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360-Degree Rhetorical Analysis of Job Hunting: A Four-Part, Multimodal Project

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Abstract

This article proposes the use of a four-component multimodal employment project that offers students a 360-degree understanding of the rhetorical situations surrounding job searches. More specifically, we argue for the use of the four deliverables of written resumes and cover letters, mock oral onsite interview, video resume analysis, and peer critique of social media profiles in a widely taught employment project to help students better analyze the complicated rhetorical situations surrounding job applications and to facilitate better peer collaboration and serious revision of the two high-stakes documents of cover letters and resumes.

Keywords

classroom practices, cover letters, resumes, rhetoric, best practices, business communication instruction, business writing

It is common for undergraduate business communication courses to include an employment project that aims to help students produce documents such as resumes and cover letters. As high-stakes genres, resumes and cover letters serve as applicants' first encounters with potential employers and help create first impressions for applicants (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001). However, students may not fully understand the purposes and rhetorical features of those genres because of time

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restraints and their lack of knowledge regarding real-world job searches. To make things worse, many students are reluctant to seriously revise their employment documents after producing their first drafts.

Inexperienced writers tend to work at the lexical level and make surface changes after finishing their drafts (Faigley & Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1980). They may be more receptive to changes in vocabulary and document design, which can help give their documents a professional look. However, many students have difficulty understanding the rhetorical nature of self-presentation in employment documents and thus refuse to make major revisions to strengthen the rhetorical appeals carried by such documents.

Recent composition scholarship agrees that writing authentic documents for real audiences can help enhance students' commitment to and engagement with their written products (Kixmiller, 2004). However, little has been written about possible approaches to help students better understand employment projects and engage in serious revision of these high-stakes documents. This article offers suggestions and possible strategies to help students better understand the rhetorical situations surrounding the use of those genres and to better engage them in serious revision. We propose a four-component multimodal employment project that offers students a 360-degree understanding of the rhetorical situations surrounding job searches. More specifically, it focuses not only on the content of the application materials but also the delivery of such materials both in print and in person. Doing so helps students gain a full understanding of the rhetorical situations surrounding such experiences as well as possible strategies to survive and succeed in such processes. For three semesters, we experimented with this approach in four different undergraduate professional communication classes (with an average size of 20 students per class), revised and improved different pedagogical components, and observed a significant increase in serious revision in students' job application packages. The following section starts with an analysis of the rhetorical situation surrounding the creation of job application materials, or what we call employment projects, then introduces the four components of the 360-degree rhetorical analysis of job hunting, and concludes with suggestions about possible ways to incorporate the assignment into business and technical writing classrooms.

What Is the Rhetorical Situation of Employment Projects?

Bitzer (1968) defined rhetorical situations as

a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (p. 6)

A rhetorical situation has three components: audience, constraints, and exigences. An exigence is “an imperfection marked by urgency” and “something waiting to be done” (p. 6). Constraints are “made up of persons, events, objects, and relations . . . [that] have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (p. 7).

It may help students better understand the genres of employment projects if we apply the heuristic tool of rhetorical situation to analyze the audiences, constraints, and exigences they face. To start with, students need a job to support them in a highly competitive job market. So the exigence they face is the fact they have yet to find a job through the use of resumes and cover letters to sell themselves to potential employers. They face numerous constraints: limited job opportunities, large pools of competitive candidates, and their lack of understanding about job searches, job screening processes, their potential audiences, and the genres of resumes and cover letters.

How the Multimodal Employment Project Works: Four Components

This proposed multimodal job application project consists of four components: written resumes and cover letters, mock oral onsite interview, video resume analysis, and peer critique of social media profiles. Each component aims to help students understand the complicated rhetorical constraints and strategies surrounding job hunting processes from a different perspective, which in turn prepares them to more effectively cope with the stressful job hunting processes.

Production and Revision of Resumes and Cover Letters

The written component focuses on the production of resumes and cover letters tailored for individual jobs. Students are required to identify a real job that they are interested in applying for, to analyze the requirements of the position and their qualifications for it, to come up with strategies to market themselves, and to invent ways to emphasize their qualifications in their application packages. We highlight rhetorical constraints such as the very limited attention their resumes usually receive from employers (20-30 seconds), the limited print space offered by the genres (usually one singled-spaced page), and the difficulty to attract attention when competing with hundreds of candidates with similar backgrounds and qualifications. For the cover letter, students are asked to select the most impressive skills and experiences they have during their academic and professional life and to put those experiences into a coherent story about who they are as unique and competitive candidates. We also stress the strategic use of action verbs to add more punch to their resumes and to portray them as candidates with the ability to get things accomplished. We use Purdue OWL’s list of action verbs for this exercise (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/543/02/>).

To sum up, the outcomes of this component include

- Conducting job advertisement analysis (see Appendix A)
- Mapping their qualifications and job requirements
- Coming up with their own list of appropriate action verbs
- Ranking of experiences and skills in order of importance to the job
- Working on their resumes and cover letters

After students submit their first draft of the documents, we employ peer reviews, in-class workshops, and instructors' comments to provide students with feedback. Meanwhile, we devote several class sessions to the following three activities to help students invent ways to improve their employment documents. Students usually have a couple of weeks for revision before the final draft is due.

Mock Oral Onsite Interview

After coming up with first drafts, students are often reluctant to critically engage with their products and to revise to make their messages more rhetorically effective. Many of them bring copies of resumes previously produced in other classes or workshops and slightly change their design such as typefaces, margins, or grouping. Their cover letters repeat what is said in their resumes instead of adding more to their packages. We found many students were unwilling or unable to make major revisions in their organization or selection of materials to be highlighted in each genre. However, once we implemented the exercise of mock oral interviews, students became acutely aware of the rhetorical strategies that might strengthen their resumes and cover letters by observing the successes and failures of their peers' performance. As a result, we saw more major revisions in their final products.

We employ two deliverables in this component: 30-second self-introduction and mock oral interview. We also included only one deliverable for one session to provide students with enough time to reflect on their own and their peers' performances and to think about ways to incorporate lessons learned in each session to strengthen their application packages. Students are required to dress formally for both assignments.

The 30-second self-introduction exercise helps students to both understand the importance of self-presentation in creating positive impressions and to come up with creative ways to leave a unique and lasting impression through the effective use of details (see Appendix B). We emphasize before the exercise that resumes and cover letters usually receive only 15 to 20 seconds of attention from recruiters, so the aim of the exercise is to help students identify things they want to highlight in those documents as well as possible ways to do this so that they may stand out in the screening process. Students take turns presenting in front of the class, and the rest of the class functions as the interview committee to evaluate his/her performance, to note down three things they remember about the presenter, and to offer suggestions for improvement. Some of the strategies they soon discover are the use of personal narratives and

stories to highlight their qualifications and skills, the use of action verbs to put themselves in action, and the need to arrange their skills and experiences in order of relevance and importance before deciding which ones to focus on. Watching their peers introducing themselves, students quickly learn to follow good examples, to adopt effective strategies, and to highlight important experiences and qualifications through the use of concrete examples. In fact, this exercise has been one of the most important moments that pushes students to see the best way to present themselves rhetorically in their job interviews, which often results in major revisions in cover letters. We observed more effective use of narratives about qualifications and skills in cover letters, which was often difficult to accomplish in resumes.

For the mock interview, we compile a list of challenging interview questions, print them out, and cut the paper into small pieces with one question on each piece. We bring those pieces to class in a small pencil box. Students are required to sit in a circle and to take turns drawing one piece out of the box before answering the question. After one student answers one question, we pause and have the entire class brainstorm on other possible approaches and offer evaluation and suggestions for improvement. Doing so allows the entire class to see the wide range of questions that they should expect in interviews and to collaboratively navigate through possible pitfalls they may encounter. It also exposes them to illegitimate questions from search committees and helps them explore possible ways to circumvent traps and pitfalls by responding rhetorically yet professionally to such questions.

Both approaches work extremely well because they offer the opportunity for students to collaborate with peers and negotiate possible approaches to cope with challenges in job searches. They dress formally, share coping strategies, and reflect together on lessons learned as a community. The instructor may video- or audio-record the exercises for students' future use/analysis.

Analysis of Online Video Resumes

With the rise of video resumes, the multimodal nature of the genre offers instructors the perfect material to analyze not only the use of narratives and rhetorical self-presentation but also pitfalls in delivery in terms of gestures, voices, posture, eye contacts, and clothing. It also calls attention to the types of information students should and can reveal about themselves and the rhetorical effectiveness of different approaches to self-introduction. Seeing other people performing with various degrees of success, students temporarily forget the psychological stress associated with job searches and actively engage in analysis and critique of different approaches to self-introduction as employed by video resumes.

We ask students to work in groups and find both good and bad video resumes published on YouTube (see Appendix C). Students work in groups to identify resumes for analysis, often using numbers of views and likes, as well as the content of comments, as important indicators of the quality of the video resume. Then we ask each group to play their video resumes using the overhead projector, to describe for the class the

messages delivered by the video resume, and to evaluate the effectiveness of both the rhetorical message and the delivery. Depending on the video resumes picked by students, we may focus on content-related problems such as empty claims of skills without support or evidence, the lack of logical organization, inappropriate details, or too much personal information. Then we move on to problematic delivery such as the lack of eye contact or pacing, monotonous tones, mumbling, and fidgeting.

After the analysis of sample video resumes, we ask students to summarize as a class the type of problems they see in those video resumes, to pause and reflect on their own resumes and cover letters, and to come up with a list of changes they want to make to improve their employment package.

Peer Critique of Social Media Profile Pages of Facebook/LinkedIn

Social media refers to “a group of Internet-based applications” that allow the continuous creation and modification of content and applications “by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Some commonly used social media tools include blogs, microblogs provided by Twitter, wikis, Internet forums for nonsynchronous discussion groups, chat rooms for synchronous discussions, listservs, SMS or text messages, social bookmarking, podcasts, video sharing tools such as YouTube, and social networking tools such as Myspace, Facebook, and LinkedIn (Topper, 2009). Our assignment focuses on the use of social networking tools for personal and professional purposes and examines Facebook and/or LinkedIn profiles created by students.

Starting with having students conduct vanity searches via Google, we help students evaluate their online presences as potential job candidates. Some guiding questions we raise include the following: Who can find you online and where can they find you? What first impression do you create online? How do you use visual and verbal components to build your online presence? How professional and appropriate are such visual and verbal representations? What can you do to boost your online professional presence?

One thing students take for granted is the privacy of their Facebook accounts. They tend to think that they do not have to worry about issues of appropriateness and professionalism since they build their pages for peer interaction. Through Google searches they begin to realize the need to either adjust their privacy and access settings or to change the way they portray themselves in Facebook to avoid jeopardizing their job searches. Although no consensus has been reached about the best way to use Facebook for both personal and professional purposes, we mention the possibility of creating two accounts for different audiences and using different privacy and access settings to monitor the audiences for each account.

Then we ask the class to move on to analyze their peers' LinkedIn profiles. One effective way to start this exercise is to ask students to compare the interfaces of both websites and the types of information they invite users to provide. Such a comparison leads to some good discussions about the different expectations professional social

networking tools and informal social networking tools may have for their users and the impacts such different interfaces have on how people rhetorically construct their profiles online.

How Did the Multimodal Exercise Work in Our Classrooms?

Our experiences with the four-part multimodal employment project show that such approaches make students more motivated and more involved in the composing and revision processes. Students show more commitment to the project, collaborate more closely with peers in peer reviews and discussions, and learn constantly from one another. Their final products tend to be more polished and more rhetorically effective, and they have a clear sense of ownership of and pride in the final documents.

For instructors interested in adopting our approaches, we can imagine using parts or all of the four components depending on their schedules and goals (see Appendix D). We strongly encourage the use of the 30-second self-introduction for all instructors, because that exercise pushes students to see the constraints they face in job hunting processes and possible strategies to make full use of the highly limited time to stand out as a strong candidate. This thinking process can quickly become the driving force of major revisions to their employment documents. We also strongly recommend the constant use of group work throughout the project to cultivate rhetorical skills, community learning, peer collaboration, critical thinking, and reflection. Helping students to see the need for revision and the costs of poorly written documents seems to work much better than relying on the instructor as the sole preachers of revision.

Appendix A

Job Advertisement Analysis

1. What qualifications and skills is your prospective employer seeking? Please rank them in order of importance.
2. What exceptional qualifications and skills do you have that can make you an invaluable addition to your prospective employer?
3. Please match your experiences and skills with the desired ones using the table below

Your prospective employer

You

4. Does your potential employer have a website? What is the URL?
 5. Does your potential employer have a mission statement? Can you take some keywords from their mission statement and incorporate them in your own employment documents?
-

Appendix B

Thirty-Second Self-Introduction in Job Interview

The first question you encounter in your job interview is most likely: “Tell us about yourself.” Usually you have up to 1 minute to answer this question. Interestingly, the average time your resume will get from potential employers is 15 to 20 seconds. In other words, your audience will be scanning up to three resumes per minute.

In this exercise, you are required to spend 30 seconds to introduce yourself to your prospective employer. You have just entered the meeting rooms, with three interviewers sitting across the table. Each has a copy of your resume in front of them. So these first 30 seconds of your interview are the time that you can use to leave a good first impression, to convey unique messages about who you are, and to make you stand out among dozens of interviewees scheduled for the day.

To prepare for this question, think about important things you want to highlight in your speech. Briefly introduce your academic background and move on quickly to discuss your skills and previous experiences that are related to the job requirement. Use action verbs and representative examples to tell unique stories.

Tips for the Instructor

The instructor should bring a timer that will beep when students reach the time limit. If possible, the instructor can video record students’ introduction speech for their own analysis and improvement in future.

Appendix C

Video Resume Analysis

Work in groups of four and find two online video resumes, a good one and a poor one. You should examine the rhetorical effectiveness of the video resumes and the way they meet or fail to meet prospective employers’ expectations. Then you will present your findings to the class and provide some general guidelines for making effective video resumes for job searches.

You can focus on the following components in your initial analysis of video resumes:

1. Is the content appropriate for job searches?
2. Is the author’s claim of skills supported with good evidence?

3. Does the author incorporate related materials from his or her resume? His recommenders?
4. Is the video resume organized logically, with professionally appropriate details?
5. How effective is the delivery? Things to consider include eye contact, gestures, posture, and the use of tone, rhythm, and pauses.

When you finish your analysis as a class, revisit your draft of the cover letter and resume. Do you see any connection between our discussion about video resumes and possible ways to improve your application package? What about your 30-second self-introduction?

Appendix D

Sample Schedule for the Four-Part Multimodal Project

Three-Week Schedule

Week 1

First session: Job ad analysis and discussion of resumes

Second session: One-minute self-introduction and discussion of cover letters; introduce video resume assignment

Week 2

First session: Video resume and discussion of revision plans for both documents

Second session: Peer review of resumes and cover letters

Week 3

First session: Peer critique of social media profile pages, with focuses on LinkedIn, resume, and professional online presence

Second session: Employment project due

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Bios

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