Technical Procedures & Manuals

Lecture # 2
How Documents Engage Readers' Thinking and Feeling
Interplay of Cognition & Affect in Interpretation

- Presenting an analysis of readers' thoughts and feelings as they engage with documents, showing how interpretation may be influenced by attitudes, values, knowledge, experience, age, race, culture etc.
- Reflecting on possible differences between document designers and their readers that may make it difficult for communication to take place.
- Showing that readers form impressions not only of what a document says, but also of who they believe may be presenting the message, of the people or organization they imagine delivering the content (corporate identity).
- The model of the reader that document designers create is of supreme importance.
Analyzing the Audience – Competing Visions

- Three document design teams are given the task of revising an article on “global warming” from *Scientific American* so that it meets the needs of junior high school audience.

- The original article, aimed at college educated adults, presents ideas in prose and reinforces them with technical illustrations and graphs.

- The goal of the revision is to redesign the article so that it informs boys and girls in junior high school, particularly in grades seven and eight, about the problems of global warming.
This team approaches the problem by brainstorming characteristics of the audience. Their aim is to distinguish junior high school students from college-age students.

The team tries to catalogue all the facts they can dig up that might be relevant to know about boys and girls in grades seven and eight: age, attitudes about science, whether attitudes differ by gender, science related hobbies, average vocabulary levels, interest in the environment.

They next make an outline that incorporates the audience analysis.

Next they run the text through a style checker (conducts grammar analysis, computes values for readability formulas etc). The style checker tells the team whether the language is suitable for junior high students. Otherwise the team would need to make another revision.
The 2: The Intuitors

- This team begins by reading the original article carefully and taking notes about what might interest a junior high school student.

- Team members then share with each other their personal reflections about global warming and swap stories about the science classes they took in junior high. As they reminisce, they generate ideas for pictures for the article exploring their intuitions about how to make the topic interesting for junior high students.

- Next, the team starts drafting the new version, at which point they start to imagine how junior high school students might interpret their ideas.

- Once this draft is ready, each team member critiques it individually by trying to put him/herself in the shoes of the student.
This team begins by calling people who might know where to find a group of junior high school students who could critique the team's drafts. They talk with teachers about “what works” with science topics.

Students and teachers give the team members many ideas they can use for generating a new version of the article.

Once they complete a draft, they again seek the feedback of the audience. This time they listen to students as they read their drafts, paying attention to details like illustration and concepts use, mapping pictures to text.

The team pays attention to what interests the students and what confuses them.
Classification-Driven Audience Analysis

- Provides technical communicators with methods for creating profiles of their anticipated readership.

- Communicators begin their analysis by brainstorming about the audience and by cataloging audience demographics (e.g., age, sex, income, educational level etc). These audience profiles are used to classify audience into groups.

- The leap between audience analysis and textual action is large.

- The major strength is that they prompt communicators to think about the needs and expectations of different groups for their documents.

- The major drawback is that they tend to lead communicators to focus on the similarities within reader groups and to ignore their diversity.
Intuition-Driven Audience Analysis

- In this model communicators imagine the audience (*mental construct of the imagined reader*) and draw on their internal representation of the audience as a guide to writing and design. With imagined reader in mind, communicators choose words and graphics.

- When document designers imagine their readers, they may think not of actual people but a composite of human characteristics (e.g., an intelligent reader, technically minded).

- The strength of this model is that good communicators are sensitive to verbal and visual rhetorical moves that resonate with readers.

- The limitation of this model is that they do not encourage document designers to question the adequacy of their own judgements about the reader.
Feedback-Driven Audience Analysis

- This model provides a view of real readers engaged in the process of interpreting texts. Here, audiences come to texts with knowledge, needs, values, and expectations that dramatically influence how they interpret what they read.

- Researchers stress the importance of studying the impact of the situation on the audience's interpretation.

- *Both intuition and feedback driven model, mental image about the reader is used interactively during writing and design. The key difference is where ideas about the reader come from.*

- The strength of this model is its orientation towards real people. A weakness is that like other models, there is still a gap between forming an image of the audience and taking an action based on that image.
First decision people make is whether to read or not to read.

Evidence suggests that many people prefer not to read unless they have to.

Wright (1988b) has argued the development of theories that explore people's motivation for reading some documents carefully while ignoring others completely.

Skilled document readers behave opportunistically, getting what they want from documents and no more.

We still have little empirical evidence about how the context influences what people do.
Two Things Document Designers Can Do

- In order to help readers recognize the documents that deserve their consideration, document designers must do at least two things.
- They must visibly structure the document so that the main ideas catch the attention of busy readers.
- At the same time, they must use language (both visual and verbal) that connects with the readers' knowledge, experience, beliefs, and values.
Part of being an expert in document design means being able to write and design a single document that will satisfy the needs of multiple audiences.

For example, when creating texts that persuade, document designers need to develop ideas that show readers their perspective has been understood and represented fairly. At the same time document designers must orchestrate the visual and verbal content so that it encourages readers to seriously consider the position put forth through the document – a position held by sponsoring organizations.

The document must meet the needs of the organization and reflect their values as well as those of readers.