ACHIEVING OBJECTIVITY THROUGH
GENRED ACTIVITY: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT
Finding itself at the center of highly publicized legal and political deliberations over fairness in testing, personnel credibility, and legal liability, the training department at a North American transit authority adopted a genre system that enabled the production of objective evidence of job competence, which was then used to make objective decisions about who passed and failed various training programs. The ongoing genre-structured activity of the department involved not only the regularization of organizational texts but also the regularization of social interaction mediated by those texts, which, while producing the types of interpretively stable documents required for successful public deliberation, led to a shift in authority and social relations within the department that instigated considerable resentment and loss of morale among many veteran instructors.

INTRODUCTION
“One can scarcely overestimate the power of the concept of objectivity in contemporary affairs,” wrote Kenneth Gergen in Rethinking Objectivity [1, p. 265]. On the eve of the first Capetown talks on ending apartheid, President George Bush singled out objectivity as one of the cornerstones of global prosperity [2]. At a luncheon in New York the following year, United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar called for a renewed commitment to peace, human rights, environmental preservation, and the reduction of poverty and weapons [3]. “We need no magic,” remarked de Cuellar, only “patient efforts undertaken with objectivity and common sense and . . . compassion.” A decade later, a NATO
conference on corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended on a hopeful note as its participants agreed to promote and personally abide by seven principles of public life: selflessness, integrity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership, and objectivity [4]. But how does an organization achieve objectivity? What particular practices confer a sense of objectivity and thus a rhetorical force upon a set of statements? In this article, I respond to these questions by examining the literate practices of a training department at a North American transit authority, which I call the Metro Transit Corporation (MTC). The training department at the MTC is unique in that it has experienced a marked shift toward objective decision-making in recent years, owing to a 1995 subway accident that resulted in 3 deaths, 33 immediate injuries, and 135 subsequent injury claims. To understand that shift and the resulting implications, I draw from Charles Bazerman’s [5, 6] notion of a genre system and Anthony Pare and Graham Smart’s [7] framework for examining genred activity in well-structured organizations.

Bazerman’s notion of a genre system extends North American genre theory in the direction of workplace writing by acknowledging the interconnectedness of genres, which coordinates much of the work of an organization. Whereas the genre set [8] of a patent clerk, for example, accounts for the full collection of genres typically used by a person inhabiting that role, a genre system in which the patent clerk participates encompasses not only all of the genre sets of all of the people working collectively toward a common goal, the patent clerk included, but also the patterned relations among the genres. “A patent may not be issued unless there is an application,” writes Bazerman [5, p. 98], “An infringement complaint cannot be filed unless there is a valid patent. An affidavit about the events in a laboratory on a certain date will not be sworn unless a challenge to the patent is filed.” In short, the enactment of certain genres is linked to the enactment of other genres within the system, though the particulars of that linkage may vary from situation to situation [9-12].

Pare and Smart [7] offer a useful analytic lens for observing genres in situ by drawing attention to generic regularities across four dimensions: the texts, the composing processes involved in creating them, the reading practices used to interpret them, and the social roles required for this work. Their focus brings to the fore not only regularities across texts but also regularities across social interaction mediated by the composition and enactment of those texts, a point central to my articulation of the achievement of objectivity at the MTC. Accordingly, alongside Bazerman’s concept of a genre system, Pare and Smart’s lens serves as the primary heuristic for this article, though I chose to embed my discussion of regularities in social roles within their relevant composition and enactment sections rather than address them as a fourth category.

Ultimately, the aim of this article is twofold: First, I try to show that objectivity, as it was presented at the MTC, is best understood not as a stylistic feature of organizational texts (contra [13]) but as an overall effect of a genre system, which required not only particular textual features but also the regularization of social
interaction among dozens of people across the organization. Second, I try to elucidate some of the implications of that regularized social interaction in terms of the changes in authority and social relations it effected at the MTC.

This study took the form of an 18-month case study, during which time I was present at the MTC on a daily basis. My interviews with several MTC employees as well as my role as participant-observer were carried out in accordance with a research protocol approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the University of California, Santa Barbara (log reference numbers 02-411 and 03-401). In addition to observational notes and transcripts of recorded interviews, my textual data included: 12 competency profiles; resource books from five of the major training programs; the five lesson plans associated with those training programs, with one exception; and the seven associated written tests. In the interest of privacy, all of the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

BACKGROUND

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the MTC was considered one of the finest public transit authorities in the world. Hundreds of government and transit officials—from Tokyo, Melbourne, Caracas, London—visited the MTC in search of ways to improve their own systems. Even when ridership was at an all-time high, reaching 463,500,000 passengers in 1988, the MTC maintained its title as the safest transit system in North America, winning the American Public Transportation Association’s (APTA) Silver Plaque Award 9 out of 10 years in the 1980s and 3 out of 5 years in the early 1990s.

It was against this backdrop that a six-car subway train, traveling between 30 and 35 miles per hour, ran three red signals and collided with a stationary subway train in the summer of 1995. Of the 200 to 300 people aboard the two trains, 3 died, 33 were injured, and 135 filed subsequent injury claims against the MTC. It was the first fatal passenger accident in the 40-year history of the subway system.

Months later, a 48-day coroner’s inquest into the cause of the accident reported a series of recommendations that identified dozens of external agencies as integral to the future regulation of the MTC. The jury also recommended that the MTC submit to biannual audits by external agencies, such as APTA, as a primary measure toward ensuring the future safety of the public. Because improper training was identified as one of the primary causes of the accident, the MTC’s Operations Training Center (OTC), which was the predecessor to the training department, was particularly scrutinized.

Buried within the transportation department, the OTC housed the transportation instructors, an experienced group of mostly career employees whose accountability rarely extended beyond their immediate supervisors. For the most part, it was a local setting in which routine face-to-face interactions accomplished much of the daily work. Documents, when required, rarely needed to stand alone; they were regularly written under the assumption that the author
would have the opportunity to explain their meaning in an oral conversation with fellow instructors or supervisors. This, coupled with the high degree of credibility that many instructors enjoyed, allowed decisions about who passed and who failed a training program to rest on the judgment of the instructor, whose experiential basis included prolonged interaction with the trainee in the classroom and in the field [cf. 14-16]. Accordingly, the instructors used practices that were suitable to high-trust settings, such as observation, lore-based “rules of thumb,” and brief narrative reporting. Most of the documents generated by the OTC were deeply contextual, highly dependent on the shared expectations and norms of the local audience, and thus of little value to the external jurors and investigators who were investigating the inner workings of the organization.

As the jury of the inquest saw it, the training programs were underdocumented, unstandardized, unstructured, and based on the idiosyncratic judgment of various instructors. The high degree of credibility that the instructors enjoyed within the pre-accident OTC simply did not transfer to the audience of the inquest. Rather than seeing the instructors as experienced technical experts whose judgment was beyond reproach, the jury questioned their qualifications and recommended that they all return to school to obtain credentials in adult education. With the judgment of the instructor delegitimized as an appropriate basis for decision-making, the jury recommended that the training department hire “an accredited adult education training specialist” to ensure that all existing and newly developed training programs were based on an “improved methodology” that would “ensure proper adult training is achieved.” This effectively transferred the basis for decision-making from the experiential judgment of the instructors *in situ* to an objective paper-and-pencil testing system, which was to be developed and maintained by testing specialists. What is more, the jury requested that the Office of the Chief Coroner convene a press conference one year from the date of the inquest to “provide all concerned parties with an update on the implementation of the recommendations contained in [the] report.” Not only would the MTC have to provide an update, it would have to publicly “show that the system is safe” to the distant audiences involved.

**THE MAKING OF OBJECTIVITY**

The rhetorical challenge perceived by the training department was essentially twofold. First, they had to produce acontextual evidence of job competence (e.g., Employee 1 scored 62, whereas employee 2 scored 89) that would be interpreted reliably by a variety of different audiences. Second, they had to show that the decision to pass or fail a trainee was based exclusively on that evidence. In other words, what was needed was not so much the display of expertise in the day-to-day decisions of the department but the production of statements and decisions whose meanings were freed from the situatedness of the department and thus reliably reconstitutable by the members of distant
audiences through the exchange of written texts. This was achieved primarily through the composition and enactment of the genre system illustrated in Figure 1, which serves as the organizing principle for the remainder of this article.

Seeing genres as instances of typified language in use implies that they are socially constructed and thus identifiable only by those who use them. This point is latent within the work of Bazerman [17] and Carolyn Miller [18] and explicated by Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates [19] and Amy Devitt [8]. In the case of the MTC, identifying the genres responsible for the development of training and testing was not left to tacit knowledge gained through sufficient enculturation into workplace practices. Instead, several types of documents, including standard operating procedures (SOP), new employee orientation materials, and technical reports, identified the genres illustrated in Figure 1 as the texts essential to the development and delivery of training. They are interconnected in many ways. In Figure 1, however, I have chosen to illustrate their interconnectedness in terms

![Figure 1](image_url)

Figure 1. Genre system used to achieve objectivity.
of how they served as topoi for each other in the context of deliberation over decision-making: Indicated by the direction of the arrows, challenges to a decision to fail a student were typically met by the testing strategy, which, in conjunction with the test score itself, served as the primary inventional material for management’s defense of their decision. Challenges to the tests, whether written or practical, were typically met by deliberations that focused on either the resource book for matters related to content or the lesson plan for matters related to their proper administration. Further challenges typically led to deliberations involving the competency profile itself, the ultimate basis for most training programs, as well as to peripheral regulations, legislation, collective agreements, and other documents germane to the deliberation. In short, challenges to a decision to fail a trainee typically called into question the history of that decision’s production, and it is this trajectory that Figure 1 illustrates. Intertextual references and SOPs reinforced this relationship among the genres, as did routine discussions among superintendents. When asked how he dealt with challenges to testing decisions, to cite one example, Superintendent Brian Lewison explained:

It’s all tied back. . . . A question is tied back to the training manual [resource book]. In the newer programs, that’s tied back to the competency profile. . . . In the newer programs, it’s all defensible. In the older programs, Joe, if there was a challenge, I’d almost always have to buckle (personal communication, May 13, 2005).

Put another way, by reading the arrows in their reverse direction—from head to tail—Figure 1 illustrates the necessary chronology for their proper enactment: the proper enactment of the resource book required an underlying competency profile; the proper enactment of the written and practical tests required an underlying resource book for content and lesson plan for administration; the proper enactment of the testing strategy and the decision to pass or fail a trainee required an underlying written or practical test score—where “proper” in each case can be read in relation to achieving the patterned defense, typically marshaled in response to claims of subjective decision-making.

Owing to space limitations, this article focuses on the competency profile, resource book, lesson plan, and written test, and involves the testing strategy only briefly. I should also mention that, in the interest of space, clarifications on the meanings associated with the term “objectivity” have been included only briefly in this article rather than articulated in a separate, extended section. For extended analyses of the different types of objectivity at work in academic and professional settings, see Megill [20], Novick [21], and Porter [22, 23].

**Competency Profile**

Arguments levied against the training department were varied and many. Trainees who failed a test would sometimes challenge the training department on the grounds that the failed test questions were not related to the job in question.
Others criticized training programs for being too narrowly developed on the basis of one person’s vision of the job and thus not sufficiently informed by the variety of practices used in the field. In response to these and other situations, the training department introduced the competency profile, which was a chart that listed all of the competencies required to successfully perform a job at the MTC. It not only defined the content domain of the training program but also established the organization of the resource book.

Each profile was comprised of rows of boxes. The left-most box in each row, called a general area of competency (GAC), described the theme that unified all of the boxes in the row. Each box that extended to the right of the GAC, then, represented a single competence within that general area. In terms of style, nearly all of the competencies began with an active verb and described an observable behavior. In cases where mental activity was implicated, the active verb “understand” was typically used—as in “Understand Rules and Guidelines”—and a trainee’s performance on a written test was considered the behavioral demonstration of the competency.

The composition of a competency profile invoked a recurrent social event—a competency profile workshop—and two social roles: job incumbent and facilitator. A job incumbent was anyone who was currently performing the job that the competency profile was required to describe. For example, any employee working at the MTC as a bus operator would qualify as a job incumbent for the competency profile workshop for a new bus operator training program. The role of the facilitator was reserved for staff employees who had a working knowledge of competency-based training and testing. At the MTC, this role was usually performed by a curriculum developer or superintendent.

Throughout my study, all MTC personnel were generous with their time and resources, and several managers and superintendents were overtly encouraging of my research interests. However, owing to concerns over the privacy of job incumbents and the potentially deleterious effects of a research presence, detailed description of the innerworkings of the competency profile workshop was prohibited. In broad strokes, then, I will proceed: The goal of the workshop was the achievement of intersubjective agreement among job incumbents regarding the competencies required to perform their job—what many writers in the wake of Thomas Kuhn have come to call “disciplinary objectivity” [20]. Like Giambattista Vico before him, Kuhn recognized what William Grimaldi [24, p. 4] later described as the “large complexes of pre-existing convictions and assumptions” that enabled human activity to take on meaning. Writing about the shift in objectivity effected by Kuhn, Johannes Fabian [25, p. 83] remarked, “it made sense to speak of objectivity only relative to a given, established paradigm and its attendant practices (‘puzzle solving’). Commitment to science as a serious pursuit could be maintained without commitment to one indivisible truth.” It was this sense of objectivity, what Peter Novick [21, p. 222] called “consensual truth,” that lay the foundation for objective decision-making in this first step of the
genre system. Managers and superintendents were well aware of the variety of successful but potentially incompatible practices used in the field. Their priority was not the evaluation of each practice in search of the optimal set—an impractical prospect, to say the least—but the establishment of one reference set of successful practices that would form the basis for training and testing, one “paradigm” if you will. The aim of the workshop was to achieve consensus on that set through the composition of competency statements. Job incumbents would reflect on their job duties and verbally suggest competency statements to the group, which the facilitator would write on large notecards and attach to the wall or a whiteboard. Incumbents would deliberate over the suggested competency, sometimes directing the facilitator to remove or revise it. Throughout the workshop, many of which lasted two or three days, the facilitator would document the competency statements suggested by incumbents, manage their presentation on the wall or whiteboard, and, ultimately, direct the discussion in ways that would lead not only to equitable participation among incumbents but also to consensus regarding the wording of particular statements. The facilitator also had the responsibility of suggesting GACs that effectively grouped related competencies and of enforcing the stylistic requirement that each competency not only begin with an active verb but also describe an observable behavior. However, the rules of the workshop prohibited the facilitator from suggesting new competencies or making final decisions on the content of competencies.

In addition to negotiating intersubjective agreement, the composition of the competency profile regularized the construction of job competence in a way that made it amenable to inquiry. The rules of the workshop ensured that job competence was framed as an aggregate of discrete, observable competencies. In a word, the composition of the profile began operationalizing job competence, providing an empirical “handle” on what had previously been an extremely elusive concept. A later genre, the resource book, continued the process by further breaking down each competency into a series of tasks and facts, which were sufficiently specific to induce a high degree of consensus among instructors regarding whether a particular trainee had known and completed them correctly.

The composition of the competency profile also offered the training department an extremely efficient way of producing credible textual representations of job competence. Rather than investing in expensive, labor-intensive techniques such as job shadowing, which would have required not only the development of expertise in observation but also the burden of defending those observations to distant audiences, the training department invited the incumbents to write agreed-upon statements of competency themselves. This effectively grounded the authority of the competency profile and thus the forthcoming training program in the consensus of veteran job incumbents—the only individuals with the experiential basis to make credible statements about what was required to successfully perform the job in question. Once intersubjective agreement was achieved, the
workshop was concluded and the incumbents returned to the workforce. What remained was a stack of notecards, which made their way into final form as the boxes of a competency profile. Once signed off by management, the profile provided the training department with the textual artifact it needed to compose and enact the rest of the genres of the system, starting with the resource book. Job competence was on its way to becoming a publicly demonstrable and defensible concept.

The competency profile was primarily enacted within the context of developing the resource book, and therefore the primary social roles invoked were those of the curriculum developer and the instructor. However, what was regularized was not so much the interaction between social roles as the organization of the resource book, owing to the departmental mandate that the competency profile “form the basis for developing or structuring program content.” To adhere to this mandate, the competencies set forth in the profile were used as the chapter titles of the resource book. Accordingly, the GACs were used as the section titles of the resource book, which provided the overarching theme that unified chapters within a section.

Bazerman [17, pp. 271-275] has traced the loss of continuity in the experimental article to the 1960s, when, as a result of the methods being relegated to a less substantive position, a disconnect emerged between the statement of the problem and the results. “[T]he article tends to break into disjointed parts,” he explained, “increasingly labeled by standard headings, as reflected in the successive style sheets.” This is precisely the effect of the enactment of the competency profile on the invention of the resource book: Because there was no connection among the GACs of a competency profile, there was no connection among the sections of the resulting resource book; likewise, the frequent lack of connection among competencies resulted in the frequent lack of connection from chapter to chapter in the resource book. When each competency was further broken down into a series of tasks, these tasks became the second-level headings within the chapter, so even the elements within the body of a chapter did not always have a notable relationship other than a loose thematic one. As a result, knowledge was discretized. The resource book became a collection of textual elements, either facts or tasks, with few to no transitions between them. This lack of interrelationship between the elements of the book enabled instructors and curriculum developers to treat each chapter as a stand-alone unit of content to be composed, revised, and circulated for review independent of the other chapters. It also enabled the Superintendent–Planning and Program Development, to increase productivity by identifying instances of modularity where various chapters developed for one training program could be transplanted—or “dropped in”—to other training programs. The effect of this modularity on the reading habits of trainees would make for an interesting line of inquiry; however, it falls beyond the scope of this article.
The main effort toward regularizing the textual features of the resource book was handled through the Training Department Style Guide, which was maintained by the Superintendent–Planning and Program Development and adhered to by all curriculum developers as a way to ensure that training materials were clearly written and therefore readable by the intended audiences. The style guide evolved over time from a list of commonly misused words to a more comprehensive document that included principles of document design, organization, usability, and procedural writing. According to the guide, for example, all body text should be 12-point Bookman Old Style and all headings and titles should be Tahoma Bold; direct quotes should be set off with a left indent and placed in 12-point Garamound with the in-text citation bracketed and right-justified below the quote. Words should contain fewer than three syllables and sentences fewer than 30 words. Lists should be numbered when the sequence is important and bulleted when the sequence is immaterial. Procedures should be written in the imperative form, beginning with an opening stem and colon and followed by a numbered list of tasks that maintains parallel structure. Throughout all training materials, passive voice, dummy subjects, and third-person references to the reader should be avoided. “All of this,” remarked one superintendent, “should help the learner, and especially learners with limited reading skills, to access the content of the program” (Superintendent M. Bingham, personal communication, December 12, 2003). 

The composition of the resource book invoked two social roles: the curriculum developer and the instructor. The curriculum developer served as the technical writer and editor of the resource book and was responsible for its overall development, whereas the instructor served as the subject matter expert and was responsible for drafting accurate content. The composition process began with the instructor breaking down all of the competencies into constituent tasks, which served as the working outline for the development of the resource book. At that point, the instructor would write a rough draft of a particular chapter, consulting other instructors, technical staff, colleagues and representatives at other companies and government offices, MTC and vendor documents, and legislation as necessary. It was a process that was occasionally referred to as “downloading.” Once the rough draft of a chapter was complete, the curriculum developer would revise the text to ensure it met departmental standards. Depending on the writing skills of the instructor, this revision work could range from a simple copy edit to a complete rework of the text, drawing from the instructor’s text as a rough draft.

Forced to meet the requirements set forth in the style guide, this process of revision served the important function of casting the knowledge of the instructor in a written form that was accessible to virtually anyone in the organization. Essentially, it was a process of making public what had been the private lore of
the instructors for years, and it was not without controversy. Superintendent Martin Bingham reflected:

There was a lot of resentment on the part of those older instructors who felt that they really held this knowledge and skill and information about the operation of streetcars, about these vehicles, that they really held that in their heads and they would say [Martin], you could really not write this down. They felt that it was a sort of art or a certain lore that they held and there was actually considerable resentment, I would say, at that point to try to take what was in their head—that they had gained from a lifetime or a career of experience—and to actually put it onto paper. They felt we were in a sense taking away a certain amount of power that they had by putting this knowledge into the written form (personal communication, April 29, 2003).

In the classroom, the resource book served as the sanctioned source of knowledge, and therefore the primary social roles invoked by its enactment were those of the trainee and the instructor. The degree to which instruction was to be mediated by the resource book is well illustrated by the lesson plans. Subway Operator Initial, for example, was a 30-day training program comprised of 147 segments of instruction. Of those segments, 21 required the trainee to read or refer to specific sections of the resource book in class, oftentimes in preparation for discussion or for an instructor’s presentation of the material. In the segments that didn’t include explicit requirements, the section of the resource book that corresponded to the instruction was listed in the reference column of the lesson plan. Other programs, such as Bus Garage Operator, consistently used only the reference column to ground the sections of instruction in the corresponding sections of the resource book. Not only classroom but also practical, hands-on instruction and homework exercises were structured by the contents of the resource book. The Work Car Monitor lesson plan, for example, illustrates how even the most hands-on instruction was meant to be mediated by the text:

Snaking Vehicles
While trainees follow in their Resource Books, read and discuss C3, Snaking Work Cars. Then proceed to the snaking location. Set up the scenario and have the trainees perform the snaking procedure as described in the Resource Book. Team member #1 [which is described in the resource book] is an Instructor, and team members #2 and #3 are trainees.

The shift in authority from the instructor to the text effected by the advent of the resource book sponsored a considerable amount of resentment on the part of many instructors. Before the accident, various training programs were offered with meager written material. In some cases, instructors wrote and shared informal notes on what should be covered, but only on occasion were the notes shared with trainees. According to instructor Scott Thomas, it was a time when instructors held unchallenged authority in the classroom and maintained what some MTC
employees called an “inner sanctum” in the workplace. If trainees challenged an instructor on a particular matter, explained Thomas:

[The instructor would] just basically tell them, “That’s the way it is. I’m the instructor, I’m . . . the one that’s feeding the information to you, I’ve got the correct information, you don’t know what you’re doing, you’re the student, you’re not qualified” (Instructor S. Thomas, personal communication, December 10, 2003).

In contrast to Thomas’s pre-accident account, Paul Jacobsen placed the resource book at the center of debates or challenges to instructor authority in the present-day classroom:

If there’s a disagreement with the homework exercise or . . . in a lot of cases, some of these guys will come from the job already. For instance, . . . the service line. Somebody may have already come in from a garage, work[ed] a service line, but hasn’t actually driven a bus through the service line. So we’ll say, well, you’re supposed to take the bus through at this speed and line this up with this. [Trainee:] “Arggh. That’s not the way it’s done! I see these guys go through there a hundred miles an hour, blah blah blah.” [Instructor:] “Well, that’s what you might see, but that’s not what supposed to happen.” [Trainee:] “Well, what do you mean?” [Instructor:] “There it is in the book right there” (Instructor P. Jacobsen, personal communication, December 10, 2003; my emphasis).

Jacobsen offered another illustration of the centrality of the resource book in a typical day of instruction:

The [resource] book is usually opened up because in most cases the homework exercises are involved as well. And a lot of the assignments for homework, they get the information for those assignments out of the resource book. So we’ll refer to the resource book as well . . . if there’s any discussion around . . . different responses to some of the questions. . . . And they’d already have the book open for the homework stuff so we would just sort of continue into the day’s lesson so that really the book was already opened, and it should be easy . . . accessible for them if something comes up (Instructor P. Jacobsen, personal communication, December 10, 2003; my emphasis).

Thomas agreed with Jacobsen’s description, offering a window into the emotional toll of the shift:

Back then [before the accident], we had more authority. . . . You were the instructor, you know what you’re talking about. . . . They’d come to you, asking your opinion. . . . They’d ask you for what was right, what was wrong. . . . You know . . . we’ve been stripped of all of our authority basically. Our opinions are gone. . . . Here’s the [resource] book, here’s the homework, here’s the standard operating procedure. . . . That’s the gospel. It’s written down here in black and white. If [instructors] agree or disagree, that doesn’t matter (Instructor S. Thomas, personal communication, December 10, 2003; my emphasis).
With the instructor serving as a facilitator rather than as the source of knowledge, trainees were largely freed from the need to establish and maintain positive social relationships with instructors as a way to ensure they would receive the required information and treatment to succeed in the course. Extracurricular factors, such as culturally prescribed senses of politeness and courtesy and the appropriate display of confidence and deference, among many others, became less integral to the process of knowledge dissemination. “It was like this,” summarized one instructor:

“I’m the keeper of all the wisdom. I’ve chosen to give you eight of the ten commandments. You can’t handle the other two yet.” Now [after the advent of the resource book], you can go and just read the book. You don’t need me (personal communication, May 24, 2005).

The competency profile had operationalized job competence, but it was the resource book that democratized it, providing equitable access to the knowledge required to succeed in a job in a way that was largely insulated from the influence of instructors or superintendents. It was this genre, more than any other in the system, that led to considerable resentment and loss of morale among instructors.

Lesson Plan

After the accident, few things gained higher priority than following the rules, and the lesson plan served the function of disseminating the agreed-upon rules and policies to the dozens of instructors teaching in classrooms and practical settings across the city. In terms of regularized textual features, lesson plans were comprised of three columns labeled Time, Content, and Reference. The time column paced the instruction by listing the interval of time assigned to each section. The content column provided a wide range of substantive instructions, which were almost always written in the imperative voice with the instructor implied as the subject. This column prescribed the content to be taught and, in many cases, the pedagogical techniques to be used, including discussion and exercises and the use of white boards, PowerPoint presentations, training props, and resource books, among other things. In driving-related courses, this column oftentimes specified the particular routes to be taken and additional instructions regarding the training experience. The reference column contained citations that grounded the instruction in the corresponding section of the MTC training materials or, in some cases, in third-party documents published by government agencies or commercial vendors. This provided a clear intertextual link between the content being covered and the authorized source of information about that content.

Like that of the resource book, the composition of the lesson plan invoked two social roles: the curriculum developer and the instructor. The composition process began with the instructor writing a rough draft of one or more days of
instruction, oftentimes consulting other instructors to understand the variety of best practices used. Beyond collecting needed information, these consultations with instructors also served the important function of securing instructor “buy in,” which, by lending them a sense of ownership, would increase the likelihood that they would willingly adhere to the lesson plan once it was finished. When a rough draft of one or more days of the lesson plan was complete, the curriculum developer would revise the text and ensure it met various departmental standards and requirements. This often included adding various regularized statements of the sort discussed earlier as well as any other required revision work based on the specifics of the program and the proficiency of the instructor.

Essentially, the composition of the lesson plan enabled the training department to produce a sanctioned representation of the inner workings of the classroom and of practical instruction and then offer that representation to instructors to follow as well as to arbitrators, auditors, and other members of distant audiences who had no direct, observational access to trainees and instructors working in situ. To borrow from Dorothy Smith [26], it stood in as the documentary reality of the classroom and practical instruction—two environments that the distance audiences of the MTC would never see—thereby transforming the sanctioned activities of training into publicly inspectable events. The rationale for this genre, like many within the system, can be traced to the subway accident and the low-trust, high-stakes communicative setting that ensued. Martin Bingham explained:

[T]he case in point is, of course, the operator who was involved in the crash in ‘95 was able to say, “Well, I never learned that. Nobody ever told me that. I was never taught that.” And, of course, this all drifts into liability, but the [MTC] was really never able to say that that operator had received [the training], or at least it was very difficult for the [MTC] to demonstrate that that operator had been trained on certain content or that he was trained adequately . . . , so we [could] never establish this (personal communication, April 29, 2003; my emphasis).

Instructor Scott Thomas corroborated Bingham’s description, remarking:

We got into trouble [with “the courts”] because we didn’t really have any real formal lesson plans that structured or gave us an account of what we were doing and how we were doing it each day, cause everybody would have their own teaching style . . . to get the message across. So we never really had any lesson plans until the crash. . . . It was all out of the instructor’s head (personal communication, December 24, 2003).

By prescribing in detail the course material to be taught, the pedagogical techniques to be used, and the amount of time to be spent on each section, the enactment of the lesson plan regularized the instructor activity to such a degree that many of the situational differences that would have otherwise existed from course to course, instructor to instructor, were effectively controlled. “In the end,”
wrote one superintendent to the Manager of Training, “the lesson plans have to have absolute credibility. We can’t have instructors adding more time because they have decided personally that it is merited.” Another superintendent corroborated the regularizing function of the lesson plan, explaining:

The main reason that we have lesson plans is to make sure that each instructor is consistent in the information that they’re delivering. [My section] has 27 instructors. . . . Without lesson plans, what I have is 27 different ideas, all being input toward a trainee. You have 27 people thinking that this idea is the most important thing that they need to learn. . . . What a lesson plan does is make sure that it’s one idea—that it’s one idea—that it’s an approved idea, that it’s an acceptable idea (my emphasis).

This regularizing function provided trainees with what Martin Bingham called a “standardized, uniform experience” and what Porter [22, 23] calls “mechanical objectivity.” For Porter, mechanical objectivity involves a privileging of steadfast adherence to agreed-upon rules over the exercise of situational judgment, which offers a strong defense against the prospect of subjective bias and the more modern peril of legal liability in high-stakes workplace settings (cf. [27]), and this is precisely what the lesson plan worked toward. Because situational differences can be seen as confounding variables to inferences made from written and practical test scores, the control of these differences via the lesson plan insulated the department’s training and testing system from the claim that differences in test scores could be at least partially attributed to differences in instruction. More threatening than situational differences in instruction, however, were situational differences in the administration of tests, for the immediate environment surrounding the taking of a test was seen as deeply influential to the resulting test scores. Again, the lesson plan responded by directing all instructors to administer all written tests in accordance with another document, SOP TR-002, Administration of Written Tests, further regularizing their agency within the context of testing.

Written Test

The written test was a series of multiple-choice questions that assessed a trainee’s knowledge of a content domain. Many of the textual features required of the test items were prescribed by SOP TR-001, Development of Written Tests, which stated that each item must be multiple choice, including a stem and four response choices. The stem must be either a complete question ending with a question mark or a partial statement ending with a colon, which can be grammatically completed by each of the four response choices. Although false response choices, or “distractors,” should be “plausible and able to attract respondents who are not fully knowledgeable or skilled,” only one response choice—the key—can be correct. “Where possible,” continued the SOP, “response choices should be arranged in logical order, e.g., quantitative choices in ascending order,”
and the “sequence of key answers, A, B, C, and D, should be random.” Because “None of the above” response choices do not ensure that the trainee knows the correct answer to the question, they should not be used. Also, because “All of the above” response choices allow trainees to answer the question correctly if they know that two of the three responses are correct, they should not be used. Finally, each test item must correspond to a “single idea or task” explained in the resource book, owing to the requirement that trainees be tested only on job-related knowledge.

The composition of the written test invoked a recurrent social event—an item writing workshop—and two social roles: curriculum developer and subject matter expert. Subject matter experts were MTC employees with substantial expertise in the content domain in question. They included the instructor assigned to the training program, other training department instructors, and, in cases where instructors were unavailable, other MTC employees with the appropriate background and knowledge.

The curriculum developer served the role of facilitator in the item writing workshop, providing a brief introduction and continually overseeing the composition of the items. Oftentimes, the curriculum developer would compose a few items collaboratively with the subject matter experts as a way to model the process and confirm the correct product; other times, the curriculum developer would present test items of varying quality and critique them collaboratively with the subject matter experts as a means of informally norming everyone’s sense of what was expected of the final product. At that point, the subject matter experts were given the relevant training materials and a testing matrix, which indicated the sections of the materials that required written test items, and asked to “generate” test items independently, either in reserved cubicles, offices, or other similar environments. When the subject matter experts had “generated” a sufficient number of test items, the curriculum developer would conclude the item writing workshop, collect the composed items, and send the subject matter experts back to their respective work locations. The curriculum developer would then revise the test items to meet the required textual features prescribed by SOP TR-001, distribute the items across various tests and quizzes required by the training program, and randomize the location of each key among the distractors.

That the subject matter experts were to write items in accordance with prescribed textual features, combined with the curriculum developer’s own revision of the items based on those same textual requirements, worked toward the elimination of several confounding factors that would otherwise have threatened the integrity of the written test on the grounds of validity. By randomizing the key within the distractors, the subject matter experts and curriculum developer eliminated the likelihood that correct responses would follow a perceptible pattern, which could be spread throughout the MTC as part of the lore of test taking; by arranging the response choices in logical order, they precluded the possibility that other trends in the location of correct responses could be found; by
ensuring each test item corresponded to a single idea—a concept known as item independence at the MTC—they reduced the likelihood that the correct answer to one question would provide clues about the correct answer to another; and by writing the items in exceedingly clear language with parallel response choices that completed the stem in grammatically equivalent ways, they worked to reduce the influence of language proficiency on test scores. All of this worked toward isolating one construct—job competence—as the likely entity being measured by the test.

Owing to the lesson plan and various SOPs, differences in test scores could not be persuasively attributed to differences in instruction or other situational variables that existed “off the page”; now, owing to the regularized textual features of the written test, differences in test scores could not be persuasively attributed to differences in textual features or other confounding variables that existed “on the page.” In the wake of such alternative interpretations of test scores, differences in knowledge of the facts required to perform the job emerged as the most likely construct responsible for differences in test scores. In the larger picture, the competency profile has operationalized job competence as a set of discrete facts and tasks, the resource book has provided equitable access to those facts and tasks in a written form that virtually everyone could understand, and the lesson plan has worked to control not only the idiosyncratic judgment of the instructor but also environmental factors, such as room temperature and distracting trainee behavior. All of this worked toward creating a set of controlled test conditions such that the trainee’s literate participation through the enactment of the written test—the inscription of a series of X marks, one per question—could be convincingly seen as textual evidence of job competence. This effectively freed the test score from the idiosyncratic judgment of the instructor, thereby rendering the test score objective and thus acontextual and easily communicable to the distance audiences that demanded objective textual evidence of job competence. What is more, with the aid of the testing strategy, which published the minimum passing score for each test, the decision to pass or fail a trainee was proceduralized, replacing the contextual judgment of the instructor and superintendent with a rule-based and therefore mechanically objective decision-making process, grounded in objective evidence of job competence, whose quality was documentable, interpretively stable, and thus defensible across the wide variety of distance audiences implicated in the MTC’s post-accident communicative setting.

CONCLUSION

Finding itself at the center of highly publicized legal and political deliberations over fairness in testing, personnel credibility, and legal liability, the training department adopted a genre system that enabled the production of objective evidence of job competence, which was then used to make objective decisions about who passed and failed various training programs. The production of this
evidence and the enactment of the accompanying decision-making process, in turn, required not only regularized textual features but also regularized social interaction among dozens of people across the organization.

The competency profile laid the foundation of the training and testing system by negotiating intersubjective agreement among key stakeholders, operationalizing along the way the construct under investigation—job competence—in a way that made it amenable to inquiry. The resource book then codified and disseminated the knowledge of facts and tasks required to be deemed competent in a particular job, grounding it in the content of the competency profile. The lesson plan, in conjunction with the SOPs, regularized the context of instruction to such an extent that many of the idiosyncrasies of the instructors and of the environment were minimized, thereby creating a controlled test environment within which the trainee’s enactment of the written test—the inscription of a series of X marks—could be convincingly seen as textual evidence of job competence, produced by the trainee’s own hand. With objective evidence at hand, the testing strategy then proceduralized the decision of whether to pass or fail each trainee by explicitly prescribing and disseminating the rules by which the decision was to be made. This eschewed from the process any form of contingent judgment on the part of the instructors or superintendents, enabling them to stand by as third-party witnesses to the passing and failing of trainees and thus successfully defend their practices and decisions through written communication in various high-stakes fora. The coordination of this ongoing activity, mediated by the genre system, flattened the hierarchy of social relations within the department and more equitably structured the flow of job-related information, instigating considerable resentment and loss of morale among many veteran instructors who saw themselves as “keepers of the knowledge.”

REFERENCES


**Other Articles On Communication By This Author**


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