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Organizational Voice: Explicit Factors Enabling Assimilation and Participation

Priscilla S. Rogers
University of Michigan Business School

Working Paper 03-001

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EXPLICIT FACTORS ENABLING ASSIMILATION AND PARTICIPATION**

Priscilla S. Rogers

701 Tappan Street

University of Michigan Business School

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234

Phone: +1 734 764-9779

Email: psr@umich.edu

Acknowledgements: The author is indebted to colleagues Jane Thomas, Elizabeth Girsch, Jone Rymer in the US; to Soon Ang, Irene Wong, Mian Lian Ho, and Catherine Ooi Lan Cheng in Singapore, as well as to research assistant Cynthia Wilson whose support helped “voice” this work. Institutional support was provided by the University of Michigan Business School and Nanyang Business School, Singapore, for which the author is grateful.

ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE:

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This article proposes “organizational voice” to conceptualize the unique communicative practices or "voiceprint" of a given group. It extends composition and discourse studies, where "voice" is applied to writing activities but less to organizational communication; it challenges organizational communication research, where "voice" is used to describe power relationships but less to understand explicit communicative activities. Complementing "organizational culture" and "organizational genre," the proposed construct encompasses multi-faceted communicative practices that enable participation and require negotiating individual and collaborative, routine and dynamic tensions.

ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE:

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The concept of “organizational voice” is not new. In organizational communication literature “voice” has been used as a metaphor to explain the connection between communication and organization, particularly with respect to relationships and power. Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman (1996: 389) defined organizational voice as “the practices and structures that affect who can speak, when, and in what way.” In organizational communication literature, “who can speak” is of particular interest; “in what way” is much less so, however. For example, organizational studies of empowerment associate voice with participation and commitment--those at the top of the organizational structure are said to have substantial voice, those at the bottom, little or none (e.g., Pacanowsky, 1988). Voice is also used to describe how minority groups with different voices may be marginalized (e.g., Nkomo, 1992) including via workplace policies, such as English-only requirements (Murphy, 2002). Discussions of how individuals "gain voice" also appear in feminist organizational studies (e.g., Marshall, 1993) and in research concerning various interest groups voicing their concerns, such as the nurses examined in Sharp's 1994 study. Summarizing this literature, Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman (1996: 391) concluded that the “voice metaphor centers on *implicit* factors that shape the role of communication, namely ideology, hegemony, legitimization to speak, and unobtrusive control.” What *explicit* factors may help define or shape the role of communication remains to be explored.

By contrast, literary theory and composition studies have historically associated voice with writing performance. Some composition studies propose writing as means for self-discovery (e.g.,

“writing to find one’s voice”); others regard writing as an instrument to exercise collective power, external agitation, and change (e.g., "writing in opposition to current practice"). The connection to organization is undeveloped in these studies, however.

More recent composition and discourse studies exploring “writing to learn” and “communities of practice” (sometimes called discourse communities) have examined relationships between textual communicative practices and organizational operations, including the question of how writing activities may enable participation and even distinguish one organization or group from another. One of the first to associate “voice” with unique textual practices group-to-group is Swales (1998). He observed three distinct academic communities (each organized on a different floor in a small, three-floor university building) and concluded that each group employed a broad-ranging set of the textual particulars that were a necessity growing out of their specializations and further that these textual particulars were the means by which their disciplinary work got done. More than this, Swales concluded that the textual operations of each group were a mark of belonging, differentiating one group on one floor from another group on a different floor. “In pursuing the elusive concept of discourse community,” Bazerman noted, “Swales uncovers something far more concrete, novel, and revealing: the discursive lives of individuals made within complexes of organized communications and social relations, mediated through writing” (1998: ix-x).

Building on composition and discourse studies, the primary purpose of this paper is to propose organizational voice as the unique communicative activities of an organization. Having a voice, it will also be suggested, depends to some extent upon one’s capacity to recognize, understand, and appropriate the particular communicative practices of an organization or its voiceprint. This extends to organization the attention to texts found in composition and discourse

studies and, in doing so, suggests the possibility of a slightly different approach to address the concern in organizational studies for disenfranchised individuals and groups. It raises issues related to organizational entry, barriers to participation and whether voice can be learned or can be facilitated by prior training, particularly communication studies.

After surveying literature suggesting the validity of drawing a connection between voice and the explicit act of writing, and after describing discourse studies that lay the groundwork for associating voice with organizational communication practices, a definition of organizational voice proposed. Organizational voice is subsequently distinguished from organizational culture and “professional voice.” Having a voice, it is further explained, involves mediating at least two inherent tensions: the tension between individual responsibility and collaborative relationships, and the tension between an organization’s communicative routines and the dynamic communicative requirements of individuals working together, including across groups. The example of the new entrant is used to suggest how the construct might be operationalized and implications for further research are offered in closing.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT FOR VOICE AS TEXT

The notion of "voice" has a long developmental history in literary theory and composition that uniformly involves writing performance and related textual matters. Yet specific applications vary widely. As Yancey (1994: viii) observed, definitions tend to “argue rather than explain,” explicating voice as “exactly not what is claimed by the prior definitions.” Among the multiple and diverse uses of the voice that Yancey identified, for example, are the following: voice as infused in the process of writing; voice as a reference for human presence in text; voice as a source of resonance for the writing and the reader; voice as a way of explaining the interaction of writer, reader, and text; voice as the appropriation of other texts; and voice as a synecdoche for discourse.

Two of the more dominant applications in writing pedagogy further illustrate this diversity: "voice as individual expression" and "voice as critical writing."

"Voice as individual expression," emphasizes students' discovering and expressing their unique individuality through writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986, 1991; Graves, 1983; Lensmire, 1998; Murray, 1985). Writing is regarded as a means for personal reflection and self-discovery, a way to uncover one's authentic, unique self. The writer is seen as creating personal "presence" in the text (Yancey, 1994). Graves (1983: 227) describes this as "the imprint of ourselves on our writing." According to this formulation, voice has "an individualistic, non-conformist strain" that presents the "self" as "stable, coherent, unitary, and autonomous" (Lensmire, 1998: 263-264). "Voice as individual expression" is not conceived a means to achieve some sort of collective goal, but rather is a means for personal introspection, development, and expression in the world (Graves, 1983).

Somewhat differently, "critical writing pedagogy" associates voice with conflict and social struggle focusing on writing as the vehicle for activism (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Freire, 1970, 1985; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Simon, 1987). Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) notion of diverse "languages of heteroglossia" (expressing a particular stance or position about the world), critical writing pedagogy emphasizes the writer as the activist asserting self into the public sphere. As Lensmire summarizes it, students are encouraged "to be active participants in the construction of their worlds" and to avoid getting "trapped in the meanings, subjectivities, and forms of authority determined by powerful others." (1998: 268). Being socially active to the point of making those in power accountable, including the teacher is the goal of this writing (e.g., Gilbert 1989). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to treat writing as genuine student-teacher dialogue by which students become a collective to be listened to and understood. Lensmire (1998) extended this model of

"writing as activism" to explore the conflicts existing in the social context of the classroom, conflicts that may involve asymmetries in power (teacher over student) and disadvantaged minorities.

Different as they are, what unifies "individual expression," "critical writing," and other conceptualizations of voice in this stream of composition literature, is the notion that voice involves writing performance as the means of expression. Might not this attention to writing performance be applied to "organizational voice?"

Research on Organizational Discourse

Meanwhile, discourse studies illustrate that writing and speaking practices are integral to organizational participation, particularly work on "writing to learn," "communities of practice," and "organizational genre."

Writing to learn. One stream of research demonstrates that individuals learn an organization's communicative routines and come to understand the nature of collaborative relationships and individual responsibilities and how to enact them as they write together, confer on writing, or discuss written deliverables (Ackerman, 1991, 1993; Haas & Witte, 2001; Penrose, 1992). For example, Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller (1985) found that in the process of passing a piece of writing back and forth for revision (document cycling), employees at Exxon ITD developed shared views and learned what was expected of them. Couture and Rymer (1991) observed a similar phenomenon operating in subordinate reporting. Document planning, drafting, and revising sessions with superiors helped subordinates understand and discover appropriate ways to approach tasks and learn what was expected in terms of reporting style—e.g., one subordinate they studied reported that discussions about drafting with his supervisor taught him how to depersonalize his writing appropriately.

Similarly Katz (1998a & b) observed that during writing review sessions new entrants learned not only to write in the organizational style but also to understand particular aspects of the organization's culture, including appropriate ways to question approaches and to gain sufficient authority to initiate change. Other studies show that cooperative drafting and writing review builds consensus and commitment (Rogers & Horton, 1992; van der Geest & van Gemert, 1997), that individual writing demonstrates membership and facilitates relationships (Ice, 1991; Lipson, 1988; Winsor, 1990, 1998, 1999), and that the writing an employee produces may even influence evaluation and promotion decisions (Anderson, 1985; Couture & Rymer, 1991; Scudder & Guinan, 1989). These and other studies show a strong connection between participation with a group and various writing activities such as composing, revising, and editing (Cross, 1994; Odell & Goswami, 1984; Odell, Goswami, Herrington, & Quick, 1983; Suchan, 1995; Swales & Rogers, 1995). In summary, "writing-to-learn" research suggests that becoming an effective communicator in an organization requires an understanding of and facility with the particular communicative practices of that organization, including the specialized communicative forms of expression used by its internal groups.

Communities of practice and organizational genre. Research examining communities of practice (sometimes called "discourse communities") and organizational genre establish variation in communicative practices group-to-group and further suggest a connection between acceptance as a member of a group and compliance with these practices. In studying entry-level engineers' workplace writing, for example, Winsor (1999) found that documentation in the form of activity reports to superiors proved easier to produce when the writers and readers were part of the same internal group (See also Swales, 1998; Iedema, 1998). Such groups, she observed, shared goals and expectations regarding reports. Non-members regarded the same reports somewhat differently, a

reality that complicated communications across groups. As Winsor (1999: 202) noted: "[W]hen people attempt to work productively together they need some means to resolve inevitable discontinuities. Text appears to be one of those means."

Related to the communicative practices of groups, organizational genre (or socially recognized types of communications such as various kinds of memos, meetings, announcements, reports) are known to be organization and task specific and to be influenced by organizational job demands and reporting relationships (Miller, 1984; McCloskey, 1985; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Bazerman, 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Henry, 2000). Rogers (1989) observed an example of these latter influences in her observations of field managers' communications in a major automotive company. In reporting to their immediate supervisors, these managers continued to use a narrative structure to recount problems their dealers were experiencing (e.g., "I talked with Fred at our ABC dealership on Friday and he said that they have. . . . He told me he'd decided to go ahead."). Even in the face of pressure from the corporate office to adopt a new analytical report format (Problem, Recommendation, Action, Timetable) that it introduced to enhance efficiency, this narrative mode persisted: field managers and the district managers to whom they reported explained that the new analytical approach was inadequate because it inhibited their descriptions of the complex relational aspects of their dealer visits, information they were rewarded for reporting at both the district and corporate levels. Here the specific organizational genre developed as a consequence of the job demands, reward system, and reporting relationships in the field. Neither the specific genre nor its unique value was fully understood by the "outsiders" at the corporate level (For another example see Brown & Herndl, 1986).

Extending genre research, Bazerman (1994) and Yates and Orlikowski (2002:14) proposed "genre systems" or "sequences of interrelated communicative actions" as one significant means by

which individuals work together. As Yates and Orlikowski (2002) concluded: “Genre systems are indicative of what a community does and does not do (purpose), what it does and does not value (content), what different roles members of the community may or may not play (participants), and the conditions (time, place, form) under which interactions should and should not occur” (See also Driskill, 1989).

Taken together, what do these streams of research suggest as relevant to a re-conceptualization of organizational voice? First, in literary and composition studies, voice has been traditionally been applied to writing performance including the process of discovery and the textual products reflecting the authorial uniqueness or dissent. Second, discourse studies show that writing and speaking activities are integral to organizational life and are unique group-to-group. More than this, and third, genre and other discourse studies illustrate that communicative expertise sufficient for organizational participation requires some understanding of the organization’s discourse—e.g., what words to use and what genre and genre systems comprise the organization’s communicative norms involving when to write, to whom, and for what purpose (see also Nickerson, 1994; Bereiter & Scardamaila, 1987; Katz, 1998a & b; Purves & Pruves, 1986). Exploring "voice" as the explicit written and spoken operations of an organization seems a logical next step. How might organizational voice be defined along these lines?

ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE DEFINED

Building on the association of voice with writing and speaking activities in composition and discourse studies, and addressing the concern in organizational communication literature connecting voice to participation, a re-definition of organizational voice is proposed, one that focuses on explicit communicative activities and their uniqueness group to group.

Organizational voice is proposed as the unique textual life of an organization or its collaborative communicative voiceprint, involving the integrated whole of the organization's linguistic and rhetorical patterns, genre use, media choices, and communication protocols for timing and distribution, all of which are formulated and reformulated situation-to-situation and over time. Focusing on communicative performance, organizational voice can be observed as the particular configuration of mutually constructed and dynamic writing and speaking practices and products that enable, define, and re-define the individual roles and collective relationships, tasks, goals, and values of an organization. Voice results as individuals communicate to organize and to remain organized for specific purposes; it is learned and evolves through collaboration and, therefore, it cannot be fully understood by outside observation alone. From another view, organizational voice may be said to comprise the multi-faceted and dynamic communicative template that the new organizational entrant must learn and use to some degree in order to establish and maintain relationships and to operate as an organizational member.

To clarify further, compare the well-known concept of "organizational culture." Although organizational researchers do not entirely agree on the definition of organizational culture or exactly how best to study it (Martin & Meyerson, 1988), one of its early advocates, Schein (1984: 85), defined it as "the pattern of basic *assumptions* that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed." Within this and other definitions, organizational culture relegates writing and speaking activities to the position of cultural *artifact*, at best the "visible or audible behavior patterns and public documents such as charters, employee orientation materials, and stories." These "texts of organizational life" have been regarded as undecipherable; invisible perception, thinking, and feeling tend to comprise the starting point and core of organizational culture (e.g., Schein, 1984).

By contrast, organizational voice would have us begin with the "artifact" or the "thing made," observing the visible speaking and writing processes and products as integral to the development of organizational culture, to the establishment and maintenance of roles and relationships, and to the work itself. By this conceptualization, organizational voice focuses on "what people say," and when, and in what way. Organizational voice foregrounds and values the textual operations of the organization as more than archival data or cultural artifact. Re-conceptualizing organizational voice in this way would have us appreciate and observe recurring communicative practices and products (e.g., meeting protocols including interactive norms for timing, participation, meeting genre and their use). Reasons for doing so are also suggested: Having a voice or the power to act, to effect change, and to participate, may be correlated with ability to translate and employ the organization's textual operations involving its written and oral activities.

Organizational Voice Subsumes Professionalism

It is further proposed that organizational voice subsumes the communicative forms associated with professionalism generally, but it is not synonymous with what might be characterized as "professional voice." Much as the label "business casual" conjures up images of individuals wearing belted pants (kaki perhaps) and collared shirts (maybe even short sleeved and kit as for golf), so too the "memo," "proposal," "management presentation," "performance appraisal," and "mission statement" are quite universally recognized and associated as the genre of professional life. When a job candidate is described as mature, well spoken, and highly professional, it may be generally understood that this individual possesses the demeanor appreciated in organizations generally. Such broad understandings, which might be characterized as "professional voice," are not the same thing as the conceptualization of organizational voice

proposed here. Rather, while organizational voice may subsume professional expectations, it involves refinements and requirements that are distinct to the historical development and particulars of a specific organization and its various sub-groups. In this, organizational voice is retrospective, involving communicative forms that may be universally and superficially recognizable, but involving these forms in a way that is in the end quite original, having evolved as a particular mix of individuals engaged in a variety of inter-related tasks toward some common goals over time.

To illustrate, consider the expectation that individuals should express deference to their supervisors or others with special expertise. Traditional politeness strategies (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987), such as using titles (e.g. "Mr.," or "Dr.,") or hedging statements (e.g. *We might want to change this program.*"), may not apply in particular organizational contexts. Communicating on a "first-name basis" may be the norm in some organizations. In one organizational context it may be customary to call the boss by her first name; in another a more formal set up an honorific may be expected (e.g. "Professor," "Mr.," "Dr.," "Your honor"). Or, for example, directness (e.g. "We should change this program"; "You're wrong about that."), even open debate may be encouraged in some organizational environments and situations, including when a superior's ideas are involved; whereas, other environments may discourage confrontational exchange. "Open debate" environments are not alike either--e.g., assertive declarative statements (e.g. "I disagree") may be well suited in one organizational environment; kinder, gentler tactics (such as soft modals like "we could" or "we may") may be the norm elsewhere. Many other variables also come into play, including when and where open debate may appropriately occur, if at all, and the genre and genre systems typically employed for the same. The voiceprint of an organization is much more complex and uniquely individual in terms of its communicative forms and their meanings.

TENSIONS IN ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE

It is further posited that organizational voice involves on-going management of tensions between individual contribution and collaborative responsibility; between communicative routines and dynamic activities (See Figure).

Insert Figure about here

Tension Between Individuality and Collaboration

While it is posited that the individual must operate to some extent within the organization's voiceprint, this need not imply capitulation or prohibit individual contribution. Rather, it is proposed that a tension exists between individuality and collaboration, a tension that persists as an inherent feature of voice that is both desirable and negotiable.

In terms of individuality, organizational voice differs greatly from the view of “voice as individual expression” found in one branch of writing pedagogy that pushes students-as-authors to *identify for themselves* the topics and purposes for writing that are worthy of their time and effort” (Lensmire, 1998:262). What “voice as *self* expression” advocates do not consider, Lensmire (1998: 265) concluded, “is that writers are not really isolated individuals, but embedded . . . in important social relations with others that influence the work of writing and creating a self.” By contrast, voice as *organizational* expression, as proposed here, de-emphasizes the isolated individual and rather focuses on the communication patterns and practices that are inherently collaborative and that enable social relationships. Much as an individual singer is expected to accept the discipline of the musical score and the director in order to perform as a member of a choir, so the individual within an

organization can assimilate and participate to the degree that s/he complies with prevailing communicative practices (Redding & Tompkins, 1988).

At the same time, organizational voice may also accommodate improvisation, especially by seasoned members. Improvisation, however, does not equal individualism but rather a kind of participation like that of the jazz musician whose "solo" harbors back to the formal features of the underlying score and its previous interpretations while all the time remaining aware of other musicians and the listening audience (Weick, 1998; Meyer, Frost & Weick, 1998). As Weick (1998: 548-9) explained: "In jazz, as in conversation, self-absorption is a problem." Voice as individual expression with its goal of self-discovery and actualization as some composition pedagogy would have it, is quite different than individual expression as an organizational participant.

Like voice in "critical writing pedagogy," organizational voice may also accommodate the role of the agitator, voicing concerns. In contrast to critical writing pedagogy, however, organizational voice is first and foremost a means for participation, even while advocating change. For example, we might expect an individual who possesses organizational voice to express ownership of the tasks, relationships, and organizational concerns (e.g., it's "our" problem versus "your" problem) and to accept and scrutinize individual assignments as they relate to organizational goals (e.g. "My boss asked me to critique the promotional presentation he's giving so that *we* win the contract."). Rather than voicing dissent from the outside, however, organizational voice is grounded in shared understandings, goals, and obligations; it involves communicating as an insider who belongs and bears some responsibility, including for conflict and its potential impact on the organization as a whole. In this, organizational voice may mirror the experience of the singer who joins a choir to sing in some sort of harmony with others, perhaps with an occasional solo. Interpretative license may be allowed, even welcomed, and changes in the score may be negotiated.

So too, the explicit factors of organizational voice, including linguistic and rhetorical patterns, genre creation and use, media choices, and communication protocols for timing and distribution may be seen as the means for organizational give and take, for solving problems, for addressing concerns, for agitation, for competition, and for change. In this way voice may enable dissent. When the individual is at odds with the collective, then perhaps the textual tools of voice become the means to explore differences and to make change.

Organizational voice would not displace the individual. Rather, it is proposed as a collective of individual voices. A choir becomes silent if individuals stop singing, an orchestra hushed if players pause, a jazz performance less successful absent of improvisation. At the same time, choral and orchestral performance requires some sort of harmonization, even if dissonant. Participation involves interplay, give-and-take between individual performers within the parameters of the score or theme and sometimes under the guidance of a director charged to see that all perform as well as might be expected. Even a the musician in a jazz ensemble is said to contribute something that is recognizable, that contributes to an emerging structure being built by the group in which he or she is playing, and, more than this, that creates possibilities for other players (Gioia, 1988).

Tension Between Routine and Dynamic

It is further proposed that an organization's voice involves communicative routines including a unique vocabulary, genre repertoire (Orlinkowski & Yates, 1994; Yates & Orlinkowski, 1992), protocols for media use, and systems for communication timing and distribution (e.g., Jablin, 2001; Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999). As Dutton and Dukerich (1991) explain, some organizational operations are routine, expected, and fit into existing categories for which learned responses and patterns of behaviors are both recognized and rewarded in an organization. Driskill similarly observed that "the possibility of organized

action hinges on the emergence and continued existence of common modes of interpretation that allow day-to-day activities to be taken for granted” (1989: 132; Nickerson, 1994; Suchan & Dulek, 1998; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). Communication routines may be said to comprise a common voice involving communicative styles and approaches for relationships and tasks that have been negotiated over time. When individuals disregard or fail to employ these routines, misunderstanding or even alienation may result.

It is also known, however, that routines modulate under changing individual and communal circumstances. Much as Orlikowski and Yates (1994) observed of organizational genre, so too organizational voice is conceived as dynamic and developing rather than static and finished, as continually created and re-created rather than as found (as in the “finding one’s voice” notion of the individual-expression school). Shifting organizational goals, tasks, relationships, and roles bring changes in voice—e.g., language and genre may be modified and created for new initiatives, new positions and groups, or to accommodate technological innovation. Media use may be altered to reflect the preferences of new leaders or in the interest of increased efficiency. All in all, organizational voice is comprised of communicative routines that evolve over time, creating tensions between established norms and dynamic inputs.

OPERATIONALIZING ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE

Revisiting the Metaphor

Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant (2002) challenge the conventional claim that “metaphor is an invitation to see the world anew” (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990: 222) and call for a wider range of organizational tropes, especially those illustrating dissimilarities such as irony and paradox. They relish irony because it “involves a playful but assertive rejection of the conventional, taken-for-granted conceptions of reality” (Oswick, et.al., 2002: 299). “Irony,” they explain, “implies that you

might think that A is like B, but don't be fooled; once you explore it in more detail, you will find that it is more complex than that" (2002:299). And yet, one could argue that metaphors are no less powerful as instruments of knowledge generation. Rather, the relative powerlessness imputed to them may stem from their overuse and underdevelopment—e.g., “don't be fooled . . . you will find that it is more complex than that.” Recall that metaphors facilitate the transmission of meaning and provide a comparative shorthand by drawing attention to *likeness that may be novel or surprising, or that may even illustrate complexity that has been overlooked* (Davidson, 1978; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986; Tsoukas, 1991; Gibbs, 1993; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002). Organizational voice may be a case in point.

The metaphor of voice fundamentally relates to the physical voice, the human capacity to speak, to be heard, and to interact in the world (Yancey, 1994; see also Berry, 1973). In organizational communication, the concept of voice has been used to explore connections between communication and organization, focusing on *implicit* factors such as ideology, unobtrusive control, legitimization to speak, and the exclusion of individuals or groups. Quite a bit has been written about voice as the need to be heard and have influence, less about *explicit* factors that may be the means to such ends.

Meanwhile, as has been shown, composition studies have long associated voice with the explicit act of writing. Voice has been a much used and debated construct in composition. Meanwhile, also appreciating "texts," discourse studies show distinctions in language, genre use, and communicative protocols group-to-group, distinctions not captured in conceptions of professional discourse generally, but distinctions that seem to matter when it comes to participation. Given this, organizational voice may be a metaphor capable of illustrating the unique complexity of an

organization's textual life, including written and spoken routines and their modification by which individuals belong and contribute.

We know that communication systems may block or discourage participation, alienating some, enabling others. But conceptualizing the explicit factors of voice or the observable textual life of an organization, suggests a somewhat different approach than “in-group versus out-group.” If voice can be observed and understood, might not it also be employed? Might not an organization’s linguistic and rhetorical patterns, genre use, media choices, communication protocols for timing and distribution and the meanings associated with their use facilitate participation? And if so, how is voice learned?

The Example of the New Hire

To suggest how the construct of organizational voice might be operationalized, consider the difficulties of the new entrant. Here Professor Kingsfield's words in the movie *The Paper Chase* come to mind: "The study of law is something new and unfamiliar to most of you, unlike any schooling you've ever been through before. . . .You come in here with a skull full of mush but you leave thinking like a lawyer." Like the student entering law school, the learning curve may be steep for the new workplace entrant. As Jablin (2001: 756) noted, a new hire spends early days learning "what insiders consider to be 'normal' patterns of thinking and behaving." Organizational voice involves learning what insiders consider to be normal patterns of interacting, both oral and written.

We know that new entrants come with frameworks based on prior experiences in family businesses, jobs, clubs, or other organizations and, one hopes, from formal training (Van Maanen, 1984; Bowes & Goodnow, 1996). Some may have taken business communication, composition, public speaking, and business English courses covering basic generic forms relevant to organizations and professionalism generally (e.g. the difference between a proposal and a report; the use of power

point slides). We also know that organizational learning occurs via interactions with coworkers and, further, that it is accelerated by explicit discussions about communication practices, as the "writing to learn" research has shown (Couture & Rymer, 1991; Haas & Witte, 2001; Katz, 1998a; Paradis, et al., 1985; Winsor, 1999; Jablin, 2001).

Yet evidence also suggests that the value of "talk about organizational talk" goes unrecognized and untapped. For example, the supervisors that Couture and Rymer (1991) observed regarded conversations about writing with subordinates as an editorial necessity rather than a mentoring opportunity. Even if such discussions were acknowledged, would organizational insiders know how to use them for mentoring? Probably not, for as Giles, Mulac, Bradac, and Johnson (1987: 41) noted, "[w]e are in dire need of specifying the acoustic, nonverbal, socio-linguistic, and discourse features that make up convergent, divergent, and other communicative strategies in different social settings." Others concur. Looking at superior-subordinate interactions specifically, Morand (2000: 235) found that "little attention is paid to how individuals display and communicate relative power."

Extending Couture and Rymer's (1991) notion of discourse interaction, consider how the process of learning organizational voice might be accelerated if new entrants were trained to observe it. Note the kind of information that may be transmitted, for example, via day-to-day interactions such as those in the Table.

Insert Table about here

Pointing out the communication expectations that are implied in such interactions may be one way to mentor new entrants. Analytical frameworks highlighting voice issues might also be developed

for recurring situations of great consequence, such as subordinate reporting. Building a framework for subordinate reporting could begin by identifying recurring concerns--such as the need to express deference to a superior and ownership of a task--and then systematically associating those concerns with textual options--e.g., deference in one organizational environment may require directness via active verb constructions, in another environment indirectness via passives. Or, directness may be appropriate for organizational genre but not in others. Exposure to available options for recurring areas of concern could increase a new entrant's observational powers and hasten assimilation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING AND RESEARCH

In the end, what are possible implications of organization voice for training and research? As a conceptual framework, the construct of organizational voice may have heuristic value. Consider its potential for unpacking the conclusion of this aspiring manager, for example:

I think you have to learn communication on the job. I'm a pretty good writer and my speaking skills aren't too bad either, so I'm going to concentrate on technical business skills while I'm in school.

This observation rings true. Indeed, it is posited here that each organization develops a unique communicative "voiceprint" that cannot be fully understood by outside observers. Undoubtedly, communicating effectively in an organization involves a lot more than simply knowing standard organizational genre (e.g., the memo, the proposal, and the management presentation) and achieving a certain level of professionalism in delivering them. Does this mean, however, that this MBA student is right to defer his communication education to the workplace? Maybe. Underlying the concept of organizational voice proposed here, however, is the conviction that such theoretical frameworks may actually hasten a new entrant's assimilation and, more than this, that "voice" itself involves explicit writing and speaking activities that may be observed and employed to a greater

extent if one has some frameworks for doing so. In management communication courses, organizational voice may complement other conceptual frameworks, such as competing values, media richness, and organizational genre theory.

As for research, organizational voice as defined here suggests the significance of studying the explicit factors of communication and the impact those factors may have, not only for understanding the unique character of the group, but also to enable fuller group participation. Studies might extend those of Morand (2000), Couture and Rymer (1991), Katz (1998a & b), and especially Swales (1998). Some research attention might also be shifted away from voice as alienation or barriers to entry, to focus rather on voice as the unique textual operations group-to-group that may enable assimilation, participation, collaboration, and even contributions to organizational change. Comparing how communicative voices differ within organizational groups and organization-to-organization could also reveal fundamentals that transcend contexts, fundamentals of professional voice as noted earlier. Knowing something about standard professional communication practices across organizations, international and domestic, may serve as a basis for identifying unique practices or the voiceprint of a particular group.

For composition and discourse scholars who have studied organizational texts for some time, the challenge of organizational voice may involve integrated studies examining the nature and inter-relationships of all levels of communicative activities ranging from linguistic forms to distribution systems, from rhetorical strategies associated with various genre to genre clusters for recurring organizational situations, such as subordinate reporting or performance appraisals. To date, composition research, discourse analyses, and even ethnographic studies to some extent, have focused on features of genre or the linguistic and rhetorical preferences of groups. Meanwhile we know that frameworks and tools, like organizational genre theory, can motivate and underpin studies

of the multiple integrated communicative activities as they relate to organizational operations and participation. Organizational voice is humbly proposed as having potential as a frame for such messy layered studies of communication in organizations.

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TABLE 1
Learning Organizational Voice through Daily Discourse

#	Sample	Lessons in Organizational Voice	Explicit Communication Factors Addressed
1	Seasoned Peer: “You can probably wait before you send that email. Give it a bit more thought. The boss won’t even look at it till after quarter earnings are reported. And, this is the kind of thing you don’t want to take too lightly.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications with the boss should be relayed according to the demands on his/her time. • Quarterly earnings consume the boss’s attention at this time of year. • Responses like this are significant and demand more reflection and revision. • Email communications can be significant communications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing in relationship to the calendar year and the kind of organizational activities involved. • Media use.
2	Experienced Division Manager: “All your peers got this memo too. You shouldn’t take it too seriously. Address it, yes, but don’t spend too much time on it.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are not the only one who receives this kind of request. • The topic of this memo is important, but not critical. • You should spend more time on other communications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution of information including the routing list and who received this kind of request. • Timing involving personal priorities for responding to this kind of request relative to others. • Timing involving the amount of time that should be spent communicating a response relative to other communications that may be expected.
3	Supervisor: “I know it makes sense to start with this information, but it doesn’t follow our format and, frankly, if I were receiving this I’d be confused. I’d expect to find this here, not at the beginning. See, right here, below this box.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There’s a specific format for this. • It’s important to follow the format, not the logic learned in school. • The way I learned to report this does not apply here. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generic form for recording/reporting this information. • Organization of content.
4	Boss in weekly meeting: “There’s a time to talk about the problems you’re having with XYZ, and this is it. And, by the way, when you do I want you to Frankly, XYZ is less critical than ABC.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particular problems are discussed in this meeting. • There is a way for discussing problems like this. • Problems like ABC are more important to the boss than problems such as XYZ. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content appropriate for weekly meeting. • Form in which the boss likes to discuss problems. • Relative importance of information.

TABLE 1 (con't.)

#	Sample	Lessons in Organizational Voice	Explicit Communication Factors Addressed
5	<p>New Hire: “Who should get this information?”</p> <p>Supervisor: “Well for sure everybody in our group, but probably nobody else, except, of course, Rajiv and Sandy as they’re personally involved and may want to comment. It’s not confidential, but then again, we still want to keep it ‘in the family’ cause we’re still working out the details you know.”</p> <p>New Hire: “Should we ask any of these guys for feedback?”</p> <p>Supervisor: “Yep, come to think of it, that’d be a good idea. Get their input. Yep, do it and keep me posted.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all information, not even non-confidential information should be communicated outside this group. • Some communications are discussed and refined inside the group before outside distribution is allowed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution and timing. • Intragroup communication versus intergroup communication of information.
6	<p>Boss to subordinate: “I’m going to do some private reading—back in 10.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The boss takes a power nap occasionally and does not want to be disturbed during that time. • It’s good to indicate when you’ll be back, even if you step away from your desk for 10 minutes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing. • Meaning is not in words.

FIGURE 1

Tensions in Organizational Voice

