

find that to “get along” in a new workplace they must accept basic assumptions about what is valuable and appropriate that are contrary to their own—or that, in fact, degrade them to the status of an object or tool? What happens when a new worker’s assumptions are frequently made obvious to the community, and those assumptions fly in the face of accepted ways of doing things?

Learning to Write in a New Workplace: Alan’s Story

My story of “Alan”—a computer support specialist who did not learn/choose 15 to write in ways his humanities department colleagues (primarily professors and graduate students) found appropriate and legitimate—illustrates answers to some of the questions about identity and authority as they intersect with writing in the workplace. For seven months, I observed and interviewed Alan, a new computer specialist in a humanities department at a large Midwestern university. I also collected 140 email messages he wrote and many others that were written to him and spent time in public computer labs listening as people discussed their computer problems with Alan. Finally, near the end of the study, I conducted a written survey with all members of the humanities department regarding their use of computers and technology and their awareness of various initiatives Alan had discussed with them via email.

Alan and the other members of the humanities department were constantly 16 at cross purposes—he did not write in ways the community members saw as appropriate, and he did not view their conventions as ones he should adopt, given his position in the community. Most importantly, the community of practice did not appear to view him as a fledging member but rather as an object—a tool enabling them to get work done. His discursive choices can be viewed as an attempt to reject the identity of tool and to appropriate authority for himself. Thus, Alan’s story serves to illustrate some of the complexities associated with learning to write in new workplaces.

Who Is Alan and What Is His Place in the Humanities Department?

Alan was a 23-year-old white male who received a B.A. in art and design from 17 a large Midwestern university. He became interested in computers as an undergraduate and as his interest in computers grew, he performed two computer-related work-study jobs on campus. He decided he liked working with computers and looked for a computer job when he graduated. Alan’s first professional position was as computer support specialist responsible for several thousand “users” in various locations at the same university from which he graduated. He was unhappy in this position, primarily because he felt his supervisor did not give him enough responsibility, instead assigning the most difficult tasks to student workers who had been in the department for a long time. He left this job for another in an academic humanities department within the same university, again as a computer support specialist.

In the academic department, Alan was the sole computer support special- 18 ist, surrounded by faculty members with varying computer abilities. While no

one else performed a job similar to his, the department included other support staff—all women, primarily administrative assistants—and Alan supervised one student worker several hours per week. Alan's supervisor, the department chair (a white male in his early fifties with a Ph.D. and numerous publications and awards), initially left most computer-related decisions to Alan, though the chair's collaborative administrative style made the division of labor unclear to newcomers. A Computer Resources Committee also interacted regularly with Alan, but whether they had authority over him was unclear. The mentoring he received was fairly hands-off, resembling what Lave and Wenger call "benign community neglect" (93), a situation that left Alan to find his own way, which he saw as a vote of confidence.

What Was Alan's View of Himself and His Authority?

Alan's sense of what it meant to fill a support staff position was very different from the faculty's sense. He left his previous position because it had not allowed him much responsibility, his supervisors "relied on students' work more than" his, and he felt he "was getting no respect." This previous experience strongly informed his understanding of his current job. Because Alan had some measure of institutional authority by way of the cultural capital associated with technical knowledge, Alan did not initially have to prove himself knowledgeable or competent in the ways many new workers do. He was immediately ascribed authority and respect due to his assumed technical expertise in a place where such expertise was rare. When I asked Alan to name and describe his position he replied: "I am basically a systems administrator, which means I am God here. Anywhere in this department. Except for with the department chair." This continued to be Alan's attitude during his tenure in the department. He often indicated that there was no one "above him" but the department chair. During his fourth week in the position, Alan told me he "couldn't believe how much authority" he had, "how high up in the computer world responsibility-wise" he was. He stressed that his title put "only one other person above" him in the university or the department.

Alan's sense of his level of authority was evident in the way he talked about the faculty members in the department. He described the faculty members as "just users; nobodies [who] use the computers I set up." He indicated they were beneath him: "I put myself down on their level." To Alan, the faculty were simply "users" of his tools. He did not seem to understand—or care about—the faculty members' work or how his tools enabled them to do that work. His focus was on what *he* did: making machines work. His comments illustrate his attempt to find a mode of belonging through imagination; unfortunately, he imagined an identity for himself fairly removed from the reality of the situation.

In reality, he was hired in a support staff position, as a "tool" to fix things the faculty needed. The faculty clearly viewed Alan as support personnel. They were happiest when things worked smoothly and when Alan's work hummed along invisibly and successfully behind the scenes. When his assistance was required, they expected him to appear immediately; some faculty even went so

far as to copy email messages to the chair and computer resources committee to ensure that Alan knew there would be repercussions if he did not appear when called upon. Alan's view of everyone else as "just users" came across clearly in his writing (which primarily took place via email) and eventually called his competence into question such that department members often failed to respond to him, were ignorant of his initiatives to help them, and laughed at him and his emails. This misalignment between Alan's imagined role for himself and the role imagined for him by others led to a lack of the positive engagement Wenger argues may help newcomers enculturate; Alan and the other members of the humanities department were not actively engaging or mutually negotiating their work together.

How Did Alan Relate to the Department in Writing?

A number of discourse conventions existed in the department that could have afforded Alan further authority. Had he adopted these conventions, Alan could have achieved alignment with the department, for example using emails as "boundary objects able to create fixed points around which to coordinate activities" (Wenger 187). Alan did not adopt the conventions of the department, however. Although it is possible for writers "to enact slightly different intentions" and "resist the ideological pull of genres in certain circumstances," their resistance will only be "recognized and valued as resistance and not misinterpretation, or worse, ignorance" if it is "predicated on one's knowledge of a genre" (Bawarshi 92). Alan's written interactions with the department were seen not as resistance but as ignorance, and identified him as an outsider without authority.

One of the conventions Alan did not follow when he wrote involved the department's approximately 15 or 20 listservs, each reaching a specific audience. Tailoring emails to a particular audience was an accepted writing convention in the activity system. During the beginning of each fall semester, listserv addresses were sent out and department members were encouraged to use the list that most directly reached their message's audience. Alan chose to use the list that reached all department members for nearly every email he wrote—despite the fact that he administered all the lists and knew lists more tailored to his messages existed. His email activity did not "fit within [the] broader structures," demonstrating his lack of alignment with the department (Wenger 173).

A survey of the department I conducted indicated that Alan's lack of audience awareness and tailoring had negative consequences for his identity in the department: most people were unaware of his efforts to better their computer system because they either did not read or did not remember reading the information he sent out via email. In other words, the members of the department did not see Alan as engaged in work with and for them. For example, much of his time was spent setting up a new departmental computer network that would benefit all department members by providing them private, disk-free storage space. He discussed this in emails many times, but usually in emails that mentioned a number of other items directed at more specialized audiences.

As a result, over half the survey respondents did not know he was setting up a new network. People indicated on the survey that they stopped reading an email if the first item of business did not relate to them.

Other accepted departmental conventions governed the content and style of emails. The community members were highly literate, hyper-aware language users, in the traditional sense of the terms, who valued professional, grammatically correct, Standard English in written communication. The unspoken convention that email within the department be grammatically correct was pervasive and widely practiced in the community. Abiding by this convention was difficult for Alan, who explicitly said on several occasions that he felt his writing abilities were not good. His emails show a number of grammatical errors including sentence fragments, double negatives, and misplaced punctuation. In addition, Alan's emails often contained directives about the use of computers and labs; he frequently implied that people should respect his authority and position in the department by doing what he asked. His utterances were intended to be "*signs of authority . . . to be believed and obeyed*" (Bourdieu 66). However, he sent these emails to many irrelevant audiences and his grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure often undermined his authority as understood by audience members.

Although Alan was institutionally authorized to speak about technology, and recognized as a technical authority, he was not able to "speak in a way that others . . . regard[ed] as acceptable in the circumstances" (Thompson 9). Survey respondents' comments suggested that people dismissed Alan's legitimacy because of his writing choices. While he appeared to feel this dismissal, he did not change his writing behavior and his institutional authority began to erode.

What Was the Outcome?

The fact that Alan, a newcomer, used email in ways that old-timers saw as inappropriate—and that this use of email caused conflict—is not surprising; after all, newcomers are expected to make missteps. But rather than adapting and changing to communicate more effectively in his new workplace, Alan resisted and clung to his own ways of writing, causing conflict and breakdowns in the community of practice. Members of the department were similarly unwilling to change their view of what they found acceptable in email. They insisted on what Bourdieu calls "the dominant competence" and imposed their idea of linguistic competence as "the only legitimate one" (56). The community didn't negotiate or compromise its idea of linguistic competence for Alan; the only real possibility for negotiation had to come from Alan—and it did not.

Because our identities are shaped to some extent by the communities in which we choose to participate—as well as by those settings we inhabit and in which we choose *not* to participate (Wenger 164)—workers such as Alan may also be demonstrating their desire to identify with communities of practice other than the primary ones in which they work by refusing to appropriate new ways of writing. By refusing to participate in communication conventions adopted by the majority of members of the community, Alan attempted to

assert the identity he imagined for himself (powerful network administrator) and to resist the one imposed on him by the workplace. Pushing past resistance to work effectively with others requires people to relinquish aspects of their desired primary identities: “[L]egitimate participation entails the loss of certain identities even as it enables the construction of others” (Hodges 289). Clearly, Alan did not feel this was an acceptable proposition. The result for Alan, as Wenger might predict, was increasing marginalization. His emails were not only the butt of cruel and constant jokes in the department, but they also failed to garner support and convey necessary information. People ignored his emails or laughed at them, and neither response was conducive to getting work done. Ultimately, Alan’s choice of non-participation resulted in “disturbances and breakdowns in work processes” (Hasu and Engeström 65).

Socio-historic activity theory argues that such situations can lead to positive developments because breakdowns can potentially serve as catalysts for change: “Discoordination and breakdown often lead to re-mediation of the performance and perspectives, sometimes even to re-mediation of the overall activity system in order to resolve its pressing inner contradictions” (Hasu and Engeström 65). However, for a breakdown to lead to positive change, those involved must be willing to consider and negotiate various perspectives and everyone must be willing to appropriate some new ways of seeing and doing. This did not happen in Alan’s case. He clung to his own ways of writing and communicating, which demonstrated that he was not engaging, aligning, and imagining a role for himself as a member of the humanities department. Other members of the humanities department no more changed to accommodate Alan than Alan did to fit in with them.

After a year and a half, Alan left and found employment elsewhere.

Discussion

Clearly, Alan’s enculturation into the humanities department was not successful. He was an outsider, a worker unlike the other community members in age, education, occupation, linguistic abilities, and concern for conventions. Since new workers are often different in these ways and still manage to negotiate communication strategies that are effective and acceptable enough so that work can be done, what might account for Alan’s resistance to writing in ways that his new community saw as legitimate and appropriate?

One reason for his resistance was that Alan and other members of his department had a different understanding of the division of labor in the department and, thus, a different view of Alan’s authority. Alan might have viewed changing his writing habits as an admission that he did not play the role he imagined for himself within the department. Despite his vocal assertions to the contrary, he was not “God” in the department. While he entered the department with some measure of authority by virtue of his technical expertise, he had to prove himself and create his *ethos* continually through language—perhaps even more than through action for this particular workplace. This was something he could not or would not do.

However, a socio-linguistic analysis I conducted of Alan's writing suggests that he did not feel as much authority as he claimed to have, even from the beginning of his time in the department when he had the most cooperation and respect because of his technical capital. Of 150 sentences I studied for the analysis, only 39 were directives. While all of Alan's emails were usually sent to department-wide listservs, the overwhelming majority of his directives (28 of the 39) were addressed to graduate students alone. Only 3 were written to faculty or staff members, and 6 were written to the department as a whole. Alan's use of directives suggests that while he claimed to have authority and see the faculty as simply "users," he did not, in fact, feel much authority over them, so he confined most of his directives to graduate students. Even then, Alan used hedges over two-thirds of the time, suggesting that his felt sense of authority was shaky. This understanding best matched the department's understanding. He could make technical changes and monitor and limit operations; however, he could not force people to act in the ways he wanted them to or prohibit them from using equipment, as he threatened in more than one email.

Given the limitations of his actual authority—which conflicted with his desired authority—Alan's refusal to change his writing might have been one way of claiming an identity he wanted, one that included the authority and autonomy to which he felt entitled. However, his refusal to write in ways seen as acceptable by the department had the opposite effect: his method of writing stripped him of the institutional authority originally invested in him. Although Alan's words could be understood, they were not "likely to be listened to [or] recognized as acceptable." He lacked "the competence necessary in order to speak the legitimate language," which could have granted him "linguistic capital . . . a profit of distinction" (Bourdieu 55). Since authoritative language is useless "without the collaboration of those it governs," Alan's initial authority was lessened with each utterance seen by the department as illegitimate (Bourdieu 113). We should keep in mind that Alan's choices are unlikely to have been conscious; quite often linguistic action is not "the outcome of conscious calculation" (Thompson 17).

A second reason for Alan's failure to adopt community writing conventions might have been his resistance to being used as a tool. As a support person, Alan joined this activity system as one of its tools, not as a community member. As a technical worker with a B.A. in a university humanities department filled with people who had M.A.s and Ph.D.s, he and the other members of the workplace were not mutually engaged. Rather, the community members used him as a tool to help achieve goals Alan did not share or value. Computer system administrators (like many other workers) are used as tools to do work that others cannot. As a result of his position, Alan was not part of the community of practice; rather, his ability to maintain computer networks figured in as one of many pieces of the humanities community: the community members needed him and his activity to use their computers.

Though Alan was hired to function as a tool, he did not sit quietly like a hammer or wrench until he was needed, he did not perform exactly the same way each time he was needed, and he did not remain silent when his work was

complete. As a person, Alan didn't always choose to perform his tasks when and how community members wanted. In addition, he initiated and responded to dialogue, and (most frustrating for members of the humanities department) chose to do so in ways contrary to the community expectations. Alan's refusal to write in ways that the faculty felt he should was, perhaps, one means of flouting their linguistic authority, demonstrating that he was not a servant or tool to be used at will. Rather than quietly performing the tasks asked of him, and writing about them in the ways the community members saw as legitimate, Alan resisted the department by seeing *them* as *his* tools and by choosing non-participation over acquiescence to their written conventions. Alan's method of resistance did bring him to the conscious attention of department members; they quickly came to see him as a human being who did not silently serve them in response to their every need or desire. However, his method of resistance did not enable Alan to complete his own work successfully, nor did it lead the humanities department to include him as a human member of their community. Thus, Alan's method of resistance in this case was successful on one level, but detrimental to both himself and the workplace on other levels.

Alan's example illustrates that learning to write in new communities entails more than learning discrete sets of skills or improving cognitive abilities. It is a process of involvement in communities, of identifying with certain groups, of choosing certain practices over others; a process strongly influenced by power relationships—a process, in effect, bound up tightly with identity, authority, and experience. Alan's case also suggests that enculturation theories have overlooked an important point: not all new workers are expected, or themselves expect, to enculturate into a community. Some, perhaps many in our service-oriented society, are present in communities of practice not as members but as tools. Given these points, those of us interested in how people learn to write in new environments, in school and beyond, and those of us struggling to teach new ways of writing to students who resist what we ask of them, must continue to study and consider the importance of factors beyond texts and cognitive ability.

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Notes

1. "A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 98).
2. "Knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications" (Thompson 14).