Social Justice and Corporate Mission Statements

Analyzing Values in Business Writing

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Abstract

This article describes and reflects on a collaborative, in-class activity that asks students in a business writing course to analyze the intersection of language, values, and social justice through a rhetorical analysis of corporate mission statements. The activity looks at how mission statements, as a genre, work to construct an ethos of civic engagement targeting a specific audience. Students reflect on values embedded in mission statements and compare these values with corporate action. Students then work in groups to create their own mission statements that direct their research and teamwork for their other, collaborative course projects. I offer this activity focused on mission statements as a concrete way to discuss social justice, values, and civic engagement in a business writing course; specifically, students explore how language impacts social justice and structural (in)equality.

Teaching ethical communication is a decades-old concern of business curriculum (e.g., Edwards, 2018, McDonald and Donleavy, 1995, Rentz and Debs, 1987, and Speck, 1990). However, integrating discussions of ethics and social justice in a meaningful way is challenging, and the best approach is a matter for debate (McDonald & Donleavy, 1995; Shelton, 2020; Speck, 1990). This challenge is heightened within a field whose communication practices are traditionally framed as oppositional to (or removed from) ethics (Speck, 1990). In my own experience, students often view ethics in narrow terms of direct deception. For example, students easily understand ethics surrounding misinformation, as shown in Huff's (2004) "How to Lie with Statistics," or access, as in Siegel's (2004) "The Plain English Revolution." This narrow understanding of ethics restricts teaching ethical communication to specific genres, like leases or term agreements. This view of ethics hinges on clarity and honesty being relegated to specific genres.

But where do conversations about ethical communication intersect more broadly with the role that all communication plays in shaping values? How do we move beyond "not deceptive" towards framing ethical communication in terms of positive action and social justice? The activity I describe here—analyzing corporate mission statements—is one attempt to make social justice, ethics, and values more immediately tangible for business writing students. I use rhetorical analysis of mission statements to frame all business writing as inherently engaged in matters of social justice.

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Course Context and Activity Overview

Analyzing Corporate Mission Statements

In this ungraded, in-class activity in an advanced business writing course, I ask students to collaboratively analyze corporate mission statements and then create their own mission statement that informs group projects throughout the semester. I limit the activity to corporations, as opposed to nonprofits, because students often describe nonprofits as more obviously interested in social justice and corporations as more "removed" from social justice. As such, we focus on

corporations to frame seemingly "apolitical" organizations as implicated and engaged in social justice.

Students work in groups of five and maintain these groups all semester. This activity falls during the second week of the semester so that 1) students have already been introduced to the concept of rhetorical analysis and 2) students' introduction to group work emphasizes language as value-laden. After assigning groups, I lead the class through a collective mission statement analysis. Students suggest corporations (such as Nike), and, from their websites, we note how easy it is to find the mission statement, its location, content, and the use of colors, font, and images. I review the components of the rhetorical situation and the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos; during this discussion students use such terminology introduced over previous class periods.

Next, we discuss mission statements as a genre. I ask students what they think mission statements *do*: who is their intended audience? What is their purpose? Then, we begin a conversation about values and social justice. We consider whether and how these organizations are concerned with social justice. We discuss the terms ethics, values, and social justice and use shared readings[1] to help define and situate these terms. I then ask students to discuss with their groups the following questions: what values do you see reflected in these mission statements? How are these values consistent with organizational practices? How are mission statements engaged in (or disengaged from) social justice? After this discussion, students work with their groups to complete the activity described below, which carries over into the next class period.

General Course Description and Demographics

I developed this activity for an advanced business writing course offered each semester at the University of Minnesota (U of M). I write from my own experience teaching this course at the University of Minnesota, located in Minneapolis, which has historically and recently been a center for both social justice activism and for racial inequities, large opportunity gaps, and violence. Social justice, as a term and a tangible concept, has been more immediately accessible for my students and has yielded more fruitful and passionate discussions than our conversations about ethics (in particular, business ethics). The university is a central part of this city's history and current reality; students at this and other Twin Cities universities are often actively engaged in protests and politics, and student groups have pushed to keep the university accountable. For example, U of M students were instrumental in pushing for university building name changes and the university president's recent decision to cut ties with the Minneapolis Police Department in response to the murder of George Floyd.

Not all students are engaged in *social justice*, and some are resistant to these conversations, but most are familiar with the term and can bring some of their own experiences to our conversations. My use of *social justice*, in this course and for this activity, exists in this context, and is accompanied by assigned readings such as "The Social Justice Turn" (Haas & Eble, 2018b). Our department offers three to four sections each semester, either online or onsite, which cap at 24 students and fill quickly. For some students, it is the only upper division writing course that they are required to take, and it fulfills a Writing Intensive requirement that all majors must complete. Because of how quickly the course fills, the class is typically composed of juniors and seniors.

As I mentioned above, I emphasize a rhetorical approach to business communication and work with students to challenge notions of business communication as "objective" or "neutral." I move through genres that students agree (based on informal class brainstorming and discussion) are more "engaged in" and "removed from" values, politics, ethics, or pathos, and then examine language usage. Our discussions highlight how even more objective genres rely on ethos, pathos,

and values in order to persuade. One example that has recently resonated with students involves Nike's use of social justice in its sponsorship and branding. Students are already familiar with the brand and controversy,[2] so we analyze their mission statement, focusing specifically on how Nike uses language to highlight corporate and community values. We then search other pages on their website to see where such language is repeated or how Nike uses language, more generally, to echo values. I ask students to reflect on how various genres are more explicit or implicit in their engagement in social justice, and we trouble the familiar notion of "objective" and "subjective" in various genres. We continue to discuss, as we work through each genre and assignment throughout the semester, how business writing is particularly important when we consider how language shapes values and how individuals and organizations engage in social justice.

This early activity, with its direct focus on social justice and collaboration, is important to understand within the context of other, major course assignments. These include discussion presentations, a problem-solving/complaint email, a corporate website revision memo, and a formal business proposal and presentation. Three of these assignments are collaborative, and students practice specific genres and work in teams. This first activity combines rhetorical analysis with working in teams while asking students to actively reflect on their team approach. This reflection affects how students approach each collaborative assignment. Further, this activity emphasizes language as the construction of values. So, students are at once analyzing how corporations do this work of articulating and operationalizing values, and also reflecting on how their own values will show up in their writing over the rest of the semester.

Activity Origins and Development

I first developed this activity several years ago after reading Speck (1990), who describes an activity in which he asks business students to create codes of ethics after reading various sample professional codes of ethics. His activity is grounded in the assumption that students do not see a clear connection between business writing and ethics and that focusing on a specific "real life" genre makes business ethics more tangible. While teaching this class in 2015, I used Speck's activity and had students research and then develop codes of ethics that would inform their group projects. I later developed my own activity with three major changes: a genre shift to mission statements; a change of focus from ethics to social justice; and, finally, an added focus on values and rhetorical analysis that frames all business communication as value-laden.

I find that mission statements work better than codes of ethics because they are a more familiar and public-facing genre. Further, mission statements allow for an easy discussion of multimodality and visual rhetoric because they live on corporate websites and use images, font, color, and sound alongside text. Finally, as many corporations have explicitly worked to incorporate social justice into their identities, this short, accessible genre provides a good starting point for discussing language and value construction in texts that are less obviously engaged in social justice and ethics (what students often describe as objective or neutral genres).

Students discuss how corporations create implicit and explicit ethical contracts with consumers and investigate whether corporations abide by these implicit contracts. Mission statements construct corporate identity; students consider whether this identity aligns with action. Shelton (2020) describes social justice as a means "to disrupt a pattern that values the myths of neutrality, objectivity, and the apolitical impact of technical and professional communication" (p. 2), which I ask students to consider during this activity. Mission statements are gateways to these types of important conversations that examine not only how corporations act in the world but how the texts they produce impact various stakeholders as well as corporate culture

and values at large.

This activity frames mission statements as an example of an informal contract between a corporation and its stakeholders: mission statements make promises and build trust with the reader. We use this genre to then discuss how corporations create contracts in all of their written communication, how linguistic contracts build relationships, and how language creates values. This activity developed out of a need to frame business writing as value-laden; while my students are often interested in ethics and social justice, they also tend to compartmentalize texts as political/apolitical, or as biased/objective. Speck (1990) insists that "language is inevitably laden with values, and the expression of those values helps shape behavioral expectations and actual behaviors" (p. 21). This activity asks students to unearth values expressed in organizational mission statements by framing language as "inevitably laden with values"; after practicing rhetorical analysis and discussion of value-laden language with mission statements, it becomes easier to map that conversation onto other kinds of business writing.

In addition to shifting from codes of ethics to mission statements, I shifted this activity's focus from ethics to social justice both in response to such articles as "Shifting Out of Neutral" (Shelton, 2020) and "The Social Justice Turn" (Haas & Eble, 2018b) and in response to my students' expressed interest in social justice. Shelton (2020) describes the difference between representation and inclusion, asking "what it means to really *include* difference—as opposed to simply representing difference numerically or visually" (p. 1). During this activity, I ask students to consider the distinction between representation and inclusion, as mission statements (representation) are weighed against corporate action (inclusion). Further, while Shelton argues that experience is firmly rooted in identity, and inclusion must consider distinct and marginalized identities, this activity examines corporate identities and, indirectly, audience identities through a discussion of values and civic engagement. Students consider who is included and who is left out, and what impacts such corporate values might have on various groups.

I have found that my conversations with students about ethics quickly become abstract: students are familiar with the concept of ethical dilemmas and hypothetical considerations. Or, students often frame ethics as highly personal and subjective. Students associate, overall, ethics with worldviews, and articulate that folks possess a variety of worldviews. (Similarly, students tend to tie ethics to religion or morality.). Finally, student conversations about ethics focus on deficit: students know that it is not okay to behave unethically, but struggle to name what it means to behave ethically.

Unlike the deficit model of ethics, my students tend to frame social justice as active: they describe social justice as something a company *does*. Shifting from conversations about ethics to conversations about social justice has helped me to shift from a deficit framework to a positive one: instead of "how can we avoid unethical language?" the question becomes "how can we use language to engage in social justice?"

While I continue to grapple with the relationship and difference between teaching "ethics" and teaching "social justice" in a business communication course, this activity has helped me to shape the rest of the semester's conversations around that important question: "how can we use language to engage in social justice?" This shift in framing language, and particularly business communication, with that question is representative of an important shift in how students recognize even apparently neutral language as always either perpetuating or dismantling social structures and community values. Students can then better examine and make choices about how they make meaning in the world and how they also either perpetuate or work towards dismantling values and assumptions that are in conflict with their own values. This activity alone does not do this work, but I consider it a piece of this continuous work we do with our students. Frequent reflective conversations with students and gestures back to this activity and

assigned readings build on this foundation throughout the semester.

Student Feedback and Response

Each semester I revise many activities; however, because students have enjoyed this activity, it has carried over from previous semesters. I have added course readings (such as the Speck, Haas and Eble, and Shelton pieces cited above) and developed the in-class framing discussion. I have also revised the activity to emphasize course-long collaboration and adjusted its timing: I initially conducted this activity later in the semester, during our course unit on ethics. I find that it works better earlier in the semester, as a way to introduce group work and key course concepts.

Informally, I observe that creating these collaborative mission statements help to set the tone for group work and, generally, help future collaboration run more smoothly. When students work together to explicitly name values—such as clear and timely communication or equal division of responsibility—there is less likelihood of a group member failing to pull their weight or failing to communicate. Further, if a problem does arise regarding the group dynamic, students have a specific document to turn to that can then provide a foundation for how to handle various roadblocks. Overall, creating these mission statements help students to feel invested not only in an individual group project, but invested in and accountable to their group.

In the future, I will incorporate additional recent literature. While keeping the core components of the activity intact, new publications shape how I frame class conversations about social justice, ethics, and business communication.

Future Application Across Contexts

This activity could be useful not only for business and professional writing courses, but in any course that engages group identity, language, and ethics. As I have adapted this activity from one that asks students to read and write codes of ethics, I imagine that this activity could be adapted to fit the content of various courses. Mission statements work well as a genre for analysis in business communication, but one could reframe this activity to analyze a variety of genres, across fields, that articulate group values, identity, and social justice. I encourage instructors to ask their students to specifically consider how language is always engaged in constructing, shaping, or perpetuating values, and how these values are (or are not) taken up and promoted.

In my experience of teaching writing to undergraduates across a wide range of majors, students often categorize writing as either biased (which they agree is inappropriate in academic, scientific, or business writing) or unbiased (which is often seen as the goal for academic, scientific, or business writing). This assignment helps to challenge the simple categories of biased and unbiased and instead shifts the conversation towards shared values. This activity opens up conversations about language and group values and begins discussions about social justice. Because these are broad conversations appropriate in any course that asks students to write or research, this activity can be adjusted to specific course content and facilitate genre and discipline-specific conversations about language and values.

While this activity can be reworked to frame various common genres across fields, the mission statement is itself adaptable for a variety of courses, because this genre *does* exist in so many distinct disciplines, fields, and types of organizations. For example, a biology course might locate mission statements from biology departments or related organizations, in part to recognize how such public-facing statements construct disciplinary values and in part to discuss corporatization of various fields (depending on what discussions are appropriate for that course focus). After analyzing mission statements, students could analyze other common genres that

their field frames as "value neutral" or "objective" and consider how even these texts construct values; how they are engaged in social justice; and how they represent ethics. Adapting this activity to look at field- or discipline-specific organizations can help students apply questions about language and values to various genres. For example, students across disciplines can follow this activity by analyzing any number of commonplace texts and asking: How do these texts construct worldviews? How do they fit into our conversations about language and social justice? Based on an analysis of such texts, what does our field value?

ASSIGNMENT

Activity: Analyzing Corporate Mission Statements

Overview

Mission statements are important ways in which organizations build ethos and appeal to a specific audience. They are brief and public, often readily available and highlighted on organizational websites, and are meant to reflect the organization's values, goals, and practices. Mission statements tell us quite a bit regarding not only what an organization *believes,* but also regarding what an organization *believes about its target audience.*

The target audiences for mission statements, in this case consumers, investors, or potential employees, are often concerned with an organization's values, priorities, and commitment to social justice. Mission statements may not explicitly address civic engagement, but they state values and signal a commitment to social justice at an organizational level.

What You Need to Do

Working with your group, find a mission statement for an organization or corporation that you wish to analyze. Consider our readings and class discussions on ethics and social justice as well as our discussions of the rhetorical situation. Additionally, pay attention to how graphics and images work alongside text.

Once you have chosen an organization and located its mission statement, reflect on the following questions:

1. Based on the mission statement, what seems to be the organization's core values?
2. What are the key words or phrases deployed in the mission statement, and how do these words align with certain values?
3. How easy was it to locate the mission statement? Where is it located?
4. How are images used alongside the text, and what values do those images evoke?
5. How would you describe the ethos that this mission statement constructs?
6. Based on your analysis of the mission statement, how has this organization constructed its target audience? Who is their audience, and what does this audience care about? Who is considered and who is left out?

After analyzing the mission statements, do some basic research on the organization. You can search the rest of their website, or search for articles about their practices and ethics. After doing some cursory research (nothing in-depth, just what you can find in 10-15 minutes), reflect on the following questions:

1. Do the organization's actions seem to align with their mission statement? Why or why not? Try to be as specific as possible.

2. Does the organization seem to value civic engagement? What led you to this conclusion?
3. Are there any instances in which the organization seems to be acting in direct opposition to the ethos its mission statement constructs?
4. Does the organization donate to any other organizations that do or do not reflect their stated values?
5. (Please note that you may not be able to answer each of these questions: it is still useful to discuss these questions even if the answer is "we don't know" because it was difficult to find this information.)
6. After each group has completed parts 1-3, share what you've discovered with the class. Were there any major conflicts among organizational mission statements and organizational practices? How did the mission statements you analyzed construct a target audience? What values were you able to identify?

Looking ahead: the last major assignment for this course is a collaborative business proposal. As a group, you not only have to develop this proposal, you also have to construct a clear professional "identity" or "voice" based around shared values. Now that you've had some practice analyzing mission statements, construct your own group mission statement for your imagined organization. As you draft your mission statement, consider how the values expressed in it will guide your business proposal and your research.

As a group, consider:

1. What things do you value?
2. How will your proposal AND the way that you work together as a team actively reflect those values?

Notes

[1]These readings change from semester to semester, but I often assign "The Social Justice Turn," from *Key Theoretical Frameworks* (Haas & Eble, 2018a), as noted below.

[2]While there have many several Nike controversies to examine, we discuss the bad press that Nike received in the 1990s and again around 2012 regarding sweatshops and child labor. Nike has since been accused of abusive labor practices, more generally, in its manufacturing. We discuss Nike and the brand's reputation related to labor and compare that to how Nike has "leaned in" to the controversy surrounding the corporation's open support of Black Lives Matter and their 2018 ad featuring Colin Kaepernick.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v5i1.72.

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