11 | Mary Beth Debs

Corporate Authority

Sponsoring Rhetorical Practice

In their article "Why Write . . . Together: A Research Update," Lunsford and Ede find that they cannot justify the low percentage of writing claimed by their respondents to be done collaboratively without calling into question modern notions of authorship: "Respondents think of writing almost exclusively as writing 'alone' when, in fact, they are most often collaborating on the mental and procedural activities which precede and co-occur with the act of writing as well as on the construction of the text" (1986, p.73). Surveying the amount of social activity that surrounds the production of any document in business and citing such common practices in industry as the use of boilerplate materials, the prevalence of technical and legal reviewers, and the recent development of information data bases, Lunsford and Ede state that "the concept of 'authorship' as most English teachers think of it, becomes increasingly fuzzy" (p. 73).

During the past seven years that I have been conducting research focusing on writers in what we now call nonacademic settings, I have come to believe that we should be paying closer attention to one particular (and perhaps peculiar) aspect of the responses writers often make in surveys and interviews: their use of the pronouns of authorship, the first person "we" and "I." Individuals easily use "I" and coauthors "we" when claiming responsibility for particular texts. Some of our research questions, however, particularly those used in discourse-based interviews, ask about specific choices a writer makes while composing a text. These questions elicit not

only reasons for the choices, but also responses that suggest whether the authority for the decision has come from the individual or from a collective group such as the organization or division.

Consider, for example, the responses of the state agency writers in the study by Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983b). When asked why they preferred one choice in their writing over another, the state employees responded with statements such as the following: "I mean, we had written before, trying to clarify this whole thing" (p. 27); "We want them to realize that this is the reason" (p. 27); "As an accounting department, we have no authority to waive that" (p. 28); "We need this information so we can adjust his account" (p. 29). The documents on which these discourse-based interviews were based were written not by groups, but by individuals, yet many of the writers referred to an undefined "we" in justifying their decisions. Discourse-based interviews get at the tacit knowledge that a writer may employ in addressing a rhetorical situation; they also discover evidence that the writer often seems to work out of a sense of meeting a collective purpose determined by the agency.

I ran up against something similar when I used an adaptation of discourse-based interviews to research writing processes within a technology-producing organization (Debs, 1986). To my question, "Do you ever collaborate?" writers would inevitably say "no" or "rarely." Yet, when asked about specific features of a text, writers often would account for the feature by indicating how other members of the organization had influenced that particular choice. In one case, of eighty-seven of the text features (for example, the choice of cover, use of terminology, organization of the text, direct appeal to the audience) referred to during the interview, a writer had decided on sixty in discussion with at least one other person. But at the beginning of the interview, she had insisted that she "never collaborated on her writing."

Who is the "we" that authorizes these choices and decisions? Where did they come from? How and why does the "we" have the authority to intervene in and influence the writing without establishing themselves as coauthors? How does reference to this collective authority coexist with the modern notion of authorship as moving one's pen in solitude?

Rather than taking on the task of examining the concept of authorship, most studies of the social activities involved in writing in the workplace (my own included) have argued for a broadening of the definition of collaboration (recent articles include Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987; Couture & Rymer, 1989; Debs, 1989; Doheny-Farina, 1986). Thus, instead of meaning simply "writing together," collaboration would include all examples of what Couture and Rymer (1989) call "interactive writing." But are we continuing to dodge the real issue here? Isn't all writing to some

extent interactive (a deliberately neutral term)? Is it collaboration if the people participating don't recognize it as such? Or are they participating in an activity that is intended to serve less the needs of the individual and more the needs of the organization, a kind of "collective authorship"? Certainly, enlarging the net created by the term collaboration has allowed us to capture and examine many more of the social interactions we find that make up composing and document production processes in the workplace and has helped to point out the usefulness of skills such as negotiation and small group participation for writers. Doing so, however, also has limited our understanding of authorship as it is shaped in the workplace and the significance of the organization's role in authorizing texts produced by its members. Thus limited, we have yet to begin examining how writing relates to the issues of social authority and the flow of power between individuals and groups in contemporary society. What I hope to do in this chapter is to outline the elements of a possible explanation of the concept of authorship as it takes shape within that part of society Burke termed "the marketplace" of rhetoric (1937/1959).

Rhetoric Employed by Modern Organizations

In their responses to surveys and interviews, many of the writers, whether career writers or people who write on the job, demonstrate what Bloom (1973) has called an "anxiety of influence." Bloom speaks of the literary artist's inability to acknowledge creative debts, particularly to other writers. LeFevre (1987) makes a similar point, noting that many collaborators, editors, and the like, especially if they are women, are not credited with coauthor status, but simply given thanks in the acknowledgments section. And in the workplace, individuals claim personal ownership of the words they have written, even when their names do not appear on documents. Berlin's work (1987) suggests that the concern for proprietary claim over what one writes is a result of assumptions that inform the teaching of literature and writing, a remnant of the belletristic rhetorical tradition of the nineteenth century. Eisenstein argues that preoccupation with original authorship and attending matters such as property rights and plagiarism "undermined older concepts of collective authority" as a result of the fixity and publicity made possible by the printing press (1979, p. 122). Ong (1982) maintains that a transition from an oral to a literate culture brings with it an increased consciousness of personal autonomy and a greater distance between author and audience as each becomes a fiction to the other.

In an oral culture, the "author," or rhetor (the root is the same), was immediately present and visible and spoke with autonomy, but as a member

of the community being addressed. The concept of "making" or "creating" a speech was associated more closely with the credibility and acceptance needed to move an audience than with originality. Of the Hellenic courts, Lentz writes, "The spoken word remained the closest substitute for the knowledge in the minds of men who knew, for the truth of individual expression as it was to be measured in the court" (1983, p. 258). (Lentz's use of "man" is correct here; in general, women were required to be represented by men in court.) Thus, during the early history of rhetoric, when writing was suspect and one's ability to speak in a public forum was a condition of responsible citizenship, the authority by which someone spoke (particularly on things probable) rested with the community and the individual; one was responsible for the truth and "goodness" of his words. For the classical rhetorician, rhetoric was necessary as a kind of social equipment for an individual's participation in public life. Recall that in Athenian society the civic forum of public discourse evolved in or near the *agagora*, the marketplace.

Rhetoric, however, is directly a function of social needs and patterns. As part of the fabric of society, the practice of rhetoric will reflect changes in the structuring of that society. Speakers in the Athenian courts and classical rhetoricians did not have to contend every day with the multiplicity of social units that divide and structure modern society. The growth in number, size, and importance of formal organizations, particularly bureaucracies, during the past century has been documented by both sociologists and historians (see, for example, Jacoby, 1973). Sennett (1980) considers the use of authority by corporations and notes several ways he believes the discourse of an organization legitimizes the exercise of power without acknowledging individual responsibility: "The veiling of power, built into the foundations of administrative science in the work of Herbert Simon, also oils the links in the chain of command. . . . [Memos and directives] are texts with absent authors, . . . since they have no visible source and apply to the organization as a whole" (p. 174).

The society we participate in is made up of a proliferation of organizations, and part of the way in which we identify ourselves is made up of the multiple, often embedded, memberships we each hold. Although we may want to be cautious in recognizing it as such, the corporation, certainly the organization, has become the major arena for public life for the individual in modern Western civilization. One's concerns are often those of the economically prescribed marketplace; one's participation is shaped by the collective dialogues of the sponsoring organization; one's rhetoric is often of necessity (or at least of salary) a product of institutionalized corporate activities.

In 1937, shortly after the depression, Burke anticipated the "rhetorical effects" of an incorporated society (and offered his explanation of where writers' use of personal pronouns originate): "The so-called 'I' is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting 'we's.' Sometimes these corporate identities work fairly well together. At other times they conflict with disturbing moral consequences. Thus, in America, it is natural for a man to identify himself with the business corporation he serves" (1937/1969, p. 264). Burke then argues that unionism is a response to a failure of corporations and a survival of earlier corporate forms: the church, the guild, and the town or city. Accepting the idea that a "locus of authority" can rest within a group or organization, he relates the corporate identification of an individual with particular uses of language:

> There is a clear recognition of "corporate identity" in the "editorial we." The editor selects and rejects manuscripts and writes comments, with vague reference to his membership in an *institution*. (He also, of course, quickly learns to "cash in on" the privileges of such an identity, as he rejects your manuscript with a frank admission that "the editors" could not agree on it, without adding that he may have "deputized" for the lot.) A variant is the "we" of business correspondence, where the writer of the letter pronounces his *corporate* role, without so much as a thought on the matter. (p. 266)

An organization, at its simplest, is a group of people who reasonably assume that all members will at least comply with a common purpose and accept those goals that are commonly held. Organizational theorist Putnam offers a definition central to most of the work current in the field of organizational communication: "Organizations . . . are social relationships, that is, interlocked behaviors centered on specialized task and maintenance activities" (1983; see also Weick, 1979). In exchange for a guarantee of personal security and often of financial reward, a member gives up the exercise of certain personal powers to maintain a social contract with other members who form the organization. As with any organization, the primary goal of a corporation is to continue its existence. For most modern corporations, economic growth, even when it is at odds with some facet of social value, is part of that purpose. Meeting the purpose of the organization is a condition of membership. So is the loss of autonomy, according to Tompkins and Cheney: "[Members] literally decide to accept certain organizational premises and approach work-related decisions from the organization's perspective: that is, they assume the role of the organization. In this way the member acquires an organizational personality . . . accepting the values and goals of the organization as relevant to on-the-job decisions" (1983, p. 125). The variables of writing in the workplace offer a number of on-the-job decisions.

The role of the organization may be taken on so well by individual writers that we find the corporation to be the only author visible in many documents today that address a consumer audience, such as annual reports (excluding the CEO's letter, which, in turn, is often written by an agency or committee), collection letters (these are often "personalized" with pseudonymous signatures), and advertising materials. Even in science, which is becoming increasingly incorporated, we continue to find concurrent evidence of collective authorship with articles signed by research teams of fifteen or more people, some of whom have not even seen the documents on which their names appear.

Manuals that accompany products demonstrate a range of ways in which corporations publicly acknowledge their authorship. Consider the appeal used by Hewlett-Packard on the inside cover of its *82143A Printer Owner's Handbook*: "When Messrs. Hewlett and Packard founded our company in 1939, we offered one superior product, an audio oscillator. Today we offer over 3500 quality products, designed and built for some of the world's most discerning customers. Since we introduced our first calculator in 1967, we've sold millions world wide, both pocket and desktop models. Their owners include Nobel laureates, astronauts, mountain climbers, business [sic], doctors, students, and homemakers" (1979). At the very least, the "we" used in this passage stands for "dramatized" authors, but this nonetheless calls forth a very different self-consciousness than that of one writing as an individual from a personal voice. It is a question of ethos, not of persona. There are also examples in which companies make use of "corporate appeals" in directly addressing other companies: "At a time when financial data is available almost instantly from a company's data processing center, it may take a week or more to type and edit a financial statement. . . . For many organizations, no system exists to handle information as the valuable resource that it is. . . . To help organizations handle information, IBM offers the IBM Displaywriter System" (IBM, 1982, p. 1–1). Throughout the text, the operator is never addressed, only discussed, as one organization talks to another about its employees.

In fact, most product manuals are published not under the individual writers' names, but under the corporation's name. In one way, this practice makes sense: We do not know who designed the Courier Model 110160–001; why should we know who wrote the manual for it? And many manuals are products of several people's contributions as well as series of revisions by different authors and editors. In contrast to this rather common practice, however, a number of Apple's "glamor" manuals do publicly identify the writers, designers, graphic artists, and project coordinators responsible for each publication.

The basic triad of elements (writer, audience, text) that we have distilled from classical theory is not sufficient to explain or to model the practice of rhetoric in today's economic world. What needs to be added is a fourth element, that of (for lack of better words) the sponsoring organization, and what needs to be stressed is not audience or writer or sponsor, but the relationships among these. It is from examining the variations of these relationships that we will understand how a particular kind of authorship is fashioned in the marketplace and how the individual writer participates.

The Role of Spokesperson

Much of the discourse produced in contemporary society, not just in the marketplace, is sponsored by organizations, and, to varying degrees, the individual writer acts as a spokesperson or representative. This is a key and problematic relationship—problematic, in part, because we tend to conflate audience and sponsor. The tendency in composition studies to see the choices writers make in their writing as depending solely on their interpretations of the traditional communication triangle (the writer addressing an audience, whether real or evoked, whether internal or external to the organization) diminishes our ability to see the investment of the organization in authorizing a text. Such a point of view also hides from examination the special relationship that develops between the writer and the organization, a relationship that varies depending on whether the context of the rhetorical act is internal or external to the organization.

An organization may have a physical location, identifiable if abstract characteristics, and even a history, but it will have no voice except through its members. The pragmatic importance of controlling this voice is reflected in the legal concept of "agency": A company can be bound legally by what an employee says or promises. Since the organization is held responsible for what an authorized employee says, it is important for the individual to "get it right." Since an organization is a sociological entity, "right" is usually a matter of collective or designated authority.

Unfortunately, little has been written about the actual communication aspects of this type of agency relationship or about the demands of being sponsored in one's writing, although, historically, we can find a number of practices that seem related: the orthographers of Greece, "ghostwriters" of political documents and speeches, modern advertising. But the role of the rhetor as spokesperson for an institution is at least suggested in Aristotle's *Rhetoric.* Considering the choices (means) available to deliberative speakers, Aristotle concludes: "Clearly, then, we must distinguish the tendencies, institutions, and interests which promote the end of each form of govern-

ment, since it is with reference to this end that people make their choices" (*Rhetoric* 1.8). Jamieson extends this claim, arguing that genre constraints represent an institutional spokesperson's "sense of presentness of past." To her, genre "perpetrates a distinguishable institutional rhetoric by creating expectations which any future institutional spokesperson feels obligated to fulfill rather than frustrate" (1973, p. 165).

Following Aristotle's lead, Jamieson sees the rhetor acting as a spokesperson for the institution, community, or state while addressing the members of that same institution, community, or state. I would like to suggest, however, that in marketplace rhetoric, the rhetor acts as a spokesperson by representing one institution (the organization) to another broader community (the general public consumer or organizations of consumers). Thus, the role of spokesperson cuts two ways into production and act, adding a new dimension to Aristotle's claim: "As speakers we should have a command of the character of each form of government; since for each form its own character will be most persuasive; and these political characters must be ascertained by the same means as the character of individuals" (*Rhetoric* 1.8).

In the only other reference to the spokesperson role of a writer that I have been able to find, Murphy notes the "relationship of message-maker to king" described by Cassidorius Senator. Employed as a minister for an illiterate king in Italy during the early middle ages, Cassidorus included a job description in his popular work on letterwriting, *Variae*: "The Questor has to learn the king's innermost thoughts to utter them to the subjects. He has to be always ready for a sudden call, and must exercise the wonderful powers which, as Cicero has pointed out, are inherent in the art of an orator. . . . He has to speak the king's words in the king's own presence . . . with suitable embellishments" (*Variae* VI; cited in Murphy, 1974, p. 197).

If a writer negotiates a text within an organization, the choices that arise from the organization's own character or past practice will be most persuasive. If the writer speaks for an organization to an external audience, he or she must fulfill the expectations developed in the audience by previous organizational spokespersons. Note that this is different than epideictic discourse in which the rhetor would speak about—most likely praising—the organization. As a spokesperson, the writer draws from dialogue with members of the organization so that discourse addressed to an audience outside will be received as if the organization were speaking through the rhetor. It is natural, then, that visible members of an organization often are concerned with the ways in which their ethos reflects on that of the organization (and conversely). We must also recognize that the organizational image is a matter of both *technos* and *atechnos*.

The role of spokesperson affects, but does not necessarily eliminate,

individual ethos. Discussing self-representation in fictional and nonfictional discourse, Cherry (1988) argues that a distinction should be maintained between ethos and persona, the concept of ethos going beyond and encompassing that of persona. The interplay between individual and corporate, between ethos and persona, does set up some interesting questions. For example, is it an organization's (rather than a writer's) decision to use passive over active voice? If so, does the company, in fact, have an impersonal (or professional/scientific) character which it wishes to maintain with its audiences? Does such an image contribute to how the character of its products is perceived? What are the writer's grounds for arguing against this decision? Given these expectations, how would the audience react to a shift made in a corporation's persona?

Rhetorical choice (and analysis) is a relatively straightforward matter when writer and audience are members of the same group or community. Such an assumption, however, diminishes the multiple roles an "incorporated" writer maintains in negotiating identifications and interpretations with audience, project teams, the corporation, and members of different groups and specialties. In industry, the choices a writer makes are often drawn from an understanding of the rhetorical situation as it is mediated by the organization. In writing, for example, about new products or policy decisions, the writer is acting as a spokesperson for the organization in transcribing what is, in effect, a preexisting reality (the product or policy developed by the organization): It is the company's message and to a large extent the organization's vision or knowledge that the writer is sending. Members of the organization have the authority to intervene to ensure that the document reflects the character of the company and its view of the text as it plays out in the marketplace.

We find examples of the complexity of this interaction when we look at technical writing addressed to an audience not made up of members of a technically-sophisticated community. In an article in which he defines technical writing as writing that accommodates technology to the user, Dobrin suggests that the question of "who is accommodating whom . . . depends on the power of each" (1983, p. 243). The ways of speaking identified with a product originate with the designers of the product. We can see this phenomenon most frequently in certain computer documentation, in which the aim often is not to converse with the audience (an aim reserved instead for marketing publications), but to make the audience conversant with the products' developers. Understanding the language and its use in a particular technology is a condition of participation in the user community.

As a consequence, we find that the rhetoric of computer documentation is often not sermonic, but catechetical. Repetition, directive tone, unequivo-

cal statements, layout featuring questions and answers, frequent use of single unambiguous definitions, arrangement centered on division of objects and concepts—these are features we once associated with the Catholic church's *Baltimore Catechism.* The technical writer's role here may not be to translate, but to teach the dogma of the product (and technology) to create a community of people who will use the product and identify with it through their use of language. In this way, we find the reversal of Dobrin's definition, as he has indicated: The writer's job becomes one of accommodating the user to the technology, to the company's products. Historically, much technical writing has been instructional, but computer documentation now is being altered in response to both the sponsor's purpose, which the writer takes on, and the organization's corporate function of creating a market.

Means of Institutionalizing Rhetorical Practices

How can an abstract thing such as a corporation or any organization so actively participate in a process as concrete as writing a document, to the point that it can be said to sponsor and authorize the writing? An organization is an institution, and it authorizes documents by institutionalizing rhetorical practices. Although an organization exists by virtue of its members, the individual members are, to some extent, replaceable. Ford remained a company with and without Iacocca as president; It exists differently because of his departure, but it still exists. For many companies in the marketplace today, writing serves the same purpose as does any commodity: It is produced for use, sale, or trade. Writing may be an art form, but it is also a product by which a company earns profits, or an organization gains capital, or an agency conducts its transactions. It is also a way of communicating within the organization, and therefore of maintaining the organization. Thus, any company has a stake in what is written (effectively, for profit) and in how something gets written (efficiently, for resource conservation). Consequently, most organizations make some attempt to institutionalize rhetorical practice, to establish and fix a fairly orderly pattern of interactions and behavior related to the negotiation of texts and the production of documents.

Because, in most cases, the organization, not the individual, is responsible for what is contained in and communicated by a document it sponsors, it is in the interest of the company to encourage or even to require other members of the organization to interact with the writer, thus guaranteeing the organization's collective authorization. The locus of authority remains in the organization: Document cycling, review privileges, central data bases, and boilerplate material are indications of the increasing acceptance of and

dependence on this authority. Various parts of the document or various parts of the process can be "departmentalized," assigned to different people. Since a document is "owned" by the company, the organization can, with little cause, replace the writer with another individual. The organization, then, employs what for it are standard procedures: production policies, division of labor, and hierarchical distribution of authority. We can anticipate that the more rigid and controlled the institutionalization of the writing process, the less individually responsible the writer will feel and the less likely change (in the document or in the process) can be brought about by the writer.

In their study of two management consultants, Broadhead and Freed take note of what they call "institutional norms": "[These] govern rhetorical decisions designed to make a text adhere to accepted practices within a company, profession, discipline, or the like. . . . In their broader application to the writing process, these institutional norms reflect a writer's overall environment for thinking, composing, and revising" (1986, p. 12). Although clearly indicating the pervasiveness of these institutional norms and practices in the site they studied, Broadhead and Freed relegate their analysis primarily to problems in the writer's physical environment and miss their significance as means for the organization to authorize documents.

When an individual joins an organization, there are many ways in which he or she will be influenced as a writer, simply because that individual has joined the daily ongoing dialogue that maintains the organizational culture. The recent and expanding series of interpretive analyses in the field of organizational research suggests that we should not underestimate the strength of the equivalence between organizations and culture (Javlin, Putnam, Roberts, & Porter, 1987; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). Smircich, for example, proposes that, as "networks of meaning," organizations depend "on the emergence of shared interpretive schemes, expressed in languages and other symbolic constructions that develop through social interactions" (1983, p. 160). Writers develop a tacit knowledge of the company and its institutional norms through the processes of socialization and identification. Through training, collaboration, exposure to models and past successes, even stylebooks, they learn the expectations of the institution as they have been developed by past spokespersons.

But the identification process is a complex one because organizations themselves are made up of groups of people, aligned together by the division of labor and hierarchy of authority, and each group may elicit varying degrees of identification among its members. The choices an individual makes will depend on his or her participation in the activities and interactions different groups develop and maintain to get something done. Aldefer and

Smith argue that these groups work as communities: They "tend to develop their own language (or elements of language, including social categories), condition their members' perceptions of objective and subjective phenomena, and transmit sets of propositions—including theories and ideologies—to explain the nature of experiences encountered by members and to influence relations with other groups" (1982, p. 40). Individual differences in perspective and even in use of language can, to some extent, be accounted for by membership in different embedded groups.

Interactions with other members of a group or organization ensure that the writer can assume the role of the organization. Other members not only contribute their rules for writing, but they also voice the norms of the institution and, most importantly, share their interpretations of the rhetorical situation. They, too, represent the organization's view of itself; they, too, are concerned with the ways it is presented. This concern with representation creates a two-part test for any public discourse: It must fit the organization's internal definition or interpretation of the rhetorical situation before it can be delivered to the external audience. For a person writing in an organization, context may not be a simple thing—particularly with the organization screening the writer from the audience, intervening in the writing process, and actually shaping the text to represent its interests—and we may need to talk about two contexts: the one in which the writing is produced and the one in which it is addressed. (In a particularly careful analysis, Harrison [1987] examines organizations as rhetorical contexts, emphasizing their cultural and knowledge-making characteristics. Not all discourse, however, is addressed to audiences within the organization; thus, a rhetorical context may consist of the organization or may encompass the organization as it is socially embedded. Harrison's work suggests the ways in which organizational members may be separated from the larger community.) In an organization, a writer's authority has to do with one's advocacy of the audience; the writer's power, however, is related to an ability to fashion the organization's presence in the marketplace and to negotiate choices (and therefore change) in the organization. At its best, the relationship between writer and organization is dialectical. Authority can be disputed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to suggest that the relationship between the writer and the organization is essential to our interpretation of research on writing in the workplace. With striking results, we have shifted successfully our attention from the writing processes of individuals exclusively to include those of a group. But in considering issues of authority, power, and responsi-

bility, we need to unveil the organization, to identify more carefully the relationships that exist between the individual and groups within society, and to begin to explore the development and characteristics of those relationships and their effects on writing and the writer.

In considering the role of the writer, such a perspective offers new questions. How has the concept of authorship developed and in what ways does the authorship of nonliterary texts differ from literary ones? (For the beginnings of this discussion, see Ede & Lunsford, 1990.) When and why did the business organization assume a collective voice and when did the personal voice of the individual stop representing the organization? How do audiences perceive different organizations and corporations through texts? How are new writers socialized within a company? Are written documents simply artifacts of corporate culture, or do they play a role in shaping the organization (see Yates, 1989)? Are there differences in the ways that other members of the organization interact with the writer? If so, in what ways does the perception of their role as critic, collaborator, or audience affect the interaction? What is the responsibility of the writer to the organization? To the audience?

As we pursue this line of questioning, we may find that the writer plays an essential, though at this time unacknowledged, role within the organization that ought to demand a conscious examination of the terms of membership as well as an aggressive sense of social responsibility.