

4. Freelancers as a Growing Workplace Norm: Demonstrating Expertise in Unfamiliar Communities of Practice

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Abstract

In light of the increase in freelance, contract, and gig economy labor, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other societal and economic shifts, the state of the traditional workplace has shifted. So too have the ways in which project teams work together in this new environment. This chapter, using Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice, seeks to identify and explain the unique challenges that organizations and freelance/gig workplace writers face when it comes to onboarding, communication, and enculturation (Wardle, 2004). The chapter also pulls from interviews from the authors' Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences project, examining two successful professional freelance writers—a commercial director and an illustrator—to consider the ways in which these professionals navigate the difficulties of constantly changing employers and collaborators, each with their own unique communication styles, work cultures, and expectations. In the absence of the stability of a traditional and more permanent work environment (and the community of practice which might accompany it), these freelance workers rely on high levels of skill transferability, flexibility, and multiple complex literacies in their communication and writing, often taking experiences from each gig and applying them expertly to the next. Ultimately, this chapter considers how transfer studies and rhetorical adaptability might aid both organizations and gig workers in smoother and more successful future collaborations as the freelance and gig economies continue to grow.

Keywords

gig economy, freelancers, workplace writing, transfer studies, communities of practice, COVID-19

From social changes and advancements in technology to the pandemic, the past several years have seen long-standing structures and standards of “workplace” shift dramatically. Specifically, in terms of how we work together, project teams

have become much more common than they used to be, and team members are much more likely to be spread out geographically (U.S. General Services Administration, 2009), communicating both synchronously and asynchronously (Li et al., 2009, p. 3). According to Clay Spinuzzi (2015), in his book *All Edge: Inside the New Workplace Networks*, we see this “projectification” (p. 32) proliferate across industries, with project teams meeting, joining, and then disbanding when projects end. With this shift, organizations become less traditionally organized and more of what he refers to as “adhocracies,” which “represent a structural shift in organizations, and society in general, from hierarchies to networks” (Spinuzzi, 2015, p. 16). This “different kind of workplace” (Spinuzzi, 2015, p. 16) is “increasingly viable and common,” but still emerging and taking form, which means that we are not only struggling to see, understand, and support it (Spinuzzi, 2015, p. 15), but also to understand the ways in which these adhocracies complicate workplace writing practices. Because of these short-term and transitory collaborations, organizations are unable to reap the benefits of longer, more stable communities of practice (CoPs) and the learning and writing knowledge that come from them. Further, the move towards work-from-home during the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this timeline and further strained and complicated already rapidly changing structures of communication. As Jennifer Bay and Patricia Sullivan (2021) predict, more blurring of the personal and professional in home spaces, workers and organizations find themselves forced to reconcile the challenges of professionals navigating workplace communication in real time.

With these shifts, we see workers far less tied to physical structures and employers more willing to hire remote and temporary workers regardless of geography, especially due to the pandemic-induced instability so many organizations face. This significant growth of freelance labor—temporary workers moving in and out, communicating with all levels of the organization—changes how we see traditional employee-employer relationships, as well as the writing that happens within them. In 2019, 35 percent of working adults freelanced in some capacity. This percentage, which increased each of the past five years, is expected to continue to grow (Freelancing in America, 2019). And according to one recent survey, COVID-19-related job loss during the pandemic has caused two million Americans to make the shift to freelance work (Berliner, 2020). Freelancing incomes make up nearly one trillion dollars, or nearly five percent of the total U.S. GDP (Freelancing in America, 2019). As a point of comparison, this is a higher percentage of the GDP than comes from the construction industry. Many of these temporary workers are operating in lower-skill “gig economy” situations—driving car-sharing services, delivering food through services like Uber Eats, or perhaps putting together furniture through a contracting service such as TaskRabbit. But many more are performing what is usually defined as “skilled” services (Freelancing in America, 2019). Such skilled work might include graphic design, business consulting, or technical consulting. And as one might expect, most workplace communication, particularly for freelancers, takes place through

written texts (Corbel, Newman, & Farrell, 2022). While temporary employees like the ones we consider here might not traditionally be thought of as technical or professional communicators, in fact we see them as such, particularly in the context of freelance work, where consultants often take on everything from proposals and bidding to technical requirements. Further, it is important to note that it's not only that freelancers make up a significant percentage of the modern workforce; freelance work itself touches nearly everyone in the working world in one way or another. Whether a full-time, traditional employee is in direct contact with a freelancer on a daily basis or not, their work is almost assuredly impacted by such independent workers. The communication and labor that these freelance workers engage in influences significant portions of modern labor more broadly.

The two industries with the largest percentages of freelance workers are art/design and entertainment (A Report Named Freelancers Union and Upwork, 2019). Here, we present two case studies of highly skilled, full-time freelancers from these industries. First, we explore the work and experiences of an illustrator. She is a self-taught artist who made the shift to freelance work in the past five years. She sells her artwork, collaborates with larger brands, and has published several illustrated books, including a guided self-help journal. The second case study focuses on a television commercial director. He studied creative writing and now works as a freelance writer and director of documentaries, short films, and television commercials, including several high-profile national campaigns. These interviews have been drawn from a larger pool of interviews with workplace writers across industries in the United States and Canada in a project titled *The Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences*. These interviews, collected and available for use as classroom resources online (www.workplace-writing.org), explore the writing, learning, and related experiences of these professionals. Like most of the working world today, the interviewees—and particularly these freelancers—rely on writing to do much of their work, even though their work products may not primarily be written texts.

Interestingly, both the illustrator and the commercial director estimate that writing makes up approximately 70 percent of their time. For the illustrator, such writing is primarily pitches, proposals, and contracts (she notes that she spends much additional time conducting research, and that she spends “maybe ten percent of my time . . . actually making work”). The director's writing is largely emailing, but also creating pitch decks (“where we show our ideas in as beautiful and comprehensible a way as possible, with images and words”), offering and responding to notes on various projects, and script-writing. Our research questions center around what differentiates the writing and communication of these workers from the communication practices of professionals in more traditional full-time employment situations, as well as how these freelance workers navigate the changing contexts of “workplace” and “workplace writing.” These case study interviews explore these concepts, as well as issues of authenticity in writing across client organizations via personal voice and branding, and the ways in

which these freelancers perceive their own development and authority as written workplace communicators.

The number of highly skilled freelance workers continues to grow, yet very little scholarship exists about their communication practices. In this chapter, we examine the writing demands placed on these freelance workers looking to thrive in a new economy. In doing so, we consider a lens initially developed to better understand more traditional workplaces: Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger's (1991) community of practice. Briefly defined, "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2011). Organizations and teams in this way develop a set of shared practices, and in this chapter, we explore the ways in which freelancers are or are not enculturated into such communities of practice. At its core, the study and application of communities of practice can demonstrate for us the ways in which such groups, or organizational teams in workplace settings, develop and reproduce, particularly through the roles of the newcomer and the seasoned professional. This, of course, changes when freelancers are involved—and we see now that they're nearly always, in some ways, involved.

Others have critiqued communities of practice, and some even in the context of similar adhocery-like working contexts. For instance, Lave and Wenger originally conceived of CoPs being in the same location, but this is no longer the case, of course. Many communities of practice are spread out over substantial geographic distance, which surely changes the ways in which communication practices develop and are learned (Li et al., 2009, p. 3). Relatedly, in examining groups and project teams similar to the adhoceries Spinuzzi addresses, Lars Lindkvist (2005) offers a variation on Lave and Wenger's term: "*collectivities of practice*." She writes about "temporary organizations or project groups within firms consist[ing] of people, most of whom have not met before, who have to engage in swift socialization and carry out a pre-specified task within set limits as to time and costs" and the ways in which such a situation makes it extremely difficult to "establish shared understandings or a common knowledge base" (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1190). Her term, *collectivities of practice*, might also rightly include freelancers.

Further, research that does exist about freelance workers mostly centers around the gig economy, or the seemingly less-skilled workers we mention above. One interesting study in this area also looks at—and also critiques—Lave and Wenger. Irena Grugulis and Dimitrinka Stoyanova (2011) examine this idea of community of practice as it relates to freelancers in their ethnographic research, conducted at a TV production company that, like many other similar organizations, relies heavily on freelancers. Their findings showed that the freelancers in this field were typically at the top of the knowledge hierarchy, whereas the newcomers to the industry were typically full-time employees. The authors describe a "missing middle," meaning that "experienced workers who would normally be central to skills development are simply not available to consult or observe, since they are employed on freelance contracts" (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2011, p. 342). They point

to an omission in Lave and Wenger's definition of organizations as coherent; and we see, too, that this is simply no longer the case in most organizations.

Still, it would be rash to say that traditional workplaces, and therefore CoPs, don't still exist. Rather, it's clear in our research that freelancers are often on the outside of such communities as they perform their work, communicating to and with such groups from this outside space. In the context of freelance workplace writers, a community of practice framework allows us to see these temporary workers as they work to demonstrate expertise across tasks, organizations, and industries. We've made this choice first in an effort to situate and understand freelance workers within contemporary labor, and to examine the ways in which this concept of a community of practice itself changes drastically when we explore the growing workplace writing context of the freelancer. We ultimately demonstrate that this framework is no longer ideal in its current form for understanding how communication practices allow for new versions of communities.

Client Sites as Communities of Practice, Freelancers as the Un-enculturated Outsider

It's well established that workplaces are legitimate learning environments (Billett, 2004; Coetzer, 2007; Engeström, 2001; P. Moore, 2006). Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice model has traditionally been a useful framework for examining communication practices within such learning environments. Although Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice comes from psychology, many writing studies and professional writing scholars have understandably grabbed hold of it for the affordances it provides in understanding how writers, specifically, learn and develop, not only in workplace CoPs, but also in classrooms and other communities (Henry, 2013; Luzón, 2017; Spinuzzi, 2015). Within these communities of practice, Lave and Wenger identify the concept of "situated learning," or the ways in which practitioners come to understand common practices and conventions over time by observing and participating in shared work with their colleagues (Wenger, 2008). Situated learning allows us to understand the ways in which communication becomes ingrained within groups and requires a period of learning for newcomers. For instance, new junior engineers joining an organization, and therefore a community of practice, will generally have the opportunity to not only be mentored by and observe more senior practitioners, but will also have access to successful documents from past projects, allowing them to gradually integrate from "neophyte" to full participant (Wardle, 2004). In this model, "practice is an ongoing, social, interactional process" in which traditional organizational communities "reproduce their membership in the same way that they come about in the first place. They share their competence with new generations through a version of the same process by which they develop" (Wenger, 2008). It's widely accepted that traditional employees, long-term and—in the past at least—usually on-site, come to understand that there are communication

practices specific to their team or department, as well as their larger organization. Over time, they usually learn to successfully participate in them.

Wenger writes that “special measures” are taken with these newcomers or neophytes (Wardle, 2004); during this period, a newcomer experiences what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as “legitimate peripheral participation,” or a kind of apprenticeship (p. 29). They theorize legitimate peripheral participation as a way for neophytes to come to understand and participate more fully in new communities of practice slowly and with guidance. It is the goal of the employer, viewing their new traditional hire as an investment for the organization, to move the neophyte “inward” from the periphery (Wenger, 2010, p. 132), and eventually fully into the community of practice. These peripheral tasks not only help to introduce the new hire to the skills and necessary expertise of the position, but also allow them to understand, slowly and with smaller stakes, the practices of the communal organization (including communication practices, group dynamics, social practices, and other elements). Imagine, for instance, a newly hired graphic designer in a government organization. They have some specific design skills, surely, and some basic professional communication knowledge. They might know formal letter-writing conventions, for instance, and have what they consider to be strong grammar skills. What they don’t know are the ins and outs of the communication within their government organization and, more specifically, their team—two different communities of practice within the same organization. At the broader organization level, there are standards and procedures surrounding communication, both spoken and unspoken, that they will have to learn. At the team or department level, we are likelier to see true legitimate peripheral participation in an effort to acclimatize this new worker slowly but intentionally. They may, for instance, shadow another more seasoned designer. They may be asked to make small design changes on an in-progress design text. The understanding is that they are learning by doing small, but real, tasks on the team. This neophyte’s identity is invested in their full future participation, even though their present participation may be peripheral; likewise, it benefits the organization to help the neophyte reach full legitimate participation as quickly as possible in order to reap the benefits of their investment.

But such an environment looks very different for temporary freelance workers than it does for traditional employees, both because of the freelancer’s needs and because of the boundaries within and around the client organization. On a very basic and seemingly logistic level, a freelancer might be unaware of, say, the expectations surrounding response time on emails that come in during off-peak hours, or, additionally, how those expectations might change depending on who sent the email—the chief marketing officer, for instance, or the junior copywriter. But of course, there are much larger, higher-stakes differences as well. One major distinction between a traditional new hire to an organization and a freelance-contract hire is that the traditional hire is seen as a novice or neophyte (Wardle, 2004), and the freelance hire is often coming in as a specialist or expert. Lave and Wenger (1991) state that legitimate peripheral participation is central to “belonging” (p. 35), and

therefore, we might conclude that without this stage, freelancers *can't* belong. For them, even the baseline idea of the workplace as a learning environment must be challenged. As the freelance worker's time is temporary within the organization, rather than seeing them as contributors worthy of investment, organizations tend to see them instead as "expert mercenaries," there to contribute their specialized skills and move on to the next organization. Traditionally, new full-time employees or group members typically benefit from having "access to the archived material in addition to the experience of and mentoring from experts" (Li et al., 2009, p. 3), but for freelancers, these types of materials are rarely available. Therefore, the freelancer's acclimatization is minimal, yet even more pressing, particularly if they are being brought in to perform a core task which requires authority. They are given little to no guidance, and their participation is not "peripheral" at any point.

Wenger (2008) writes about learning in CoPs that, over time, "collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (p. 45). But of course, the freelancer isn't around "over time." We know that "writing is not easily transferable from one domain of discourse to another, even by highly skilled professionals working within a single occupational setting" (Smart, 2000, p. 245). And so, as we think about these freelancers, it's crucial, and yet seemingly ignored in workplace studies, to begin to understand the ways in which they write, learn, and enculturate to communication practices.

The Contradictions of Gaining and Maintaining Freelancer Identity and Authority

Elizabeth Wardle (2004) draws on Lave and Wenger in exploring ideas of identity and authority for new writers entering specific workplaces, arguing that "if the neophyte is granted some measure of authority by an institution but does not quickly learn the appropriate speech conventions of her new community of practice, she may soon lose the authority with which she began." As Wardle describes, in a traditional workplace, it behooves the organization to ease the neophyte worker inward from the periphery more fully into the community of practice so that both the community (organization) and the new worker can reap the rewards of this time and resource investment. A newcomer would "normally experience a 'grace period' for adopting community practices" (Wardle, 2004, n.p.) before being asked to perform as an expert. This period of legitimate peripheral participation is strategic; it serves the organization's bottom line, as this grace period will ultimately allow for, they expect, more efficient and productive work down the line.

However, freelancers are brought in on an assumption about their ability to perform immediately and fully. Linda Li et al. (2009) point to the "tension between satisfying individuals' needs for personal growth and empowerment versus an organization's bottom line" as possibly the biggest challenge in developing

effective communities of practice. And this tension is surely at the forefront of the “problem” of freelancers here; an organization is unmotivated to invest time for the personal or professional development of a freelancer. Because of this, they’re not welcomed into communities of practice, and, yet, are expected to participate as if they are a member, however temporarily. Moreover, the stakes for the freelancer are incredibly high: Their livelihood and future work depend on integrating themselves enough to participate seamlessly—or at least close enough to seamlessly as to not cause a disruption.

Freelancers are brought in to be the “expert” out of the gate, even before they enter, in fact, through their written proposals (or, at times, a portfolio) that contributed to their hiring in the first place. Freelancers may not need to establish technical or specialist authority, as it may be immediately granted. Again, a graphic designer, brought into a project without any other graphic specialists, would likely be seen as the sole authority in that skill. Yet freelancers are seen not as community members (or potential members), but as specialized tools with both the expectation of authority and the simultaneous withholding of it. They walk a chronic tightrope: They are, by definition, outsiders, but are often asked to take on positions of authority *inside* established communities of practice. Freelance hires are viewed simultaneously as experts in their area of specialty (illustration, film directing, graphic design, etc.) and are asked to perform central tasks, which might require “full participation” practices, from their position on the periphery while being intentionally kept from any inward trajectory. For the illustrator, a freelance job is never as simple as merely showing up and performing her expertise (illustration) and moving on. The realities of each new project require myriad genres of writing and labor, styles of communication, audiences, and dynamics before they ever get to perform their core task (painting, perhaps, a spread for a magazine). Communities of practice require both “time and sustained interaction”—luxuries not granted to the freelance consultant; their ability to create and maintain authority may lie with their ability to assert enough expertise and authenticity to outweigh any shortcomings in expectations of practice (Wenger, 2011). They have little ability to build additional authority through demonstrating a successful navigation of practices, and yet the freelancer’s identity is multi-faceted and complex. Relying on Lave and Wenger’s theories about how a (traditional, permanent) newcomer must feel the small work they’re doing is important, Wardle (2004) notes, “Joining new workplace communities, then, is not simply a matter of learning new skills but also of fielding new calls for identity construction” (n.p.) This is perhaps even more true for temporary workers.

A writer’s history and experiences will, of course, inform not only the ways in which they come to understand communication practices in a client organization, but also how they approach personal professional writing tasks and choices (Kohn, 2015, p. 171). Wardle (2004) notes how easily authority can be overshadowed and eventually disregarded through enough transgressions against expected practices of the community, and so freelancers must create additional opportunities to

communicate their expertise. This vocalized authority, born from core expertise (illustration, web development, graphic design) may be incongruent with expected practices, but it is central to communicating a specific expert perspective and must outweigh any perceived incompetence or ignorance of expected practice. In her interview, our illustrator discusses the ways in which her core competency (illustration) offsets any perceived deficiencies in other practices:

I didn't go to art school, and I didn't go to business school, so I don't know anything about marketing or publicity or [law] or anything like that, and it's just been completely learning as I go and making tons of mistakes, the same mistakes over and over again. . . . I'm still learning of course, and I think that that artist part of me that just wants to write books and make drawings has a very casual approach to a lot of the legal writing, especially when I talk to my editor and my agent I'm not always capitalizing or using punctuation or formal methods of writing, and I think that as an artist you get away with more. I think people let you be casual because that's you, and you make the work that you make, and they're not going to nitpick if you don't capitalize or things like that. But I think that's been also something to learn when I'm catching myself, because there's a certain professionalism and etiquette that you need to maintain, and I think that's been difficult for me to grow into since I'm not used to doing it.

The freelance illustrator here notes an important moment of negotiation via “boundary interaction” communications (Wenger, 2010, p. 126). She simultaneously acknowledges the ways in which she negotiates her identity (creative, artist) through a casual approach to grammar while also recognizing both the leeway granted to her due to her expertise as well as the importance of moving (negotiating) her writing closer to the expected business and legal writing practices of her field, thus reducing the incongruity between the two types of writing practices. Still, as “authority . . . must be maintained through individuals' speech and actions,” it is vital that her expertise be communicated clearly and frequently (Wardle, 2004), lest she risk losing credibility in the eyes of her editor or agent.

Similarly, our commercial director speaks to this need to balance his identity and authority between what is expected and what feels most authentic to his expertise:

Most of the commercials that I write are silly or absurdist, so when I'm scripting, I try to let myself go as weird and silly and open as possible. But then when I'm talking to a client, I have to obviously button myself up and be very direct, straightforward, and professional. So, it's a lot of tone shifting when I'm actually doing the writing.

We see here that the freelance director can explicitly make distinctions between these various identities, recognizing which “voice” to show and when. He

references an absurdist sense of humor, but notes that in order to be taken seriously in this client community, such silliness needs to live only on the page.

Continuing, the commercial director speaks to this understanding that he is, in fact, working for a client with its own vision (or multiple visions) that may, in fact, be in conflict with his own:

You're always contracted for two revisions, but you always go until at least five—[clients without creative experience] keep sending emails with each revision, where they're winnowing down what they want, you're winnowing down and fighting for what you think is really important, and making sure that you're navigating that space where, there's a lot of times that . . . people can lose the thread of what was even good about it, so the onus is always on me to maintain . . . whatever the crystal was inside . . . to make sure that it's unbroken when it gets to the final destination.

The director demonstrates here that he is working to maintain his own vision while also struggling to satisfy the non-expert client's desires. Ultimately, creating and submitting work that represents his own aesthetic—the “crystal,” as he calls it—is essential to him. This is at least somewhat tied to his portfolio—he wants to be able to demonstrate this cohesive strong work to other clients—but it's also surely tied to his professional identity. And yet, of course, his authority to make sure the crystal “gets to the final destination” and is both personally satisfying and satisfying to his client must be in some conflict with his community of practice. This is especially complex, as, if a freelancer's expertise is questioned for any reason, they risk not being rehired for future projects. Their initial, limited authority can be revoked. Without the necessary authority to succeed, especially as an outsider where even minor deviations from expectations of communication or dynamics can lead to the end of their authority, freelancers run the risk of their contributions being discarded or not taken seriously.

The director speaks further to this challenge, as he recalls his early years as a freelancer and challenges in adapting to unique communication styles:

Because I didn't take any business marketing or any of those sorts of classes, I was startled by the difference in vocabulary between [my field] and sort of everyone else. These sorts of weird acronyms that would come up, like ROI and CRM and PPQ, or whatever they are, really threw me for a loop for a while, and it took me a long time to learn that language because there is a very specific language to this industry. . . . I think that was the biggest hurdle. . . . just having completely different lexicons and different words for the same things. And I've been fighting that still, in terms of trying to avoid the business-minded idiomatic phrasings that a lot of people fall into, like “making the ask” or “the burning bush” or

“the view from 30,000” or you know, all of those idiomatic crutches that people lean on in business relationships because it feels safer. That was pretty startling to me.

Here, the director not only recalls the unfamiliar phrases and acronyms he had to learn in order to fully participate in client communities, but also the ways in which he battles becoming *too* enculturated linguistically. He points to what we tend to think of as business clichés and suggests that even though he was forced to make sense of certain community practices in order to thrive, he was unwilling to take on all of them. His own identity was at risk in doing so. These freelancers are surely hired, in part, for their particular identities, aesthetics (for creative professionals), and unique ways of thinking, and yet they can’t stray too far from the practices of their client communities. As the director stated, “tone-shifting” is constant and requires quick and adept versatility.

And it’s here that both of our freelance professionals speak to what we might say is the crux of this identity and authority problem: authenticity, or how these freelance professionals—particularly, we would say, those in creative fields—straddle this line. The illustrator states,

I try to really write from the heart and connect with my audience, and along with that comes the writing that I do on Twitter and Instagram, both social media writing, but I try my best to be relatable and to be authentic instead of somebody that is just trying to sell herself.

As an artist, she describes working to connect with her audience, but as a freelancer, she *must* sell herself, and this is happening not only on social media, but also in her interactions with clients daily and—as we see in the following section—among multiple communities of practice. By this we mean she interacts with multiple teams or organizations as a freelancer at one time, navigating between the norms of these various communities.

■ Navigating Multiple Communities of Practice

In complex workplaces, which we would argue includes those employing freelancers, we also see multiple communities of practice overlap. For instance, our illustrator might be interacting with a magazine’s higher-level editorial department, which is one CoP, but also with other in-house designers, photographers, and writers, all situated in other CoPs. In such organizations, the lines between teams become blurry and fluid, and learning and interacting obviously also become more complicated (Gobbi, 2010, p. 160). Traditional permanent employees, too, must traverse multiple communities of practice—the magazine’s full-time photographer, for instance, communicates with her team, as well as many other teams, but she has access to these communities in a much more direct and long-term context.

For freelancers, every new project involves multiple new communities of practice. And, of course, sometimes these communities disagree. Our freelance writer-illustrator recalls early challenges in making her work appealing across multiple audiences:

I probably took 20 ideas [to an agent], and she liked one of them, which is the one we ended up going with. And after that, I basically did writing. . . . And then after that was finished, I created the illustrations that would go along with the manuscript . . . and then after that you do the marketing/publicity side of the proposal, which is talking about yourself, talking about what you have accomplished so far, you basically want to convince the publisher that you have an audience that will buy the book. If they give you the money to write a book, you'll be able to sell it. And so you have to determine your target audience, and other books that are already like it on the market that won't be competitors, but to show them that there is an audience for the work, and you do a complete marketing plan, who you would pitch the book to, possible publications that would feature it, possible influencers that will write about it, the whole thing. . . . It's always a constant battle between writing honestly and authentically and writing something you know will go viral or that people want to read.

We can see the multi-faceted approach to writing and communication she is forced to take, and without experience or membership in a community of practice, the effort is largely an experiment in constructing authority and building one identity while maintaining another, sometimes for multiple audiences at once.

Similarly, our freelance commercial director discusses the complexities of maintaining authority and expertise, here as a script writer among various executive audiences within one organization on a new project:

I'm in constant conversation with the head copywriter at the agency, the creative director, or the associate creative director at the agency; they're usually my point people on that side. And then on the client side . . . there are also some companies that have creative directors of their own, so, I guess it would be creative director, copywriter, senior vice president, or sometimes marketing director, or occasionally people have weird, sort of esoteric titles, like thought leader, but it's usually people who are in the upper echelons of whatever company we're dealing with. . . . Sometimes on the client side there are 15 people involved who are all supposed to give notes, and really, one person is leading the team, but person number 13 feels left out, so they always toss a curveball in, and you have to navigate that stuff by again, just charm and a lot of "in our

professional opinion” sort of phrasing, where it’s like, again, just massaging and making sure that people aren’t leading themselves off of a cliff because they think they know what’s best.

Herein lies an additional challenge faced by many freelance workers: Without any static community of practice, the target for these workers is ever-moving. Successful interaction with one job does not guarantee success in the next, we know, but also, a successful interaction with one representative at a client site does not guarantee success with another from the same site. What might be a learned experience with one community of practice might not be transferable to the next project and a new community of practice, even within the same organization, or the same industry. In this way, freelancers “accumulate skills and information, not in the abstract as ends in themselves, but in the service of an identity” (Wenger, 2008, p. 215)—an identity largely defined by awareness and adaptability. The freelancer must become a sort of Swiss Army knife worker, able to recognize valuable boundary events and when to “massage” communications, when to defer, when to negotiate or assert their own practices and expertise, and when to acquiesce.

This challenge of engaging with multiple overlapping communities of practice requires that freelance workers navigate several, sometimes distinct, communication styles and, at times, even varying levels of authority, expertise, social dynamics, and vernaculars within each gig and from gig-to-gig. They need to show at least some competence across all of these fronts in order to maintain the authority to perform their core tasks and for their collaborating audiences to value that work. So how, then, do they do this?

Freelancer Development and Learning Outside of Client Organizations

As freelancers are seen as too temporary to participate in significant learning within any of the communities of practice to which they are exposed, it must be considered from where their personal practices develop. Freelancers’ collected personal practices may be the product of high-stakes trial-and-error experiences. Whereas the neophyte is gradually oriented and acclimated to the practices of the community, the freelancer has far less time and fewer opportunities (“boundary events”; Wenger, 2010) in which to express their expertise to build and maintain authority. When asked how she overcame early challenges in connecting with and convincing new audiences, our freelance illustrator answered,

I read a lot. I read other people’s pitches. I read contracts. I read advice online on how to write a better pitch, how to write a better proposal. I look at examples, and then I try to apply those. So, it’s a lot of just teaching and educating myself from the books and the internet, the sources that I have around me.

Without the shared interactions of the community of practice—of fellow specialists—such freelancers are left to learn and model their practices from their own and others' past experiences (and missteps). Unfortunately, they rarely have the benefit of the “grace period” granted to the neophyte hire to find their place within expected practices. The stakes here for freelancers are high. With each boundary event, they are at risk of the incongruence between their personal practices and the community's practices being interpreted as incompetence, rather than intentional “negotiation” or asserting their own expert voice (Bourdieu, 1992/2003).

Even when freelancers do have access to their own communities of practice, those communities still tend to be centralized around their own technical/personal expertise, rather than communities similar enough to those to which they require access. For example, a freelance graphic designer may get together with other graphic designer friends or colleagues to share experiences about their work, but this kind of community of practice remains distinct from the unique shared competencies of any of the future project teams they might work with. On this subject, the freelance director says,

I'm in a sort of loose group of writers that meet every week and we discuss either stories or scripts that we're writing, and we're all sort of various different types of professional writer, so that is a type of training, but it's not a formal type of training, and it's totally free except I have to buy guacamole.

Freelancers serve as kind of itinerant specialists, bouncing from community of practice to community of practice, taking with them each experience, yet not necessarily finding each one wholly applicable to their next temporary homes. The freelance director may pitch script ideas, discuss different production designers they've worked with, perhaps even share horror stories of companies with whom they've contracted, but without direct engagement and participation with the writing practices of the (contracted) community itself, significant experimentation is required in each interaction. Freelancers' personal professional practices cannot be generated from firsthand enculturation into any of the communities of practice with which they work formally, but instead may be cobbled together from the outside looking in—trial and error, observing successful (and unsuccessful) models, secondhand accounts from peers, etc. When they attempt to apply these practices to each new project (with a new or several new communities of practice), it is for the first time, and incongruencies, which may challenge their authority and perceived expertise, are inevitable. Regarding this kind of trial-and-error approach to entering a new engagement, our freelance writer and illustrator notes,

For my first book, I made the proposal entirely on my own, and it was a wild shot in the dark, and I managed to submit it to an editor, and it was risky because . . . it was as professional and as detailed and in-depth as something that I had ever made. But now,

my second time around, I have an agent, and I work with her to perfect a proposal, and just to give you an idea, my first book the proposal was I think ten pages, and with my second [was] about 40. So yeah. It was a lot more well-developed the second time around.

She continues:

The whole proposal process was absolutely new to me, and I didn't know how to convince other people. So as far as writing, I had only ever learned how to use persuasion in [college] essays basically, always trying to convince the reader of my argument and how it tied to a book and a theme, but I had never learned how to use it in order to talk about myself and my capabilities. So although I had some sort of background on how to be a convincing writer, I didn't feel prepared to apply it the way that I've had to.

The writer-illustrator's livelihood is entirely dependent on her ability to traverse the dynamic expectations of several seen and unseen communities. Even though she had little familiarity with proposal writing and the expectations of the field, she was successful in her first publishing attempt largely by virtue of her technical capabilities. She admits that when she gained some access to an agent (a representative of a large-scale community of practice, or several), she gained a better understanding of how to enact these practices in genre, audience, and voice. Her proposal grew from ten pages in her initial attempt to 40 in her subsequent; she thought more about the business side of her work, potential audiences, etc.; she refined her adeptness in communicating her own voice and amplifying the technical expertise which had won her the initial proposal.

Conversely, our freelance director acknowledges his existing competence in navigating and adapting his practices in communication, which he believes gives him an edge over others with more technical skill. He references his experience in undergraduate workshop groups as a main contributor to his ability to successfully communicate, receive, and process feedback in his career:

I was lucky enough to study creative writing and so a lot of my education was workshopping . . . taking what other people had written, sitting down in a room, . . . and saying, "You know what, the opening was great, the middle I kind of lost you, but by the end, you had me and I think if you spend another week and a half . . . this thing will really sing." And having that basis of knowledge as to how to speak to people in a critically constructive way that finds what's good, tries to slough off what's bad, and really help them find their vision while also hearing that same kind of criticism about my own work—that I think was the most important aspect of my college education in terms of moving into the professional

world. Finding ways to be critical of people and also to exalt them, and basically having that as my schooling, has made me a better coworker than I would have been if I didn't have it. . . . I think the big hurdle in workplace writing is not can everything be harmonious . . . but can you solve a problem exclusively with your writing? Like can you identify something that's wrong, get in touch with the right person who can fix it, and make them understand exactly what the problem is, without ruffling their feathers or making them concerned about something?

. . . Without the creative writing study that I did in college, I wouldn't have a career. It is the reason that I am able to communicate with any sort of alacrity and why I've been able to move through my career very quickly in a way that I didn't even expect. . . . A lot of the people that are in the same field as me might actually be better at the tangible parts of the job, like being a director and being on set, but I'm much more likely to win the job because I'm a more persuasive writer.

Despite acknowledging that others may have greater technical skill, our freelance director recognizes that his early success comes from being able to do what some other peers cannot—perceive and adapt to communication standards and expectations. Whereas the illustrator's technical capabilities overshadow any perceived incongruities or expectations among proposal/business communities of practice, the director feels his participation in prior writing communities of practice gives him an advantage over those who may have more technical acumen, yet lack persuasion and adaptability. This is, of course, not to say that either freelancer would likely be successful if they were genuinely deficient in either their communication or their technical prowess. But the fact that a particular acuity in one skill may compensate for greenness in another may give insight into how much leeway a hiring client organization will give to those that cannot (for lack of access) meet the expectations and standards of their particular community of practice.

Both the illustrator's first proposal and other well-received work and the director's reference to his success in moving up relatively quickly as a freelance professional demonstrate early success in our two cases. Without such initial "break-in" success and exposure to, even peripherally, the practices of their industry, one wonders if a freelancer might perpetually struggle to adjust their practices to fit with the communities and client organizations to which they aspire to enlist, even briefly. And yet, both of our interviewees, and countless freelance workers, find success among these myriad challenges of authority, identity, and practice through, it would seem, a strong awareness and pliancy in their approach to their work, writing, and communication.

Both the illustrator and director obviously are quite skilled in their work, and their success is a testament to that. However, each of these freelancers recognizes

a “rawness” in a portion of their personal practices; yet their strengths, be they technical or practical, have helped offset that rawness (in the eyes of their client organizations) and allow them to establish authority and prove their capabilities. While aptitude (technical or linguistic) might get their foot in the door initially, what they are learning from “brushing-up” against established communities of practice in each new experience seems vital to their sustained success. According to Stephen Billet (2004), “when individuals engage in everyday thinking and acting, more than merely executing a process or task, their knowledge is changed in some way, however minutely, by that process” (p. 314). These freelancers are coming into projects with specific skill sets and through experience and (even tangential) contact with communities of practice, are deepening their skills to become more well-rounded contributors and more attractive future hires.

■ Conclusion

It’s important to pause here and note too that there is, of course, successful communication between freelancers and clients all the time. Both of our freelancers here, in fact, when asked if they consider themselves to be successful communicators, state that they do, at least to some extent—even as they voice these very real and constant challenges. And it feels obvious that we wonder here, how, and why? Are our two freelancers particularly adaptive? Or are they so talented in their specific areas of expertise that they are granted that authority if they’re communicating “well enough”? We see that the process of collaborative work for freelancers is wildly different than when it is comprised solely of permanent employees. The framework of communities of practice, while it illuminates many of the challenges freelancers face, doesn’t work to help us genuinely understand how they *do* develop their communication practices. Issues we address above, including identity, authority, enculturation, and learning and development, all require further research; here, we are pleased to offer a glimpse of this world and its communication challenges, but this initial case study set is quite limited. Further, although here we focus on “skilled” freelancers, we also hope that future scholarship will work to make sense of how communication practices for those workers more squarely in very temporary, gig-based contexts perform nuanced and, we might guess, complex communication through written texts.

Finally, as we move forward, we recommend a new framework for studying freelance workers, alluded to briefly above: transfer. Early transfer scholarship—in fact, *all* transfer scholarship—tells us that the act of transferring knowledge and skills, particularly when it comes to writing, is a “complex phenomenon” (Moore, 2017, p. 6). The ways in which writers learn and develop in one context do not naturally transfer to other contexts—and we hypothesize that this would be particularly true for those communicators, like freelancers, who by nature move frequently between writing contexts. While our understanding of transfer is still limited and somewhat piecemeal, we know that certain activities and ways of

thinking contribute to transfer. And freelancers offer us a powerful and potentially very valuable set of participants to begin to see how transfer works at a micro and temporary level. Chris Anson and L. Lee Forsberg (1990), in their early, but illuminating transfer study, found a consistent cycle for new workplace writers: expectation to frustration and/or disorientation, and eventually to transition and resolution. This last stage likely coordinates with the point when a writer in a new context, usually workplace, begins to become, as Wardle (2004) would say, enculturated. But freelancers, of course, have limited time, guidance, and community to reach resolution. We anticipate that examining the stopping point, so to speak, for freelancers in this process would yield insights both for the individual workers and their hiring organizations. Additionally, as some freelancers *do* adapt and learn and some are, of course, very successful communicators—some certainly reaching “resolution,” even if they do move on to a new gig soon after—transfer offers us the chance to begin to learn how, and why.

As this growth in freelance and gig labor is expected to continue to increase in the coming decade, workplace writing scholars must acknowledge that the contemporary workplace includes such contract work to a larger degree than ever before. As a field, we must pay more attention to the multiple, complex literacies required in the freelance market. Freelancers must be extremely adaptable in their writing practices, as they perpetually exist in the precarious position of simultaneous expert and novice. They are constantly aware of the temporary nature of their position, and so their ultimate goal is a successful project, rather than full participation in the organization. Just as these hiring organizations do not desire a freelancer’s enculturation into their communities of practice, the freelancer may only seek enough guidance to successfully complete their tasks. Their work with one organization, as a part of their larger portfolio, is in many ways their ticket to their next job. Understanding the ways in which this happens across freelance areas of expertise and client industries will shed new light on how freelancers and client organizations can collaborate more efficiently and successfully as modern workplace writing continues to evolve.

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