Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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CHAPTER 13

"AND SOMETIMES WE DEBATE"

How Networking Transforms What Professional Writers Know

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> As knowledge workers increasingly rely on networked communication and work in distributed groups, professional communication scholars must provide a better understanding of the patterns of use that are evident within networked exchanges. (Jones 2014, p. 88)

Job seekers across technology-intensive fields are bombarded with advice to network. As with the term "rhetoric," many students enter writing courses with preconceptions about what "networking" means and how it might or might not relate to their writing practices. Students may consider networking to mean random requests on LinkedIn from people they will never meet, or handshakes and small talk with people who they assume have power or access to what they need to "get ahead." Networking can suggest impractical and impersonal cold calling for the possibility of future personal benefit or aggrandizing self-promotion. It can seem time-consuming, solipsistic, and perhaps a little painful. Beyond this, students may be skeptical about social media use given how often it is used to spread misinformation. In all these ways, networking is used to forward a personal agenda—to leverage technologies or relationships to get what one wants. However, we argue for a conceptualization of

networking that extends beyond a focus on self or simply becoming present in forums (e.g., LinkedIn, meet-and-greets) where others are gathering. Instead, we understand networking as a practice of connecting that is central to learning, and that participates in constructing professional knowledge, beliefs, and values.

Our view of networking is drawn from collaborative interviews we conducted with technical communication entrepreneurs across the world with different educational and workplace backgrounds. These interviews demonstrated how careers develop through written practices of interconnection across multiple genres and platforms (see Lauren and Pigg 2016a; Lauren and Pigg 2016b). The quotation that we've highlighted to begin this chapter comes from how one participant positioned the importance of dialogue with other professionals. The individual explained, "I know people all over the world because of all these conferences . . . and we all follow each other, and we all exchange comments, barbs, information, useful tips, etc. And sometimes we debate." The participant explains how connecting in between professional gatherings provides a platform for staying connected with geographically dispersed peers. These connections were not necessarily motivated by "getting ahead" or advancing personal interests. Instead, our participants used social media to connect—to help them build and constitute their field's knowledge base through interactions online. For this participant and others, informal, everyday "debates" about best practices, ethics, new technologies, critical infrastructures, new media, and many other issues shaped the choices they made in their writing and in their careers. In other words, networking was a professional communication practice that transformed what they, as writers, knew.

Networking, as we understand it, is thus an important learning model for professional writers who intend to adapt their practices to changing social, cultural, and technological circumstances. In this chapter, we outline an approach to teaching networking as a transformative, interconnective, professional writing practice. Our approach offers both conceptual guidelines and concrete practical

advice for an approach to teaching and learning networking that illustrates how:

- Networking can be framed as essential to building writers' self-agency as learners in and beyond the university;
- Networking can be understood as a transformative writing practice when making connections for learning, advocating, and peer-peer mentoring; and,
- Networking can increase the potential for developing understandings informed by and across difference (e.g., interacting with those with different training, lived experiences, and/or knowledge areas).

Existing Pedagogies of Networking

Over the past fifteen years, technical and professional communication (TPC) scholarship has embraced the importance of social networking to TPC and has developed pedagogies to shape how networking is taught. Not surprisingly, these pedagogies take different approaches and emphasize different purposes. In most cases, though, networking is associated with using social media platforms, and pedagogies emphasize both functional software literacies and their critical use.

The pedagogical rationale for teaching networking emphasizes the kinds of writing and communication platforms that students are using outside the classroom or that they will encounter in future workplaces. In this vein, Bernadette Longo argues that integrating social media into TPC pedagogy can lead to "authentic learning that can prepare students for the workplaces practitioners now encounter. Using social media in classrooms, teachers can recreate professional settings" (2014, 30–31). Jennifer Bay's (2010) conception of networked pedagogies similarly "attempt[s] to leverage the erasure of boundaries between work and life through new media technologies." As Stephanie Vie puts it: "Social media play a crucial role in TPC professionals' lives, but TPC teachers will not learn how to incorporate social media most effectively without actually experiencing and communicating within these technologies" (Vie 2017, 346). Helpfully, pedagogies that emphasize teaching

networking can highlight how these platforms ground social learn-ing approaches, enabling students to use social media's connective potential for research, inquiry, and exchange. For example, many professionals share articles and resources, post opinions on emerging issues, and interact with colleagues. Accessing this information is a useful way for professionals to stay aware of emerging conversations in their field.

Pedagogical scholarship has also focused on how social media platforms require students' critical evaluation. Networking schol-arship grounded in a critical media approach argues for teaching rhetorical and critical literacies so that students can produce ethical, strategic communication. Amy Kimme Hea (2011), for instance, explained that people must develop a "critical media sensibility" (i.e., not taking information on social media at face value) for using social media as it is essential to community-based project work. Additionally, Melody Bowdon's (2014) experience teaching Twitter in the context of TCP focused on forwarding critical and ethical approaches.

We build on this existing scholarship but also shape our pedagogy by the ways that our research participants discussed the importance of networking in building and maintaining their careers (Lauren and Pigg 2016a; Lauren and Pigg 2016b). Our participants maintained connections in order to stay informed about developing field trends and eventually to influence those trends through circulating their own informal commentary and more formal written contributions (i.e., articles, blog posts). Also, our participants cultivated a diverse network so that their understandings and perspectives could be informed by people with different backgrounds and viewpoints. One participant in particular explained that technology fields often neglect the voices of women and racial minorities and that main-taining connections that cross race and gender boundaries is essential to ethical professional practice.

For this reason, in addition to emphasizing critical literacies, we emphasize networking as a critical praxis that crosses different technological platforms and interactive spaces. To define what we

mean by networking as critical praxis, we draw on scholars like Natasha Jones who positioned technical communicators as advocates who are "aware of the ways that the texts and technologies that they create and critique reinforce certain ideologies and question how communication shaped by certain ideologies affects individuals" (2016, 345). In terms of networking, this is important in several ways. First, networking as a critical praxis pays attention to how different technologies or interactive forums invite or deny access to particular individuals or groups. In addition, it is attentive to the diversity of collectives we engage in conversation. For example, if we are only including others from our racial and gender demographics or who are likely to agree with us, we may be developing ideas that have limited application, or worse, that may cause harm. We understand teaching networking as a critical praxis to be one concrete way to help TCP grow more inclusive. As a result, we introduce networking as a multi-sited phenomenon and a location for building more diversity into the social influences on field knowledge and practice, as well as on scholarship arguing for more writing instruction in networking and for advocacy (e.g., Bay 2010; Jones 2014; Jones 2016).

Networking as Transforming through Connecting

To make the notion of networking as critical praxis concrete, we emphasize four guidelines and associated practices that enhance how we teach networking in writing courses. These guidelines were developed out of our previous discussions of networking and technical communication entrepreneurs previously referenced above.

- Guideline 1: Teach networking as a form of knowledge development;
- Guideline 2: Teach networking as a form of participation in professional communities;
- Guideline 3: Teach networking as a way to establish and develop a professional identity; and,
- Guideline 4: Teach networking as a form of advocacy.

We understand these guidelines as unique because of their emphasis on networking as a practice focused on collectives rather than individuals. Participants in our research cited personal benefit as a byproduct of networking rather than a reason to do it. That is, networking can benefit a professional field when the focus is on sharing useful knowledge and experiences, debating best practices, and inventing new ideas. The result of these exchanges may be that individuals build credibility within their communities, but that credibility develops as a result of the utility of one's contributions. Furthermore, through the idea of advocacy, these guidelines stress the importance of adopting a critical stance toward personal associations. We ask students to consider their own positionalities, and to critically interrogate their own assumptions and individual networks. For instance, they might ask questions like who is and is not part of my network? Where are there opportunities to build knowledge as a form of advocacy and/or amplification of underrepresented voices and ideas? How is knowledge represented and valued by my network? And finally, in what ways can writers participate ethically in networking activities when working to develop an understanding of difference?

In addition to broadening students' conceptions of networking, we want to broaden students' understanding of the writing and rhetorical practices that accomplish networking. While students may be familiar with amassing "friends" or "colleagues" online, they may be less familiar with the infrastructural writing required to maintain relationships and support collective knowledge work. Connecting with someone isn't enough. To shift students toward a focus on networking to build and transform collective knowledge, we associate networking with teaching the following writing practices that we learned TCP entrepreneurs regularly practiced as part of their work:

- Researching and listening (networking to learn, maintaining awareness of others, paying attention to others' contributions, reading professional practices)

- Writing mundane genres (keeping in touch, managing online identities, emails and professional correspondence)
- Building exponential relationships (circulating good ideas, bridging subgroups, brainstorming with others)
- Participating in collective knowledge-building (volunteering services, building local relationships, attending professional meetings).

Students should understand that listening is foundational to engaging, and that engagement with others is important to building exponential relationships.

Examples of Teaching Networking as a Professional Communication Practice

We next offer two examples of teaching networking as a critical praxis in writing classes. For each class, we developed one assignment that positioned networking as a form of knowledge development, as well as a step in a research process. So far, we have developed our pedagogy of networking in ways that responded to the context of two courses we were assigned to teach. Our ideas about teaching networking have also evolved as a result of these teaching experiences, and so our examples emphasize and encourage students to achieve some of our guidelines and practices better than others. We look forward to revising these assignments, as well as to developing additional courses and units that focus on networking for transformative learning.

Ben's Account of Networking in Professional Writing Theory and Research

The first assignment was designed for a graduate seminar in professional writing theory and research. The assignment is available in the online resource "Networking Project Assignment." For this project, the goal was to try and build on each of the guidelines that our research demonstrated (i.e., to research, to write, to build relationships, and to participate in knowledge-building activities). Students were offered the opportunity to choose a platform of their interest, including popular platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter,

Facebook, and so on. To get started, I wrote an assignment sheet that asked students to make a few considerations about how they presented their public profile as they developed a professional identity. The assignment sheet, for example, required that they choose a headshot and write a short biography of their work and interests.

Preparing students required a fair amount of discussion and reflection on performing an academic identity in different social spaces. For example, some students had always used their Twitter handle as a professional space, while others had used it for more personal interactions. Discussing the affordances of transforming the strategy of their Twitter account was an important part of our discussions. As well, learning to evaluate the tone and style of their Tweets proved quite important to their work. I suggested that students begin to closely follow other academics online, especially those whose work they admired, to see how they interacted with the Twitter sphere. This approach was meant to help them understand that a variety of approaches and personas are possible.

One week, we discussed readings on TPC that helped students theorize organizations and practices of communicating via networks. Our discussion questions for that day centered on distributed work, information communication technologies, organizational theory and culture, and entrepreneurship. The presentation focused on helping students understand the nature of temporary organization, such as that depicted by Potts (2014) and Spinuzzi (2015), and how many folks seem to operate at the center of their own kind of organization (e.g., Rainie and Wellman 2012). In this way, I advised students to understand organizations and organizing as a kind of networked experience with ties to others that can be understood as latent, ongoing, and intermittent.

From this discussion, students created a networking plan for a social or professional issue of importance to them. They were invited to work in small teams or on their own. Students had the opportunity to think through how they could advocate for this issue using social media. As well, they had to consider the limitations of their

selected platform to raise awareness or motivate action about this particular issue. Through these discussions, I designed the course to move students from the idea that networking communication is only about making deals or finding future job prospects, to the idea that it is an activity steeped in advocacy as a means for making change in the world.

In addition to in-class writing activities, we also discussed professional conversations happening on Twitter. During class, I worked to bring in ideas and materials discovered on social media. Modeling for students how social media can be a contact zone between practitioners and academics seemed important, and it also emphasized the importance of learning to listen online. We talked at length about the importance of listening both critically and empathetically to others' updates. Networking to engage can appear a passive activity, even though reading to learn is truly active engagement.

Throughout the semester, students were asked to provide monthly progress reports on their use of Twitter. These progress reports were reflective moments, meant to make time for them to think about how it felt to use Twitter to network. It was during these reflections where discussions related to anxiety about Twitter as a public platform surfaced. However, the assignment did not require students to Tweet a certain amount or to Tweet at all. Rather, the assignment asked them to engage in some way and use Twitter to network (i.e., to learn).

When I teach networking in the future, one thing I'll make sure to do is ask students to do an informational interview with a professional who uses a social media site for knowledge building. Doing so would help students approach networking as learning from individuals that do it effectively. Also, I would ask students to think about who is a part of their various networks and who is not. That is, I'd encourage students to think about the networks they were participating in and building around themselves. This sort of critical awareness of networking environments is key to networking towards growth.

Stacey's Account of Networking in an Internship Course

I incorporated a networking pedagogy into an internship class for graduate students. The course taught theoretical foundations of professional and workplace writing while students participated in an internship experience. The course thus prepared students to transfer writing and rhetorical skills into workplace contexts by building their metacognitive foundations for understanding differences between professional and academic discourse communities. Students and administrators also understood another less articulated but just as important role for the course: they hoped that it will help students establish relationships with individuals and organizations that will eventually aid in their job searches.

I recently taught this course twice in two different contexts, and my class approach is indebted to Susan Katz, Huiling Ding, and Douglas Walls, who shared their conceptual frameworks, syllabi, and approaches. I first taught the course in the spring 2019 and taught it a second time in spring 2021. While the spring 2019 course was face to face, the spring 2021 semester course was conducted online asynchronously due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and students were all conducting internships remotely as well. Students faced isolation, as they were unable to "drop in" on internship mentors or academic advisors. In addition, some students had never met their professors or graduate colleagues face to face.

Our first step was to build a foundation for understanding networking as interpersonal, knowledge-generating work. In the spring 2021 class, we used a video recording and sharing program, Flipgrid, for writing and sharing media to set the stage for understanding writing as a social enterprise and for building collegial relationships. While Flipgrid is designed so that students can record quick, off-the-cuff responses, students noted that they often had to work to record a video contribution to class conversation that would both appear casual and be useful to our collective. One student even shared her funny video outtakes. Students also responded to their peers with follow-up comments or videos. As is the case in many classes, this foundation in reading and conversation established the

importance of mundane genres, social contributions, and listening to individual learning and building collective knowledge.

Another step in building students' approach to networking was to have students take the *CliftonStrengths Assessment*. This aspect of the course extended Susan Katz's curriculum development by emphasizing that students have a range of strengths related to inter-personal work. In my commentary on their personal strength assessment reports, I discussed how students' strengths related to their ability to participate in networking, which differed for each student. For example, some students had strengths in mediating or bridging differences, which would allow them to effectively introduce concepts or people that might not otherwise become connected. Other students had strengths in instilling enthusiasm in others, or in archiving knowledge. My commentary offered students support and ideas for understanding how their individual strengths could be positioned as central to their own personal ways of orienting to professional networking.

Next, students proposed and completed ePortfolio projects to anchor their professional identities online. Workshops for port-folio-building encouraged students to build their portfolios not in isolation but instead as responsive to community conversations and conventions. This meant listening and positioning portfolios as tools for connection rather than as static artifacts for self-promotion. When students created and shared ePortfolios for the class, we treated the community of scholars within the class as a relevant and diverse community from which to learn. The assignment is available in the online resource "Professional E-Portfolio Assignment."

When I teach the course again, I plan to do some things differently. For example, while I consciously considered students' work on Flipgrid to be a form of networking, I did not overtly identify that terminology. It seems likely that students might not have made an explicit connection between the networking that we did (and often do) in classrooms to connect and build social knowledge and the networking that they can do in their professional lives for the same purpose. Likewise, I want to work harder to help students see

networking as advocacy by interrogating the diversity and limitations of their current networks and/or their field's networks. This aspect of our pedagogy has developed as we have discussed our teaching experiences, and it will be central to my next pedagogical iteration.

Conclusion

Our model brings together two goals that writing pedagogies often have for students that are difficult to address in concrete ways: 1) how to encourage students to develop dispositions and practices that support continued learning once they leave our classrooms and 2) how to stress the importance of relationships—and diverse relationships—to professional life and learning. These two skills are crucial to students' success in writing beyond the university, when they are likely to have less structured tasks, feedback mechanisms, and instructions for effective practices.

The model we have described addresses some novel challenges faced by writing instructors and program administrators, and we conclude by offering key takeaways for those who work with student writers:

- Educators should position networking less as a phenomenon unique to social networking sites and more as a practice central to making and sharing knowledge.
- Relational writing is important to foster lifelong learning practices and should be taught explicitly.
- Educators should take the time to address students' potential negative responses to networking to help students work toward new dispositions.

Related to these implications, we understand our approach to have the following implications for administrators:

- Administrators can foster practice in networking across discrete formal and informal learning experiences. For example, networking learning and practice can happen in courses, as well as in the creation of professional portfolios.

- Investing in particular networking platforms is perhaps less important than teaching students how to access and navigate multiple forums and platforms for networking.

Learning how to learn socially and share knowledge with others while critically analyzing information not only disrupts hierarchical concepts of expertise but also asks students to carefully consider what it means to be in conversation with peers—learning, teaching, advocating. In this way, when we teach networking as part of our jobs as professional writers, we also clarify professional writers' role in advocating for more intentional conversations across workplaces, career paths, and intellectual domains. And we do so as learners—not as practitioners, students, faculty, managers, or entrepreneurs. In other words, we inhabit the actions and grace of what it means to learn in public, and to help others to do the same. This, we believe, is the kind of goal we should be ultimately setting for students' writing beyond the university.

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