BRIDGING CULTURES

The Academy and the Workplace

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This introduction to articles by David Carlone and Laurie K. Lewis et al. argues that the communication advice given by management gurus and in popular press books may reflect the values and practices of the workplace culture, a culture which has contexts and exigencies quite different from those of the academic culture. Generally, the goals of workplace professionals demand that they think in specific, practical, and immediately applicable ways; those of us in the academy must think in terms that are more abstract, conceptual, and long-term. It is understandable, then, that works that might be highly valued by either practitioners or academics can seem entirely irrelevant to the other. And just as understandable, practitioners and academics can easily dismiss or discount the works valued by the other side. Ideally, the best popular press books or gurus would go further than simply aligning themselves with academic scholarship; they could enrich academic scholarship with the experience of savvy workplace professionals.

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The articles that follow present two perspectives on how ideas about management and change are disseminated in the workplace—one focusing on a single "management guru" and the other examining popular press books. David Carlone (2006), in "The Ambiguous Nature of a Management Guru Lecture," offers an interesting and detailed analysis of a day-long lecture by Stephen R. Covey (1989), consultant and author of the bestselling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Laurie K. Lewis, Amy M. Schmisseur, Keri K. Stephens, and Kathleen E. Weir (2006), in "Advice on Communicating During Organizational Change," provide an insightful analysis of the dominant themes in popular books on the subject of communication during organizational change. These articles represent a fundamentally important focus for business communication research because our theory and pedagogy must be grounded in a deep and authentic understanding of the powerfully influential ideas that inform workplace practice.

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These studies reveal at once the validity of the ideas propounded by management gurus and popular books as well as their limitations and sometimes problematic advice. For example, many propositions in the Covey lecture seem sensible and, if practiced, would surely foster productive working relationships. At the same time, as Carlone (2006) concludes, "Covey's lectures simultaneously ease and deepen uncertainty and anxiety." Likewise, some of Covey's strategies, such as "disrupting the ontology" of his listeners, are those many teachers might use to get students to think about issues more deeply. However, few teachers see themselves on a near-religious quest for "transcendent vision," as Carlone reports, or view themselves functioning as something of a spiritual guru, as Covey does.

Lewis et al. (2006) see an ambiguity as well in the popular books they studied. On one hand, popular books often share much with reputable scholarship:

> In our own reading of these books, we noticed a surprising alignment between some of what has been consistently found in the scholarly literature and what is advised in these books. Thus, these books appear to be useful summaries, to some extent, of related scholarly research.

This surprising alignment of principles of popular books with academic scholarship could be "by accident," as they suggest. Or it may result in part because some authors of popular books come from the ranks of the academy, or at least hold advanced degrees in the relevant specialties.[1] In what I believe is an insightful observation, Lewis et al. (2006) further speculate that the alignment of principles may be "due to more practice-oriented authors having drawn similar conclusions as scholars based on different types of evidence."

On the other hand, although they see alignment, Lewis et al. (2006) also find that some of the advice in the popular books is "underspecified and acontextual, and none of it really demonstrates a familiarity with underlying theoretical or even empirical literature." They point out as well that popular books "tended to boil tactics for communication down to sound bites and general philosophy." These observations—that practice-oriented authors (or gurus, for that matter) draw conclusions based on different types of evidence and that popular books boil tactics down to sound bites as well as fail to demonstrate familiarity with scholarly literature—are essential to understanding what I see as a cultural difference in the academy and the workplace.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

When I reported on a national cultural setting (Alred, 1997b), I said that the term *culture* was problematic but that I would accept *culture* to mean the way a group of people understands reality or the world around them—a shared way of being, evaluating, and doing—passed from one generation to the next (Limaye & Victor,

1991). Although this definition was intended to describe national cultures, it could describe in many ways the differences in the academy and the workplace.[2]

I reflected on these cultural differences in my introduction to "Essential Works on Technical Communication" (Alred, 2003). Specifically, as I gathered titles from a wide variety of sources, I found a clear dividing line between works valued by academics and those valued by practitioners. Although a handful of works were valued by both academics and practitioners, an overwhelming number of works were recommended exclusively by either practitioner or academic sources (Alred, 2005). Based on my review of those works gathered from practitioner sources, I might agree with Lewis et al. that practice-oriented authors have drawn conclusions based on different types of evidence. But I would also suggest that the workplace requires practitioners to seek fundamentally different ways of responding to their contexts and exigencies—ways that do not require them, for example, to document either their intellectual processes or establish concurrence with scholarly or any other literature.

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One reason I have learned to appreciate how practitioner contexts and exigencies produce works that I would not necessarily value as an academic is that I have worked closely for more than 30 years with a co-author who spent his entire professional career in business and industry. Charles ("Ted") Brusaw, my co-author on a number of books, has been a professional writer, a corporate trainer, and for many years the manager of technical publications at NCR Corporation's Headquarters in Dayton, Ohio. Although I certainly respect Ted Brusaw for many reasons, I struggled in the past because of our "cultural differences."[3]

Brusaw, whom I regularly invited to speak to my classes, would often say to students, "that never happens in the real world" or "you approach [something] in this way [as if the approach was always right]." Further, when we would meet after he visited my classes, I learned that Ted found it unnatural to spell out processes and rationales that he had internalized in his work at NCR. When we were working on our first book together, *Practical Writing*, he would sometimes suggest boiled down tactics that I viewed initially as arbitrary and simplistic (Brusaw & Alred, 1973). Fresh out of graduate school, I saw everything as complex, contextual, and needing to be supported by theoretical, historical, or empirical literature. Brusaw's

approach seemed, as Lewis et al. describe, "underspecified and acontextual," and he was not at all interested in demonstrating a familiarity with scholarly literature.

Even though I was somewhat troubled, I also knew that Brusaw was a successful writer and outstanding manager, and I was impressed at his ability to research, write, organize, and synthesize information. As we worked together, I quickly learned that I was wrong to see his approach as unthinkingly arbitrary and simplistic. Although he had difficulty understanding any need to document his path to the conclusions he developed, he did not passively accept simple-minded solutions. But it took me years to fully understand how Brusaw and his colleagues at NCR constructed what I now think of as "touchstones" (or distilled principles and methodologies) to solve complex problems so they could produce sophisticated documentation within tight deadlines. Their touchstones, which to an outsider might appear as arbitrary and simplistic, were developed through highly specific research using both internal and outside expertise, distilled from a complex historical process of examining rhetorical variables, and documented as operational guidelines rather than narratives of processes or of theoretical models. Working against tight deadlines and within the proprietary constraints of collaborative projects in a competitive corporation, Brusaw had neither the mandate nor the time to document a historical account of his activities. And he certainly did not need to develop conceptual or theoretical frameworks to serve the long-term educational needs of students and future researchers and scholars. Most significant, because Brusaw and his colleagues did not document their methodologies, work, or sources, their processes, contexts, and research materials became invisible as soon as these touchstones were developed.

I would not suggest that Brusaw's processes and those of his NCR colleagues, of course, are typical of all workplace professionals. Nor do I believe that all workplace professionals or authors of popular books necessarily develop similarly valuable touchstones. But then not all published scholarly works provide valuable insights. Given my experience with Brusaw, however, I am not surprised that workplace professionals would find resonance in much of what Covey has to say or would seek nuggets of helpful advice in popular books.

Just as I have learned that those of us in the academy can too quickly reject the seemingly easy and apparently superficial comments of practitioners, Brusaw has told me that his relationship with me has helped him appreciate academic perspectives as well. We have both learned that we have different perspectives, in part because we have had different goals in our work. Brusaw's goal as a manager of technical publications, for example, was to produce usable documentation for very specific products and within tight deadlines. One of my goals as an educator has been to prepare students for lifelong careers that may involve them with future tasks that none of us could imagine. Generally, the goals of workplace professionals demand that they think in specific, practical, and immediately applicable ways; those of us in the academy must think in terms that are more abstract, conceptual, and long-term. It is understandable, then, that works that might be highly valued by either practitioners or academics can seem entirely irrelevant to the other. And just

as understandable, practitioners and academics can easily dismiss or discount the works valued by the other side.

TESTING POPULAR ADVICE IN THE WORKPLACE

I wrote in the Introduction to *The St. Martin's Bibliography of Business and Technical Communication* that "theory is necessary to prevent us from being overwhelmed by what is local, particular, and temporal. In turn, pedagogy both mediates practice and transforms our theory" (Alred, 1997a). I would argue that, likewise, practice in the workplace can test theory as well as the advice of gurus and popular books. At the very least, it is an oversimplification to assume that most workplace professionals are gullible and accept the advice of gurus or popular books without reflection, any more than those in the academic community accept uncritically the work of colleagues. And, indeed, the authors of the articles that

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follow also point to the critical awareness of workplace professionals. Lewis et al. (2006) begin their study, for example, with a narrative that reflects the skepticism of many professionals about popular books (Armstrong, 1994):

> I set down my briefcase by my office door and headed around the corner to the coffee and donuts—the last bastion of stability. I poured my coffee and was rummaging through the donuts when Marsha Fillmore, our VP of marketing, brushed by. She shot me a worried look and whispered, "The boss has a new book." . . . Oh no. I quickly forgot about the donuts and walked back to my office. Not another book. (p. 61)

Carlone reports that workplace professionals often attend workshops because they are directed to do so or think they should attend.

One way to determine how popular advice is tested in the workplace, although certainly not the only way, is to search reader comments in Amazon.com about

Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, particularly those that reflect how a guru's work is received in workplaces. One Amazon.com reader comment, for example, echoes Carlone's point about why workplace professionals attend workshops as well as offers blunt skepticism about Covey's advice: "My boss requires us to take a 2-week course on this book [*The 7 Habits*] as part of the job. I told him I thought the book was over generalized nonsense."[4]

Lewis et al. (2006) observe that popular books are often created as "star vehicles" to launch speaking and promotional tours for their authors (Clark & Greatbatch, 2004, p. 408d). To reach the widest possible audience, ideas are "reduced and simplified into pithy lists, acronyms, concepts, mnemonics, metaphors, and stories that are immediately graspable, understood, and assimilated." Some reader comments on Covey's book not only reflect those observations but also offer serious reservations. The following Amazon.com reader criticisms are typical:

> Being well-read in self-help literature, I would conclude that the "7 habits" represents an up to date effort to re-represent old ideas and theories that have been around since common sense was invented. . . . I am left with some mixed feelings about this book and I can see the same from the reviews posted here: You either love it or you hate it. . . . Basically, I liked Covey's messages about being principle-centered and so forth. However, he seemed to "beat a dead horse" referring over and over again to basic, character-based, lighthouse-guiding principles over and over again in an irritatingly repetitive way.
>
> This book has seven platitudes we have learned at our mother's knee.
>
> I just finished reading this book, and have to say it was a serious let-down in light of the [positive] reviews. Let me save you some time and money: 1) You are responsible for your own life, so do something about it. 2) Make a plan for yourself. 3) Focus on what's important. 3) [sic] You reap what you sow—so sow well. 4) Seek mutually beneficial relationships. 5) Have empathy and be considerate to others. 6) Be cooperative. 7) Take care of yourself—mind, body, and soul. Ground-breaking stuff, isn't it?!?! Mr. Covey is a wealthy man for this?! Hmmmmmm.

MEETING PRACTITIONER NEEDS

Although some practitioners may be highly skeptical, at the same time many participants and readers would seem to approach guru workshops or popular books positively, thinking that they will give the tactics a try and see how they work. Or perhaps they see popular books or a Stephen Covey lecture as potentially useful in finding touchstones or in learning a process for making useful shortcuts to recurring workplace challenges. Many Amazon.com reviewers, for example, even when they agree with those reader critics who say Covey provides nothing new, nevertheless find Covey's interpretation useful:

> Stephen R. Covey managed to repackage an ethical and moral tradition thousands of years in development and make it meaningful to a late twentieth century, secular audience.
>
> This work organizes and encapsulates years of good advice into a simple program for practical use.
>
> Covey certainly borrows from other gurus in this work, but puts it together nicely in a way that makes sense and keeps you interested.

Other readers suggest that Covey provides motivation for their work in a time of change.

> [*The 7 Habits*] give us the security to adapt to change and the wisdom and power to take advantage of the opportunities that change creates.
>
> *7 habits* allows me to stay focused even when I feel everything is out of control.
>
> I learned how to manage myself and manage my relationships with others.

Indeed, some of Covey's concepts seem worthwhile even when he presents them with mnemonic aphorisms like "Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood." In fact, that precept seems one that could be usefully practiced in

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academic departments as well as in business offices. I also find it particularly interesting that, although some practitioners object to repetitiveness in popular books, one of the works Lewis et al. cite points out the value of repetition (Duck, 1998):

> It is important for the messages to be consistent, clear, and endlessly repeated. If there is a single rule of communication for leaders, it is this: when you are so sick of talking about something that you can hardly stand it, your message is finally starting to get through. (p. 61)

Some workplace professionals, of course, may overzealously embrace the advice of gurus and popular books, but many workplace professionals are quite savvy, as these postings from Amazon.com suggest:

> One guy in our office was so taken with it [Covey's book] that he drove everyone around him crazy with the delegation and time management aspects that his supervisor finally told him to knock it off. Seems he was delegating too much.
>
> There is NO PROOF what so ever that this book [*The 7 Habits*] helps anybody. In fact I made a bet with my boss. I told him if I could guess at least 5 out of the 7 habits without having read or looked at the book; [sic] I wouldn't have to go to the two-week course. I guessed 5 of them.

Ideally, the best popular press books or gurus would go further than simply aligning themselves with academic scholarship; they could enrich academic scholarship with the experience of savvy workplace professionals.

BUILDING ON THESE STUDIES

Understanding the cultural differences in the workplace and the academy is important not only in the interpretation of workplace studies but also in research that would build on or parallel the two articles that follow. The Covey study could be enriched, for example, through interviewing participants of a Covey lecture to answer significant questions.

- How many people have read Covey's book before coming to the lecture?
- What percentage of the participants were fans of Covey's *7 Habits* before attending the workshop?
- Do participants approach a Covey lecture with modest or focused expectations?
- To what extent are participants savvy about or skeptical of the rhetorical strategies of Covey and others?
- How many participants were "forced" to attend by managers who were excited about the book or tips?
- What were the participants' general reactions to the workshop or what aspects of Covey's methodology did participants find useful a month or a year later?

It would be interesting to compare the books with the lectures of other popular speakers to determine how the rhetorical strategies of lectures and books are similar or distinctive. Does the Covey book, for example, "simultaneously ease and deepen uncertainty and anxiety" in the same way as the lecture? Does the Covey book have as much potential as the lecture to create the "liminoid event" that Carlone (2006) describes?[5] Covey seems as much a motivational speaker or latter-day Dale Carnegie as a management guru. Perhaps further studies could focus on gurus who are more specifically management oriented.

The Lewis et al. (2006) study could be extended by examining how managers read popular management guides. We know from the past 30 years of research that proficient readers do much more than passively absorb writing, sequentially decoding sentences and pages as if they were machines. Readers are much more creative. They draw inferences as they read, and they term their own concepts; they make meanings as they read, and the meanings they make are often surprising leaps of

imagination. In other words, readers remember not only what we tell them but also what they tell themselves (Flower, 1981). Readers also choose the information they believe is useful to them as they read, based on their needs (Alred, Oliu, & Brusaw, 1991). We also know that readers bring their own stores of knowledge into play as they attempt to shape possible text meanings (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Based on reading theory and studies, we might ask a number of important questions:

- Do those in workplaces "cherry pick" advice from books as Lewis et al. recommend?
- Just how do popular books meet the needs of workplace professionals?
- Do readers in different fields use different strategies for assessing popular advice?
- What are the key issues for readers? motivation? time management? personal relationships in the workplace?

My review of Amazon.com reader comments is rather cursory: Perhaps a more careful and detailed study of reader comments from Amazon.com and other sites would be helpful in answering key questions about popular books like Covey's *The 7 Habits*. In addition, Lewis et al. (2006) suggest that change is a central theme in popular management books. In fact, they say, "Organizations appear to be drawn—almost cult-like—to embrace constant change." Some intercultural theorists see change as a dominant theme of U.S. culture (Jandt, 1998). What other facets of guru lectures or popular books might reflect U.S. cultural themes?

Generally, those of us in the academy need research that helps us understand how the principles we teach conflict or align with the advice that workplace professionals encounter in influential popular books and in the advice of management gurus. We need to know the answers to such questions both so that research can inform theory and so that our pedagogy enables our students to be wise consumers of popular advice.

NOTES

1. Stephen R. Covey holds an MBA from Harvard and, according to his biography, he taught as a professor of business management and organizational behavior at Brigham Young University, where he earned a doctorate in church history and doctrine.

2. I am generally troubled by the application of the term *culture* to groups outside of historical national contexts, as in the culture of stamp collectors or certain types of music enthusiasts. Often, such applications of culture tend to trivialize the truly pervasive nature of national cultures and the ubiquitous infrastructures that support cultural themes and practices. It is unfortunate that no other term describes as well this understanding of the academy and the workplace.

3. I would like to thank Ted Brusaw for reading this article and continuing to give me the benefit of his workplace experience.

4. For specific URLs for the Amazon.com customer reviews, contact the author.

5. Carlone describes a liminoid event as a middle phase in a secular rite of passage from "ineffective" to "effective."

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