudo-workplace genres, communication mediated by the teacher and an outside party, may begin to understand some workplace contexts (Blakeslee, 2001; Doheny-Farina, 1992; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994; Kastman Breuch, 2001; Russell, 1997; Wickliff, 1997). Although some research claims that contexts can be transferred to students, Blakeslee (2001) finds that "classroom-workplace collaborations do not fully replicate workplace contexts," and students recognize the situation as "artificial" (p. 179). Regardless of the level of outside-the-classroom participation (i.e., collaboration, internships, service learning, etc.), students are generally new to professions, or they are pre-professionals not fully acclimated to the particular workplace context. After all, as Russell (1997) argues, "For experienced insiders in a profession…their ways of writing may be so routine that they come to seem natural" (p. 515). Therefore, the classroom should not be seen as a place that can mimic workplace genres, but teachers might be able to introduce students to these genres in order to begin their professionalization.

The goal of this article is to demonstrate that students communicating within an academic activity system cannot fully articulate how they fit into professionalized, virtually unknown activity systems. The author reviewed students' cover letters, résumés, and brief reflections and found student performance mediated by the classroom activity system and not the activity system of the assumed profession to which their career-oriented assignments show they aspire. Students farthest away from the assumed activity system show the least amount of understanding when attempting to create an effective candidate description of themselves. In the context of this study, "farthest away" means lacking credentials or experience to attain the position for which the students write the assignments. To explain why these assignments are difficult for students, a review of genre research is presented to identify the ways in which the classroom is the overarching genre mediator in education. Following that is a discussion on the inherent limitations in attempting to recreate fully the workplace context in educational settings. Finally, this study provides excerpts of the language students use when creating career-oriented texts, which show students attempting to perform for unknown activity systems. With one exception, students constructed a version of their future workplace identities, but they never fully present concise, effective constructions because they were too far removed from the professional environment and, most likely, because

they did not separate their articulations from the classroom context.

Career-Oriented Assignments in/as Multiple Genres within Activity Systems

Although industries have used various types of employment materials over the past century, this article focuses on two forms commonly prescribed today: the cover letter and résumé. On face, the résumé and accompanying cover letter (an application letter) seem to be ideal, stable textual formats with a clear goal—to land a job. However, even though "around 1914….the résumé entered and became stabilized in American professional culture" (Popken, 1999, p. 95), it, as well as related material, has never been a fixed form mediated by a fixed activity system. The activity system for these materials is not stable, but, contemporarily, their purpose is to demonstrate that an individual is the ideal candidate for a position. The professional activity system is mediated by larger cultural forces that respond to social, economic, and political realities. These activity systems can be learned, but individuals must be immersed in those activity systems in order to successfully engage in effective communication. Unfortunately, those activity systems are not as familiar to students as the classroom context is; when a teacher assigns résumés and cover letters in an educational setting, they become, after all, assignments.

Because they are assignments, their use as tools means they "may differ overtime and across different actions and activity systems" (Russell, 1997, p. 511). For a job candidate, the materials act as the initial conversation with a prospective employer; for a prospective employer, the materials may be an introduction to candidates or a bureaucratic necessity to make sure the position has a large enough applicant pool; and, for the human resources representative, the materials are records of employees or sources for addresses for form letters that begin *We regret to inform you*. Regardless of strategy, most technical and business communication textbooks identify these materials as tools to begin seeking employment. Teachers and students internalize that message, but, because the assignment is mediated by the classroom context the "outcome" or "direction of activity" (Russell, 1997, p. 510) satisfies the well-known practice of fulfilling an assignment for the audience—the teacher and not the potential employer. Certainly, students do send out their polished (or not-so-polished) classroom-mediated résumés, but that moves the document into a different activity system. This article focuses on materials that have the teacher as the primary audience.

The Teacher as the Classroom Mediated Audience

Research on genre overwhelmingly argues that learning a genre is not about following a form but having the opportunity to immerse oneself into the social context(s) of genre production (Bazerman 1988; Miller, 1984; Russell, 1997). Carolyn Miller (1984) defines genre as "a particular type of discourse classification, a classification based in rhetorical practice and consequently open rather than closed and organized around situated actions" (p. 155). She even argues for traditional professional communication documents, such as "the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report" as well as others to be considered genres worthy of analysis (p. 155). Résumés and cover letters and the situations to which they respond are also genres that have definable "exigence" and represent rhetorical action. Miller bases her argument regarding classification of genres, in part, using Herbert Blummer's "observ[ation] that 'the preponderant portion of social action in a

human society, particularly in a settled society, exists in the form of recurrent patterns of joint action'" (cited in Miller, 1984, p. 158). Miller also points out that our "study of rhetorical genres" focuses "upon the typical joint rhetorical actions available at a given point in history and culture" (p. 158). In other words, genres do cultural work by performing as tools, to use Russell's term, to accomplish objectives in socially defined contexts. Miller even concludes by stating that "for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community" (p. 165).

Although students can begin to understand how the community works by learning about genres, they cannot fully immerse themselves when learning in the classroom context. Some evidence suggests that classrooms may be able to contextualize the workplace environment better and act as transitioning situations (Blakeslee, 2001; Carter, Ferzli, & Wiebe, 2007; Cooke & Williams, 2004; Yu, 2008; Yu, 2010). However, the bottom line is that the classroom is a different context from the workplace and, thus, mediates a slightly different genre. What is called a *cover letter* is not the same genre across activity systems: "A single text may successfully function as a tool for mediating the actions of participants in more than one activity system….a single text may function as different genres" (Russell, 1997, p. 518). No matter how often teachers ask students to put on a "professional lens" when approaching an assignment, the activity, in essence, is to perform an assignment.

However, students may be able to approach the activity systems of genres. The university, of course, is a place that can help students get closer to activity systems in a pre-professional context. Russell (1997) notes, "From the point of view of a discipline or profession, the university supplies resources not only for research but also for selecting and preparing future professionals" (p. 529). He even identifies that "A university…brings together a wide range of other activity systems with vastly different and often contradictory motives, because it exists to select and (perhaps) prepare students for a wide range of further involvement with them" (p. 525). The opportunities students have can be great, but students are not in a particularly powerful position: They enter the milieu of departments, colleges, and organizations, which are already established "intersecting activity systems" (Russell, 1997, p. 528-529). Russell does explain that newcomers do have the possibility to change an activity system and their related genres through "involvement with it over time" (p. 522), but they are the least likely to affect change in the assignment activity system—the teacher-defined realm. Students are not in the activity system long enough to affect change and likely "will have no ongoing future interaction with the disciplinary activity system outside of the activity system of school" (Russell, 1997, p. 540). Therefore, the career-oriented assignments serve merely as practice for job hunting, but, as shown in the next section, these assignments are artificial and have students too far away from the activity systems to which they (may or may not) aspire. Students lack the context for effectively communicating through these genres.

Method
Students' Career-Related Assignments

Student texts from two "Introduction to Technical Communication" courses were examined. This course is a typical introductory course found at many universities and colleges (both two and four year), and it is not the only course that teaches career-oriented assignments, such as résumés and cover letters. This course is housed in

the English Department, and students from Business, Engineering, English, Information Technology, and related fields enroll. The introductory course has mainly sophomores and juniors who need it as a prerequisite for advanced courses within and outside the Department. One teacher, *Sandra* (a pseudonym), volunteered two courses for gathering student work. A total of nine students out of roughly 40 in both of Sandra's classes participated. Although that might seem too low a response rate from which to draw conclusions, the results are suggestive of a pattern the author observed over previous semesters:

Students often provide résumés and, especially, cover letters full of vague constructions regarding their character without support for those attributes. For example, student cover letters typically include accolades such as "hard worker," "punctual," "team player," and "goal oriented." By themselves those attributes do not tell the audience much about the potential of a candidate, and those phrases show the writers do not fully understand how to articulate themselves as ideal candidates for future, unknown careers. This observation led to the present study. Although it is difficult to generalize to a larger population, teachers should reflect on the artificiality of the classroom and begin to consider the limits of others assignments that attempt to mimic so-called real world situations.

As a methodology for analyzing the students' work, I attempted to read the résumés and cover letters as a "faceless" hiring manager. I chose not to interview students or look at other assignments (except for their reflections of their résumés and cover letters) in order to focus more on the texts' constructions of their authors being ideal candidates for a particular job. Beyond the classroom, students may or may not apply to jobs cold, meaning they might know someone working in an organization that gets them acquainted with the environment. In order to have the students' work stand alone, the author did not participate in class discussions or provide guidelines for the assignment to Sandra whose pedagogical approach is typical in business and technical communication courses. Although these résumés and cover letters could have been compared with "real world" ones, the focus is on the classroom activity system and how pre-professionals compose career identities. The study's findings suggest students are mainly focused on surface-level concerns (e.g., formatting), and they need more encouragement to explore constructing a career identity.

Instead of considering career-oriented (as well as other) assignments as mimicking professional genres, the goal for such assignments should be to get students thinking about *potential* careers. Sandra's approach can begin to professionalize students, but no evidence suggests their classroom activity system will get them to think as professionals in the field, especially, as professionals who may be on a hiring committee. Some students pursue a specific career goal because they might know exactly what they want, but many other students pursue what they (or parents, spouses, society, the media, etc.) believe is a good job. Students would certainly benefit from researching these sought-after careers to understand an industry's possible future. Without that research, students' only knowledge of an occupation is most likely their own assumptions or the assumptions passed onto them from others. Although internships and co-ops can help students identify the context of a career, the students in this study did not have much extensive experience in the particular fields to which their assignments show they aspire.

Sandra asked for résumés and cover letters as part of a large unit on career-oriented assignments. The career unit has seven parts, but this study only addresses three of them: résumés, cover letters, and the reflection—a one- to two-page reflective letter to the teacher (see Table 1). I did not attend classes or engage in discussions with the students. Although doing so might offer further reasons for why the students made the choices they did on the assignments, their reflections provide a useful context for understanding how they constructed ideas about themselves as potential employees and to what places they look for guidelines for these genres. The reflections show that students look to their experiences and people close to them for advice on their work. Sandra attempted to get students to search further for information about particular careers by requesting students to interview professionals in the field. That is a good requirement to open students to professionalization—conversations with future/potential colleagues. The interview should extend the student's awareness of the profession and, as Richard Carpenter (2009) mentions, "extensions into new activity systems are how new genres and literacies are learned, which in turn facilitates the development of more complex and sophisticated rhetorical skills" (p. 143). Thus, Sandra's requirements fit within the framework of a beginning professionalization for students even though they are, while in her classroom, in an academic activity system.

Table 1. Guidelines for Employment Unit from Sandra

Reflective Memo	Discuss positive aspects of working on this [career] unit
	Discuss the challenges involved in completing this unit
	Discuss the process of writing one of the documents and the revisions you made. Why did you make those particular revisions?
	Discuss how/if writing will be important to your future career
	Discuss how you felt and thought about your role as interviewer and interviewee in the class mock interview process. What questions were most helpful and why?
	Discuss the research and interview process of someone in the field.
Cover Letter	Completeness and accuracy of information
	Visual presentation
	Adherence to guidelines, correct format
	Correct writing style and grammar
	Thoroughness of information
Résumé	Completeness and accuracy of information
	Visual presentation
	Adherence to guidelines, correct format
	Correct writing style and grammar

The career-oriented assignments the students in this study produced are typical representations of classroom activity system work. Even the students' reflections show a need to please the teacher, the evaluator. The reflections also show an overwhelming concentration on formatting and correctness. Although such topics are important, the most grammatically correct text that fails to address the audience and purpose effectively is not an appropriate text rhetorically. However, the students appear to fulfill audience expectations in the classroom activity—their teacher accepted these assignments. The following analysis identifies student concerns, which

demonstrate that they are producing career-oriented materials in an activity system far removed from professional contexts. One student does produce an effective cover letter and résumé, but her goal is very close to her experience level, which allowed her a chance to be immersed in an environment where she, as Russell (1997) mentions, "appropriate[d] the discursive tools (and genres) of a discipline" (p. 538). Before discussing specific results, I define an "effective" career-oriented text and offer some anecdotal evidence about why there is a disconnect between students' (pre-professionals') abilities to conceive of their future places and the reality of these places (e.g., professions).

Results and Discussion

A Profession of One's Own

Students (especially undergraduates) may have difficulty articulating their future goals because of the following reasons:

    1) They are not immersed in the contexts of the professions to which they aspire;

    2) They are not sure to which professions they hope to enter;

    3) They have yet to reflect critically on their career path choices.

It is important to note, however, that this article does not attempt to blame students for their lack of immersion into an activity system. Teachers give the assignments to pre-professionals who are quite removed from the context of a career they have not entered. Also, the school context mediates student activity, so they do not fully recognize an audience other than the teacher. Furthermore, this study does not blame Sandra for students not being able to articulate themselves as the ideal candidates for a position: Business and technical communication textbooks stress forms and do not explain to students (and teachers) that a critical understanding of the activity system of a professional field comes only from immersion within that field. Students with incomplete or even unknown constructions of professional activity systems will most likely reproduce vague constructions of their identities in career-oriented assignments instead of showing themselves to be the ideal candidates for positions. As for what I mean by "ideal candidate," an ideal candidate is the one who gets hired, which, because these texts are classroom-mediated assignments devoid of professional contexts, makes it impossible to define universally. After all, the adage "it's not what you know but who you know" makes any attempt to codify an ideal format moot. Additionally, specific jobs with specific and disparate demands across industries make it impossible to provide students with anything but generalizations. Students may, however, strive to construct themselves as ideal candidates for positions. Such a construction *shows* their qualifications and does the following:

- uses specific attributes and not vague catch phrases
- demonstrates past skills will benefit the organization
- matches job experience requirements
- identifies applicant as a potential member of the activity system.

The above list is not exhaustive, but it provides a way to generalize the needs of those wanting to hire ideal candidates.

Unfortunately, even assessing ideal candidates but not being in an activity system oneself is artificial. After all, what do teachers know about the needs of a nuclear physicist (or accountant, civil engineer, computer scientist, financial planner, etc.) if they are not from that field? In practice, to facilitate a contextualized assessment for career-oriented assignments, teachers would have to enlist the help of industry professionals who hire for the jobs to which these students apply. It is possible for a teacher to be knowledgeable about one or two industries, but it seems very unlikely teachers could wear as many hats as there are student interests. There is evidence to suggest that students' professionalization is better shaped with projects that enlist support of organizations outside the university (Cooke & Williams, 2004), but it is unrealistic to assume a teacher could enlist the support of the numerous fields students wish to pursue.

However, that does not mean there is no value in assigning career-oriented genres as long as teachers understand they are mediated by the classroom context. Those assignments can be reflections—discourse to the teacher— teachers respond to in order to ask questions that will lead students to explore their desired fields more. What does need to be a component of these assignments is a reflection that acts as a metanarrative for the student's choices regarding, preferably, identity construction of an ideal candidate for a job as opposed to surface-level details such as formatting, grammar, or spelling. Reflection will make the career-oriented materials conform more to a profession of one's own because the student creates the context to which the teacher responds. Therefore, the teacher facilitates the student's trajectory towards a career by posing questions instead of grading a textbook mimicry or snapshot in time. Whether such reflections lead to superior or just effective career-oriented materials is impossible to define even with longitudinal study because other pre-professional experiences, as students move closer to careers, immerse students into various activity systems. The classroom activity system is not the professional activity system, so, to be effective, teachers should recognize the career-oriented assignment as the correct genre: *assignments* and not workplace discourse.

The next section shows the ways students articulate ideal(ized) identities in career-oriented assignments. The purpose is to underscore how removed students are from professional activity systems and how that is manifested in their assignments. Also, because there was a reflective component to the assignments, I show that students are ultimately concerned with the teacher's opinion, thus, limiting the potential of the assignment to the classroom activity system.

Student Concerns and Constructions

The selection of student texts reviewed shows that formatting and vague catch phrases are dominant attributes of résumés and cover letters. Of the nine students' work examined, five specifically pointed out that their choices and revisions for résumés concerned formatting issues. Additionally, all but two—six reflections—mentioned that their revisions focused on sentence-level issues such as grammar and correctness. For instance, Tyler—all names are pseudonyms—reflects on his résumé the following way:

> Deciding on the format, the information to write, and basically converting a person into a piece of paper is quite a task. I started by looking at a few templates online, as well as the Microsoft Office template pack. We watched a video in class that had interviewers talking about résumé format. Most of

them gave the impression that something to make them stand out from the rest of the white papers on their desk would be helpful. I decided to choose a template with a little bit of color to highlight the headings.

Tyler also talked with his mother, a professional HR person, about his résumé. He writes,

> I read the general format to her and asked if there was any particular order in which the information goes. She said the order is basically most important at the top and least important at the bottom….Once I determined the order, I then decided what exactly to list. I made a quick list on notebook paper with some of my general activities and successes in work and school. I selected a few to put into bulleted lists on my résumé….I started off on a good foot with the advice my mom gave me and with the nice format I found in Microsoft Office.

Clearly, Tyler is consumed with formatting from beginning to final revision—the students in the course were not given a chance to revise after submitting the work to the teacher. However, there was a peer-review workshop for the assignments.

Another student, Edwin, had this to write about the career unit as a whole: "This project is a valuable opportunity to learn proper format and techniques to find, apply, and get a job….I gained beneficial knowledge and experience to properly write these documents [résumé, cover letter, and thank you letter]." He also cited a problem with the unit and "would recommend that there be examples of each document posted so that struggling students could gain ideas when writing." Initially, one might think that the ideas he wants pertain to ways of constructing one's identity for an audience; however, Edwin goes on to write, "All the references to past projects and layouts were done only in class and once I began writing, I wished I had some examples to look at. These examples will help future students not make the same mistakes as past students." Again, this student focuses on layout and where to put information and not about audience and purpose.

Clearly, formatting appeared to dominate student concerns. Another student named Barry had this to say about the challenges of writing a résumé:

> Another challenge that I encountered was which format to use for my résumé. There are so many different ways to present a résumé; chronological order, targeted, or function-oriented. One must be careful which to pick because certain formats may represent you better than the others. I personally chose to use a chronological format because it was visually more appealing.

Barry reiterates his understanding of what's important about a résumé in this reflection: "I originally used abbreviations in my cover letter to represent streets and the word "apartment." Later I found that it was necessary to spell the abbreviations out, which provided a more professional looking cover letter." Associating having a "professional looking cover letter" with the need to "spell out abbreviations" assumes that revision should focus on surface-level details and, in some cases, what could be pet peeves of a teacher, classmate, or textbook author.

These students are not wrong in thinking format counts, but the emphasis on formatting is less important than

positioning one's self as an ideal candidate. Certainly, a résumé is a reflection of the candidate from whom it comes, but the best looking résumés and cover letters are worthless without content that addresses the purpose the writer had in mind—to convince an audience to get the candidate "in the door." A non-traditional student, Rick, seemed stymied by the attention to formatting that he went the procrustean route and cut out any explicit hint that he had had over 12 years of experience as a project manager in an IT firm. Below I quote one third of his cover letter to show the audience how little time Rick has to convey his qualifications and the fill-in-the-blank perception of writing characteristic of this genre:

> As a student at [this University], I have gained experience in Java, C++, HTML and CSS. I also have taken courses in Basic, Pascal and RPG to develop my problem solving skills. I have worked with all of Microsoft's operating systems from Windows 95… My previous business experience includes maintaining company websites and networks while managing the construction of multi-million dollar jobs.

The last sentence regarding Rick's work on "multi-million dollar jobs" makes him stand out from the rest of his classmates. However, that aspect is muted by the fact that it comes with no detail regarding the projects he has worked on. The above selection is the second of three paragraphs; the first communicates who he is, and the last informs where to contact him. His computer skills as shown on paper are ones others will have, and, although it is possible to argue that his knowledge of Windows 95 hints at his vast experience, it does not signal what "worked with" means. There are millions of users who have "worked with" every Microsoft operating system from MS-DOS to the present incarnation of Windows, but what does that say about their candidacy for a job in computer science? Nothing. Furthermore, I routinely hear from students that they have 10 or more years of experience playing video games, and this assertion supposedly supports their being hired by a video game developer. If I have more than 40 years of video game experience but am not a programmer, it becomes easy to recognize that time spent on an activity is not the only factor in expertise. Most video game developers probably play video games as a hobby, so gaming experience needs more explanation to be relevant to a company hiring video game developers.

This article does not want to dwell on student deficiencies or even to argue that students have to work harder to produce more effective career-oriented materials. If anything, teachers need to provide engaging opportunities for learning and not just offer formats to be followed. Students are not in a position to understand the careers to which they aspire; therefore, they might be satisfied with following résumé and cover letter formats because those formats are often described in textbooks, so students just follow the guidelines. However, this practice, as the research here shows, leads to using vague descriptions or superlatives. In many cases, the cover letters stated that the student was a good hardworking individual who could do the job. The following were common statements from various students: "work under pressure," "passion for success," "great interpersonal skills," "work ethic," "focused," and "well rounded." Again, these statements are asserted with little or no explanation that shows how a candidate demonstrates these qualities. Additionally, half of the students mentioned GPA and/or Dean's list accomplishments in their cover letters, but only one mentioned when he would graduate—two years from when these materials were turned in.

These factors—vague assertions, GPA indications, and accolades—show that students perceive their time in school as important indicators of what type of employee they will be. The listing of information in a cover letter—which is the time when writers should be exciting the reader about their potential—follows the attitude that education is accumulating skills for the future. Basically, the students fill in what they have gathered from their education, which, unfortunately, comes across as gathering: gathering this credit, acquiring an internship, getting skills, etc. Such a practice reflects the idea that higher education is simply about accumulating credits for a degree. This view is contrary to the view that taking courses from across the college or university makes an individual a well-rounded graduate. A more effective strategy would be to encourage students to demonstrate how their schooling shapes their identity. Such an exercise might be useless in a professional activity system, but it would serve a pre-professional classroom activity system. If anything, explaining one's educational identity would be relevant to the actual audience for these materials—the teacher, who is well-versed in the classroom-mediated activity system.

Teacher-Pleasing Reflections

Students are conditioned to please their teachers. Russell (1997) succinctly defines the classroom activity system the following way: "In a typical school…the teacher writes the assignments; the students write the responses in classroom genres" (p. 520). Research shows that student reflections often reproduce formulaic "growth narratives" where students claim to grow as writers (Scott, 2005, p. 18). In fact, Anne Blakeslee's (2001) article on promoting classroom-to-workplace collaborations quotes students claiming they learned from the activity. This does not suggest that the students did not learn and/or did not enjoy the assignments; however, student responses such as "These exercises feel like real-world exercises" (p. 181), and "I got more out of the [assignment] and more work done than if you had given us work out of a book" (p. 180) are representative of teacher-pleasing comments. In fact, Blakeslee offers quotations from students that identify that the teacher (Blakeslee in this study) and not the collaborating outsider (the client) for whom the classes are working is *the* audience (p. 187). The excerpts from student reflections in this study underscore that in the classroom activity system, the teacher *is* the audience.

Just as Blakeslee's students seem to be engaged in teacher-pleasing rhetoric, the work of the students reviewed also had similar constructions. In his introduction Edwin claims that this career unit is "valuable," and he concludes "This project is not a punishment but, ultimately a guide to what needs to be done after graduation. Following this project, I have more confidence in applying for an internship and eventually a career." Barry opens his reflection this way:

> After a self review I am happy to inform you that this project has increased my knowledge of technical writing in general. Specifically, my skill in writing documents that are required to obtain a job or career has improved. Before completing this project I was unaware of the elements that contribute to the job interview and application process.

Interestingly, unlike the students Tony Scott (2005) interviewed, who were reflecting on an entire year of school or more, the students doing the career unit turned in this reflection after four weeks of class. Originally, the unit

was due after three weeks of being in class, but the teacher gave a one-week extension. That is quite a short amount of time to know how to engage in a professional activity system. In fact, without being immersed in the context, it is difficult to believe students can effectively engage in the activity system.

Similar to the above learning narratives are the explicit accolades students have about the unit. Some students express that the assignment is so great that they now fully understand their future. One student seemed to do quite a bit of teacher/reviewer pleasing. A student named Tabitha uses the following descriptions regarding her cover letter revisions: "It was interesting," "I liked writing the cover letter," and "It gave me good practices." As for specific revisions, she writes:

> For my cover letter I made two revisions. The first being that I changed the comma to a colon in the salutation, and the second being that I changed the wording in reference to my interest in writing. I made the first revision because the comma wasn't correct for the cover letter format, and the second revision just to spice the sentence up a little more.

The sentence revision about her writing interest is: "Writing has always been of enormous interest to me, and I have excelled at it academically for as long as I have been in school." The cover letter continues by listing awards she has accumulated as a writer, but the sentence on her writing interest, again, reflects that school provides her with acknowledgement that her writing is good and valued. One thing she definitely has internalized is how to show the teacher/reviewer that she has learned something and enjoyed it. Her opening sentence for the reflection is "Working on this employment project has been much more practical for my future endeavors than any other project that I've done while enrolled in college." Because the framework of the career unit is for the future, Tabitha is sure to provide the teacher/reviewer with her assessment of its future value: "[This career unit] has direct application to my life and to some of the things I hope to accomplish as a professional….I can use the résumé I created anytime in the future." Tabitha even implicitly thanks the teacher for extending the deadline:

> I tried to spend a lot of time on the résumé in particular, and before the project was extended I was afraid that I might not be able to get everything done by the due date….if the project hadn't been extended I wouldn't have been finished.

Whether she meant to or not, Tabitha performs the standard reflection narrative of claiming to have learned something from class.

Other students also mention that the career unit was beneficial to their futures, but Tabitha's is an interesting example of how the perception of an assignment, in this case, future career development, may condition students' responses. Although Tabitha and her classmates might very well have learned something during the career unit in regards to careers, it is doubtful that they understand how the unit contributes to "future endeavors," and it is impossible to know exactly how one's future is affected until one looks back. Many students I reviewed also provided the mantra that they know they will have to communicate to non-technical audiences. That is true, but, in the context of the above discussion, those reflections seem to be "prewritten" fillers that reflect the introductory material of the course. Many business and technical communication textbooks start with "why is communication important for you." Expert-to-lay-audience communication reasons abound.

The assumption that a student will have to communicate to non-technical groups is taken not from experience but, most likely, from repeating what they are supposed to know from the first four weeks of class.

Even though the classroom is an artificial environment and mediates student reflections, it is possible for a student to have a good understanding of what she wants to do in the future, especially, the near future. A student named Meredith has a cover letter that is succinct and contains enough detail for a reader to want to hire her not to be a professor (yet) but to accept her into a beginning activity system. The context is that Meredith wants to attend a summer institute that offers undergraduates a chance to work with virtual reality technologies—a subject in which she is well versed. She uses no fillers, vague phrases, or generic superlatives. In fact, the only awards or honors she mentions relate to her winning Virtual Reality prizes, but they come with details about why such honors prove she will do well at the summer institute. Meredith's work shows she is a student with lots of experience and a solid focus that is within her reach now, as in, at the time of writing the cover letter. Meredith is a student who is not aiming to apply to a career that is four, six, or ten years away; she is applying for the coming summer.

Most students are asked to think about a future job they might aspire towards, and the reflections prove this. Meredith's immediate reality prepares her for what she wants. She is not trying to pretend to be an expert and using vague phrases as filler text for an assignment; instead, she is looking for the next educational experience. And unlike students who accumulate credits or skills for the future, her reflection is quite detailed about her plan for her future. She integrates the technologies and programs into a discussion on why she chose to represent herself the way she did in the career unit assignments. She has internalized her immediate surroundings so well, that she even mentions how detailed her CV is when she describes how her collaboration as a lab assistant for a Ph.D. student has prepared her for her next phase in education—graduate school. After all, what graduate student does not ask in reference to anything, "Will this get me a line on my vita?" While she might just be absorbing the lingo of those she aspires to become, her lack of fillers and discussion of format show that her tight focus comes from closeness—in terms of time—to the position she hopes to attain.

Meredith does discuss the future, but her discussion is more detailed than other students in that she claims, "In my future career as a research professor, writing is the single most important aspect of the job." She qualifies that with the types of writing she can expect: articles, conference papers, letters of recommendation, grant applications, and even class notes. Contrast Meredith's discussion of writing to Tabitha's reflection (Tabitha indicated that she wants to be an English professor): "The role of writing in my profession will be monumental. I will be teaching the writing process, I will be writing the writing process, I will effectively be living the writing process." Her understanding of what she will be doing is a repetition of a writing lesson, not how writing will be used in academic activity systems, such as conference papers and submissions to peer-reviewed journals.

This study, although small, provides empirical evidence that students' understanding of their future goals might not be enough to communicate effectively their qualities for an assumed, distant job. Assignments reflect the values teachers privilege; therefore, if teachers value formatting and reflection that shows progress, students will

excel at providing that material. The author even examined his own résumé and cover letter from the "Business Writing" class taken as a junior in college and found it had similar vague constructions. The selection below shows what the author thought was an impressive attribute that for a future job. Besides the résumé's declaring knowledge of "Internet Software include[ing]: Net Scape and Internet Explorer," the cover letter stated:

> My résumé highlights my extensive computer experience, which can be very useful in this new information age. With exchange rates changing daily, banks must be able to follow them using the most up-to-date systems. The Internet is a great place to find such information and is where I have concentrated a great deal of time.

As a bank teller, customer service is a better ability to highlight than the ability to search the Internet, and the résumé and cover letter made no mention of skills related to interacting with the public.

Conclusion

The seemingly ubiquitous assignments of résumés and cover letters might give us insight into what students assume will be their future career plans. However, we cannot assume the classroom-mediated genre is the same as the profession-mediated genre because students are not immersed deeply enough in the activity systems of professions to which they aspire. The students in this study did not do anything wrong in their assignments. In fact, they did just the opposite: They did exactly what the classroom activity system asks of them—perform the assignment for the teacher. Also, Sandra did not do anything wrong in assigning the career-oriented assignments. She actually went beyond the standard formatting advice of many business and technical communication textbooks and asked students to conduct interviews and reflect on the entire activity. Unfortunately, the classroom will not professionalize students: For students to, as Russell (1997) claims, "[appropriate] the motive of a professional activity system….students must have a longer, deeper history of involvement with the discipline" (p. 540-541). Understanding what an audience wants to have from a candidate takes time: An individual must work in the field, converse with colleagues, attend conferences, pursue job training or further education/accreditation, and, most importantly, reflect on their performance along the way to professionalization. Students, even with service learning opportunities and internships (and past or current careers), do not necessarily have such vast experience.

Instead of doing away with résumés and cover letters, we ought to be up front about their limitations as texts that can transfer experience from the activity system of the classroom to the activity system of the profession. The résumé is not a static document and will (or should) be updated throughout one's career. Because of that fact, teachers should assess the materials for their potential to grow with the student. This does not mean that the format can simply accommodate new information; instead, it means the student shows a critical awareness (via reflection) that these materials must adapt to future situations. Therefore, these assignments should not be given without a reflective component or without process. The interviews Sandra assigned are good opportunities for students to get acclimated to the profession, and the general research she assigned contributes to professionalization and, as Jablonski (2005) claims, should be part of the technical communication classroom. However, Sandra asked students to interview those in the fields, but a four-week-long career activity, as the excerpts show, is dominated by the classroom context and not the workplace.

Although it is impossible to think students will not ever produce assignments for any audience other than the teacher, as Meredith's work shows, teachers can encourage students to focus on more reasonable goals—positions more attainable given the students' experiences. It would be a mistake to assume the teacher can read the students' assignments in the myriad professional contexts to which students aspire. Yu (2008) argues, "By studying and critically learning from workplaces' best assessment practices, we can design both contextualized assignments and assessment in the classroom" (p. 280). Teachers will need to be aware that the context they attempt to set will be limited to their experience; furthermore, as Randazzo (2016) points out, "it is impractical to become an expert in divergent career fields" (p. 289). A helpful approach to assessing career-related work comes from Quick's (2012) study where careful attention was paid to determine whether students wrote "to speak to the needs and concerns of the audience rather than the writer's need to get the position" (p. 241). In other words, are students engaging in writer-based prose that only they understand, or are they engaging in reader-based prose where they consider their audiences expectations. Quick offers a rubric for assessing cover letter effectiveness, aiming for students to produce more critically aware and, therefore, useful writing (pp. 241-2). Arendt & Sapp (2014) make a similar claim in their conclusion on military veterans' career documents needing a reader-based approach: "Job applicants need to be trained to display how their knowledge, skills, and abilities can meet the needs of employers [in order] to make their strengths more prominent in such documents" (p. 58).

Although it is unrealistic for teachers to immerse themselves in all (or many) of the professional activity systems towards which their students aspire, recognizing the ineffectiveness of generic assignments is a good step for rethinking these career-related assignments. If immersion in an activity system is how one learns genres and acclimates to a profession, then the best approach is to recognize the limitations of the classroom—the activity system in which teachers are mainly immersed—and encourage students to consider applying for internships, volunteer positions, or jobs that do not require credentials they do not have. Because assignments will never be devoid of the classroom context, teachers should require reflective components that attempt to get students to identify their attributes, philosophies, and work ethic using concrete, specific examples. These assignments should not be considered the final résumé and cover letter; instead, they are practice for a time when a student is closer to a position they can realistically attain.

Acknowledgements

References

Amare, N., & Manning, A. (2009). Writing for the robot: How employer search tools have influenced résumé rhetoric and ethics. *Business Communication Quarterly, 72*(1), 35-60.

Arendt, C. & Sapp, D. (2014). Analyzing résumés of military veterans during transition to post-service. *The Florida Communication Journal, 42*(1), 45-60.

Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Blakeslee, A. M. (2001). Bridging the workplace and the academy: Teaching professional genres through classroom-workplace collaborations. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *10* (2), 169-192. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1002_4

Carpenter, R. (2009). Boundary negotiations: Electronic environments as interface. *Computers and Composition, 26*(3), 138-148. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2009.05.001

Carter M., Ferzli, M., & Wiebe, E. (2007). Writing to learn by learning to write in the disciplines. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 21*(3), 278-302. https://doi.org/10.1177/105065190730046

Cooke, L., & Williams, S. (2004). Two approaches to using client projects in the classroom. *Business Communication Quarterly, 67*(2), 139-152. https://doi.org/10.1177/10805699042653

Doheny-Farina, S. (1992). *Rhetoric, Invention, Technology: Case Studies of Technical Communication in Technology Transfers*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Freedman, A., Adam, C., & Smart, G. (1994). Wearing suits to class: Simulating genres and simulations as genre. *Written Communication*, *11*(2), 193-226. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088394011002002

Gubala, C., Larson, K., & Melonçon, L. (2020). Do writing errors bother professionals? An analysis of the most bothersome errors and how the writer's ethos is affected. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 34*(3), 250-286. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651920910205

Jablonski, J. (2005). Seeing technical communication from a career perspective: The implications of career theory for technical communication theory, practice, and curriculum design. *Journal of Business Technical Communication, 19*(5), 5-41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651904269391

Kastman Breuch, L. A. (2002). Thinking critically about technological literacy: Developing a framework to guide computer pedagogy in technical communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *11*(3), 267–288. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1103_3

Killoran, J. B. (2006). Self-published Web résumés: Their purposes and their genre systems. *Journal of Business Technical Communication, 20*(4), 425-459. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651906290267

Killoran, J. B. (2009). The rhetorical situations Web résumés. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 39*(3), 263-284. https://doi.org/10.2190/TW.39.3.d

Miller, Carolyn. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *70*(2), 151–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686

Popken, R. (1999). The pedagogical dissemination of a genre: The resume in American business discourse textbooks, 1914-1939. *JAC*, *19*(1), 91-116. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20866224

Quible, Z. (1995). Electronic résumés: Their time is coming. *Business Communication Quarterly, 58*(3), 5-9.

Quick, C. (2012). From the workplace to academia: Nontraditional students and the relevance of workplace experience in technical writing pedagogy. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *21*(3), 230–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2012.666639

Randazzo, C. (2016). Where do they go? Students' sources of résumé advice, and implications for critically reimagining the résumé assignment. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *25*(4), 278–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2016.1221142

Randazzo, C. (2019). About face: Reflexively considering "audience" in hiring situations. *Journal of Business*

and Technical Communication, 33(2), 203-232. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651918816355

Russell, D. (1997). Rethinking genre in school and society: An activity theory analysis. *Written Communication*, *14*(4), 504–554. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088397014004004

Scott, T. (2005). Creating the Subject of Portfolios: Reflective Writing and the Conveyance of Institutional Prerogatives. *Written Communication, 22*(1), 3-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088304271831

Spinuzzi, C. (1996). Pseudotransactionality, activity theory, and professional writing instruction. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *5*(3), 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq0503_3

Wickliff, G. A. (1997). Assessing the value of client-based group projects in an introductory technical communication course. *Journal of Business Technical Communication, 11*(2), 170-191. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651997011002002

Winsor, D. (1994). Invention and writing in technical work: Representing the object. *Written Communication*, *11*(2), 227-250. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088394011002003

Yu, H. (2008). Contextualize technical writing assessment to better prepare students for workplace writing: Student-centered assessment instruments. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 38*(3), 265-284. https://doi.org/10.2190/TW.38.3.e

Yu, H. (2010). Bring workplace assessment into business communication classrooms: A proposal to better prepare students for professional workplaces. *Business Communication Quarterly, 73*(1), 21-39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569909357783

Author Information

Aaron A. Toscano

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1659-2752

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28223

U.S.A.

Contact e-mail: *atoscano@uncc.edu*