

Chapter 4

Feedback-Driven Audience Analysis

Human thought and behaviour are so complex that any given description or explanation of a human experience is best considered a perspective — a point of view rather than a point of fact. This is not to say that a description or explanation cannot be wrong. It is, rather, a reminder that no single description or explanation is truly complete, however accurate it may be.

**Edward Hundert, Philosophy,
Psychiatry, and Neuroscience:
Three Approaches to the Mind**

While I was digesting the results of the systems analysis of undergraduate research writing (chapter 3), in the spring of 1998 I encountered Schriver's (1997) concept of audience-driven audience analysis. Schriver's approach entailed gathering audience feedback about a document throughout the entire document production process, rather than relying on the document designer's own intuition (intuition-driven) or information gathered through research (classification-driven) and then "crash testing" the document once completed or nearly complete — what I had done with *NSR*. While Schriver's discussion of audience analysis focuses primarily on document design, I found that her models of audience adaptation, combined with Senge's interactive, dynamic approach to understanding systems, applied very well to the design and implementation of a periodical, a more interactive communication environment that requires not only reader interpretation of documents but also the ongoing support from its audience as they continuously generate, read, and use new documents published in the periodical (via continued submissions, readership, and citation). Senge's systems analysis approach contributed the interactive, motivation-uncovering method for exploring the audience's rhetorical situation — a method that was key in identifying the likelihood that my audience would be willing to continually contribute to the *NSR*. Schriver's approach provided the overlying concept of interactive, audience-driven design throughout the

process, and pointed toward the (low) likelihood that the *NSR* could be changed sufficiently from its present status to accommodate the rhetorical situation Senge's approach had uncovered.

According to Schriver (1997), the concept of audience finds its roots in the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and is a key element to the rhetorical tradition of communication. The concept of audience provides that "effective design must . . . first of all meet the needs of the audience" (59). Another concept from this same tradition is that of heuristics. Heuristics — strategies for effective guessing — help people to draw on the knowledge they already possess and open up new areas of investigation. Senge's systems approach to organizational communication is such a heuristic.

The role of the concept of audience has changed over the past 100 years. In the 1900s audience as a concept entered technical writing teaching, but the audience was conceived as static and passive (106). In the 1950s the importance of audience analysis and the relationship between the reader and the writer became more prevalent in professional and technical writing teaching and practice (120). In this decade some colleges were criticized for not paying enough attention to the role of the audience (124). By the 1960s audience analysis and the rhetorical situation were standard fare in most college technical writing courses (126). In the 1970s writing faculty turned their attention to reading processes (132), and in 1979 Flower and Hayes published the first cognitive model of the writing process (136). In the same decade, expressivism, a perspective that views writing as a strictly personal activity for the author, became popular in writing classes (134). And in the 1980s researchers began to examine the social, contextual aspects of writing (138). All this left academics in the 1990s with the task of integrating cognitive, expressivist, and social perspectives, as well as cultural and feminist perspectives, into the process of writing for readers (144), which is trickling down to all teachers in the form of Writing Across the Curriculum approaches, and at NC State the GER writing requirements — how do we include "significant writing and speaking experiences" in all our classes (interpreted as writing and presentation assignments) as

described in the 1997 proposed General Education Requirements? How do we guide our students as they write and speak on the subjects we teach?

Document designers are faced with the task of being sensitive to the needs of their audience (152), often multiple audiences (167), and to do so they rely on their conceptions of how readers will interact with the documents (152). Over time these conceptions can develop into a completely internalized mental model of how and when to think about the reader (155). How accurate that mental model is, based on intuition and experience, will affect how well the designer adapts the design to the real audience the model is supposed to represent. This relates Schriver to Senge's systems approach: as one of the five disciplines, mental models are key to the smooth functioning of a system. As a system, the production of a document depends strongly on the mental models of those involved, the designer, as well as the reader, and so on.

But even with a robust model of audience, how exactly to implement any model into a design still remains a difficult task with few clear guidelines. To accommodate this difficulty, in the 1990s professionals began moving away from "crash testing" the finished product and toward "understanding the user," inviting the audience into the design process, in what has been called "participatory design" (160). This design approach is very similar to Senge's approach to solving organizational problems: identify the organization (those producing and reading the document or, with a journal, those supplying a continuous stream of documents and reading), map the communication processes (who are the document users — the audience — and how can they be involved in the prepublication process), identify factors that affect communication (what do they expect, want, need; how do they interact with the product; how do they want to interact with the product), and examine potential for leverage, or change to the system, for a better end result. Senge's approach to systems analysis also relates to participatory design because Senge focuses on understanding how the individuals in the system affect the system and in turn are affected by it, in order to achieve a smoothly operating system, rather than focusing on materials and money (e.g., reducing labor and cost), or what the general "everyworker" (or "everyreader") should be.

A. Schriver's Audience Analysis Types

Schriver points out that designers often do not consciously survey their own particular approach to audience analysis — what they do “naturally” — and that we actually have a choice of approaches (155): intuition-, classification-, and feedback-driven audience analysis (AA), which she describes in detail (154–163). These roughly parallel the expressivist (intuition), cognitive (classification), and social (feedback) perspectives on the writing process developed in the 1970s and 1980s. Below I briefly summarize their characteristics, pros, and cons regarding how well each form of audience analysis models an audience and how difficult they are to achieve and apply.

1. Intuition Driven

Intuition-driven AA involves “visualizing” the audience, which emerges as an “audience addressed,” an imagined group constructed out of introspection and experience. The result is either

1. a wholly fictitious reader with no correspondence to any real person,
2. a constructed reader, based at least in part on memories of real people, or
3. an imagined ideal reader, that is, the reader the document designer most wants to read his or her text. (156)

The audience is a mentally constructed model based on imagined readers. This imagining draws on the intuitive strengths of the designer, but at the same time it relies entirely on the designer’s intuition, with no checks and balances (feedback) to measure its accuracy, and no clear way to translate the conceived audience into clear-cut document design elements:

Intuitive models don’t help communicators to discriminate ideas that will actually resonate with readers from those which will fall flat. . . . Just how professionals get to the point where they can readily make wise or rhetorically sophisticated choices while imagining the reader remains enshrined in mystery, perhaps not so surprising for a model of audience built on intuition. (159)

2. Classification Driven

Classification-driven AA involves creating a profile of the anticipated readership or “target audience” by compiling a list of audience needs and concerns from

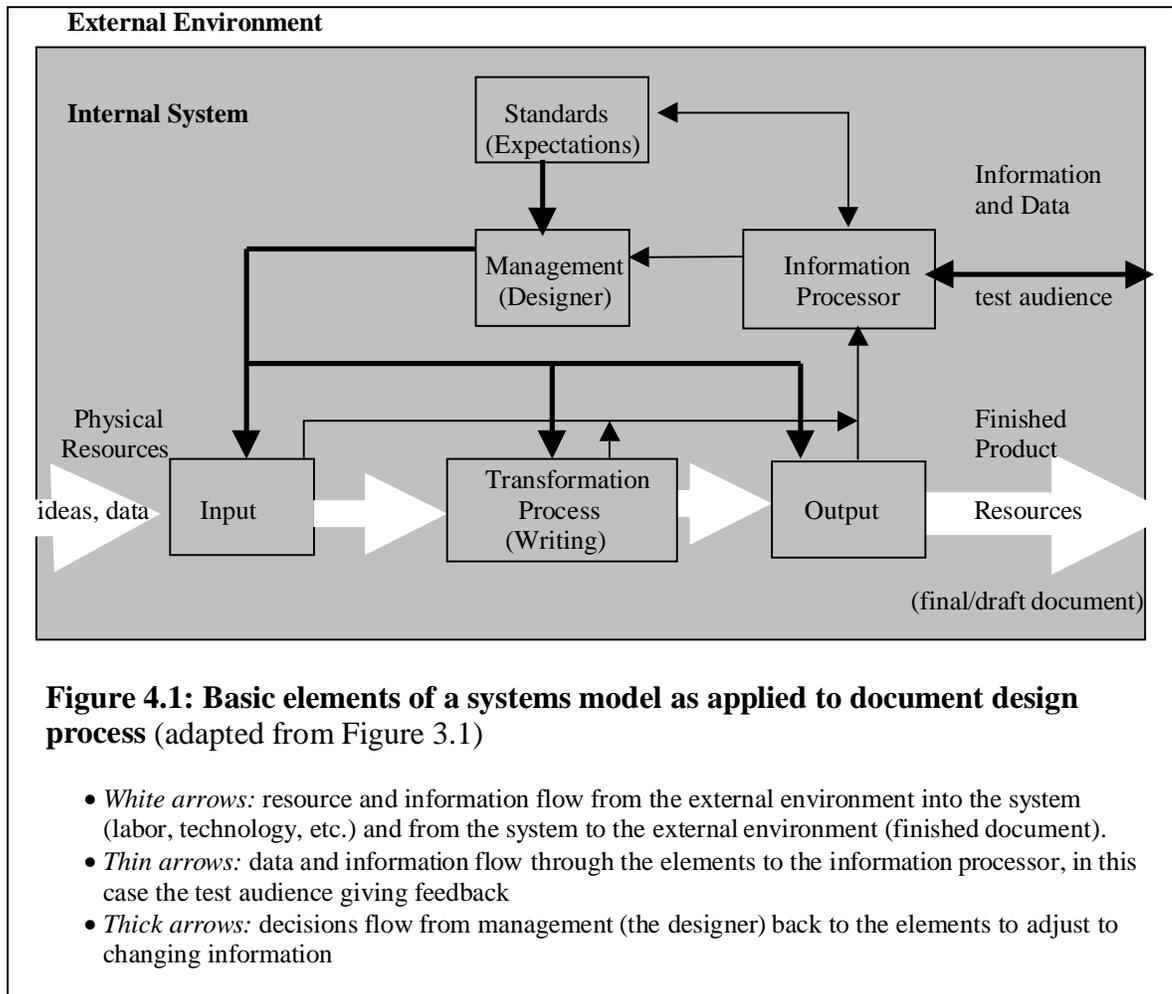
demographic and other research data, and then applying these in designing and creating the document. The strength of this approach is that it requires us to think about readers' needs and expectations by providing a heuristic focused specifically on the audience. However, as with intuition-driven AA, it provides no feedback mechanism by which the designer can test the view of the audience until after the document is complete (crash testing). The mental model is not compared to the real audience for accuracy, but rather "fossilizes" (156) into a stereotype that may result in incorrect inferences about what the real audience needs.

3. Feedback Driven

Feedback-driven, or audience-driven AA, which Schriver considers the best way to approach document design, involves continual feedback from segments of the prospective audience throughout the design process. This creates a much more accurate picture of the audience, as the audience is repeatedly surveyed and consulted in the conception and design of the document. The drawback is that such feedback can create a huge amount of data that is sometimes difficult to apply to designing the document itself. The strength, however, which overcomes this drawback, is that continual audience feedback will keep the document on track, making the final product more successful and reducing long-run cost/labor outlays.

This feedback-driven process is very similar to the organizational communication approach outlined in Chapter 3, where information is cycled among the system, producing changes along the way (Figure 4.1). This correspondence is not surprising, given that feedback-driven AA comes from two broad research traditions, one of which includes the discipline of organizational behavior. The other comes from disciplines that have strong empirical research traditions, such as cognitive psychology and linguistics (160); the roots of empiricism and hypothetico-deductive reasoning are anchored in feedback loops of "real-world" data.

Another similarity between Schriver's feedback-driven AA and Senge's systems approach to organizational communication is that both are dynamic, feedback-driven



models that must involve input from key elements in an interactive fashion.¹ But feedback-driven models share the same overall weakness as the other models of audience analysis, in that there is still a gap between forming an image of an audience, however accurate, and making changes to the process or product based on that image (162), a difficulty inherent in any model. Organizational communication provides the answer: a clear plan to assess the effect of changes to the system, to make adjustments as needed to see that the organization meets its goals. Although Schriver points to the mountains of data generated by gathering feedback as a drawback, I found that Senge's heuristics were

¹ Senge's systems approach would take Schriver's feedback-driven AA a step further and model the entire design process to include feedback from all key elements — designers, (sponsoring) organization representatives, end users, end user support — throughout the entire process.

excellent in organizing that data and processing it into useful information regarding my audience — their mental models (what do they expect from a document, what it should do and how it should do it), personal growth (how the audience interacts with the document, including reading levels and reading styles), team learning (what information or effect do they gain from the document, how does it affect their behavior), and shared vision (how does their learning from the document jibe with the goals of the document, or the client who commissioned the document). This “shared vision” (shared between the purpose of the document and its effects on the audience) in turn affects the audience’s expectations and hence mental models of that document and others to follow). The document designer can then harness and “leverage” this information to produce a better document (and affect the audience’s expectations of documents), with which the audience is better able to interact — an assumption that is then tested in the next round of audience feedback.

Another similarity with systems theory heuristics is that, though Schriver clearly favors feedback-driven AA (as do I, for reasons I outline in the next section), the three approaches are not mutually exclusive (162). As heuristics they can be used interchangeably to fit differing circumstances, each with differing pros and cons that would be more or less effective in a given rhetorical situation. Intuition and classification are integral parts of the interviewing and system-defining processes, respectively, that are included in the systems analysis approach. Classification helps to identify the initial boundaries of the system to get started in analyzing it: who are the audience, what do they interact with, hence what should the interviews initially examine. Then based on that feedback, further audience elements can be sought to complete the picture uncovered. Intuition helps direct the interview questions that begin to answer the initial question a document designer wants answered.

B. Retrospective

It is clear in retrospect that I had used a combination of classification- and intuition-driven audience analysis in designing the undergraduate journal. Neither relying on my literature review on scholarly communication and focusing on electronic publishing

research (classification), nor drawing from my own and others experiences as teachers and students (intuition) was enough to generate an accurate model of *NSR*'s audience — a model that, had I pursued it earlier in the project, would have pointed me toward the complex audience environment and its potential impact on the interactive journal I was trying to create.

1. Intuition-Driven Audience Analysis

In conceiving the journal I believed that students would be quick to recognize an avenue for advancement in the undergraduate publishing process — after all, they had an existing, underutilized resource (their paper) that with minimal added effort could gain them more reward. Hence, I focused my marketing approach on them. I also believed that faculty would be quick to recognize the usefulness of enticing students with publication potential, and to use examples posted on the Web in their ever-growing responsibility for (and teaching time spent on) student writing; hence, I did not focus an intensive marketing campaign toward them, but simply notified them of the journal, expecting them to follow up. I believed that if the hurdles were low enough not to scare students away, yet high enough to give them a firm sense of the publishing process, low enough not to overtax faculty yet high enough to be a valued resource, then I would have more submissions than I could handle. Hence, I focused on minimizing labor costs of the journal production process, and designed the initial handout design to show how short the process was — after all, it fit on one page! But with no understanding of how complex the process *could* be, the students still saw the form as complex.

Students were not quick to recognize a simple avenue for reward, simply because they did not recognize the reward. The mental models, personal growth, shared vision, and team learning environment under which undergraduate students, and particularly science and engineering students, operate include no disciplinary space for publishing. In the faculty's minds, students are not expected to “publish” until later in their careers — after all, they're only undergraduates. Faculty were quick to recognize a great learning tool, judging by the feedback I received on the journal conception. They were not, however, quick to encourage lots of papers as “excellent” because of the debate over

what's "excellent" and what should be required and rewarded in undergraduate writing, introduced by the GER requirements.

2. *Classification-Driven Audience Analysis*

I read that students as future authors would have to face an intensified motivation to publish as part of their jobs. These future authors would likely be more involved in their publishing efforts as more universities and societies sponsor "home-published" documents and serials, and all publishers, profit and nonprofit alike, reduce their publishing costs by passing editorial and production work on to the authors (e.g., requiring disks and limited range of acceptable formats). Authors have great need for recognition as well as contribution to their fields, both of which electronic publication and communication will provide, which in turn will draw more and more future authors into the electronic arena. And even those students who would not go on to become authors within their workplace would nonetheless likely be faced with the task of reading and evaluating materials that other authors had created under these publication pressures. All this students will face in their future workplaces, and I believed that preparing them to face that by providing experience would be welcome by all parties.

However, I learned that undergraduates have little identification with their future selves as authors, hence perceive little reward for publishing. Students do have great need for recognition, in preparation for future employment, but do not perceive a student publication as providing that recognition. Those who are motivated to "publish" satisfy this goal by publishing as acknowledged assistants or, occasionally, co-authors with their research mentors.

I also learned that faculty believe that there is no "disciplinary space" in which undergraduates should publish: coursework assigned to students usually did not yet include genres that faculty would consider acceptable for publication (e.g., complete research report). Hence, judging a piece of student writing as "excellent" that did not fit into their definition of professionally, publishably "excellent" (i.e., advanced research report beyond the capabilities of most undergraduates) was problematic. And the depth of faculty discussion regarding just what an excellent *student* paper *should* be, spawned by

the perceived inadequacy of student writing as indicated by the need for new writing requirements, indicated that there was a perceived lack of consensus regarding just that issue. Interviews with faculty in many different disciplines indicated that assignments, and likely standards of excellence, varied among disciplines, further problematizing faculty's willingness to publicly portray, to the entire university and beyond, that any assignment within their course, within their discipline, met universitywide standards of excellence.

3. Feedback-Driven Audience Analysis — How the Audience Could Have Helped In the Conception. Had I talked *in depth* with faculty and students whom I hoped would use the journal, rather than simply “bouncing the ideas around” with interested faculty and colleagues (many of whom were in the English department or in other departments that had strong interests in writing education), I would likely have learned of the depth of the writing debate and the need for discussion in that regard. Also, I would have learned which departments and colleges within the university were more suited to an undergraduate research publication, thus helping me narrow my focus to those departments that already had a strong writing tradition, from which I could build my base and work out.

In the Design. Faculty and students both would have contributed greatly to the review process — Were faculty willing to peer review? Would they like to have a site to post the best papers in their classes? Faculty and students could have advised on the submission process — Were students really concerned with keeping the publishing hurdles low? My sampling for opinions had not been broad enough or focused enough to identify which pockets of enthusiasm favored which approaches, thus allowing me to tailor the journal (or journals?) accordingly.

As I talked with members of each department in turn, their varying needs and conceptions of “excellence” would have come forth, probably entailing a complete redesign of the journal, from a focus on a cross-university audience to possibly a series of smaller journals each operating within more carefully and homogeneously defined

disciplinary space. In that way each discipline, department, and division could construct their own (or not participate if they chose) according to their specific approach to writing in the undergraduate curriculum, and also be free to vary it as they wish without cumbersome interdepartmental decision processes.

In the Implementation. I believe that once the conception and design of the journal reflected their interests and needs, the audience would have become a broad pool of volunteers, many of whom would come on board as I discuss my plans and needs with them early in the process. This is what happened on a small scale, through the help of Dr. Rajala in marketing and Margaret Hudacko in Web design. Teacher enthusiasm could be passed to students when they announce it to their classes and perhaps encourage more of their students to submit. By the time the journal reached this stage, together we would have created an “environment” that was interactive, dynamic, creative, and adaptive.

In the Longevity. The primary key to success in a journal is in its longevity: developing a self-sustaining relationship between the major players — authors, publishers (editors and producers), and readers. The interest developed early in the journal project could have grown as the journal responded to feedback and adapted as a learning environment to those who made use of it. I believe I would have encountered more students — graduate or undergraduate — and faculty who would have been enthusiastic about the journal and willing to contribute to its continued success. In this way the journal itself would become a creative, interactive communication environment offering a comfortable home to authors and readers alike — a self-perpetuating system, in Senge’s (1990) terms, a “learning organization.”

But a self-perpetuating system is not what the journal had become. Though I attended the Undergraduate Research Symposium in the spring of 1998, redesigning the brochure to be less daunting, I received only one submission (though lots of inquiries) for the second volume. As it was, faced with the overwhelming evidence that the journal environment I had created did not meet the needs of its intended audience, and that for it to do so would involve its complete overhaul all the way down to its mission statement

and advisory board, I had come to the end of a two-year experiment that I determined did not merit continuing. Rather, I determined to take the information I had gathered and the lessons I had learned, share them with any other interested parties, and apply them to my own future projects.

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