Professional Writers and Empathy: Exploring the Barriers to Anticipating Reader Problems

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Abstract

Research has shown that professional writers cannot accurately predict the problems readers will experience when using functional documents. In this paper, we give an overview of reasons why it can be so hard for writers to anticipate reader problems. We elaborate on the concept of empathy, and discuss a broad range of research offering explanations for the lack of empathy among writers and reviewers.

Keywords: empathy, reader feedback, curse of expertise, document design, writing skills, expert review.

Introduction

Despite the increased research attention for functional texts and document design, it has not necessarily become easier for professional writers to produce high quality documents. Although the available research has yielded useful guidance for many types of functional documents, and has started to do so for websites, it has at the same time made us more than ever aware of the heavy burden that is placed on the professional writer. In general, the responsibilities for the success of written communication seem to have shifted from the reader to the writer. Remedies for ineffective communication are no longer sought in the education of readers but in the training of writers. After all, writers are the professionals here, and they should optimally serve their audiences.

In addition, the notion of document quality has evolved over the years. Long ago, a high-quality document would be one that optimally complied with the traditional and rhetorical criteria for written communication. Later, notions of readability and plain language were introduced. It became clear that documents should facilitate the comprehension process of readers, but the ways of doing this were quite simple—e.g., the use of readability formulas to evaluate documents. The rise of document design as an academic and professional discipline has drastically complicated and expanded the

range of quality criteria that should be considered when judging document (or, for that matter, website) quality [1]. The awareness has grown that comprehensibility depends on more structural and contextual document features than the use of everyday words and simple sentences. It has also become clear that comprehensibility cannot be the only criterion for judging a document. Professional writers should consider the relevance and completeness of the information they provide, the credibility and persuasiveness of the information offered, the usability of information in the readers' daily life, and the readers' appreciation of the document. Professional writers know that the quality of their document only partially depends on the textual content; the graphic design and especially the interplay between textual and visual information are important aspects too. And finally, professional writers should consider the audience's willingness to expose themselves to the information, and the selection process of the readers. Decades of research have, more than anything, made us aware of readers' inclination not to read, and has refuted the myth of people reading texts linearly. All these criteria are important to consider, and all are, to some extent, the responsibility of the professional writer.

Given the complexity of most professional writing tasks, it seems only reasonable that many communication professionals no longer fully rely on their own (or their colleagues') views on document quality. Since the 1980s, a wide range of reader-focused evaluation methods have been developed, used and validated, which may be used to investigate the quality of a document in a sample of target readers [2-4]. All reader-focused evaluation studies we know have shown that readers had many problems in a document, which were not revealed earlier in the document design process. Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated that professional writers cannot accurately predict the problems readers will experience in documents [1,5-6].

This raises the question why it is so hard for experts to predict the problems readers will have. In our view, this is a problem with one of the core competences of communication professionals. If anything, communication

experts and professional writers should be able to optimally gear their documents to the needs, capacities and preferences of the target audience. In this paper, we will make the case for more research interest for the *empathy* of communication professionals. First, we will describe the empathy concept. After that, we will discuss various threats to empathy, which may be found scattered in the literature.

Empathy

In general terms, empathy refers to the extent to which people can understand and predict the feelings and thoughts of other people. It is often connected with related constructs as “perspective-taking,” and “role-taking.” The concept can be very broad—mainly because its multi-disciplinary roots [7]—and we think it must be narrowed down to be applicable to professional communication. For instance, sympathetic crying when others are in pain is certainly an aspect of empathy, but is not very relevant for communication experts and professional writers trying to empathize with their readers.

This relates to an important distinction made by Stueber [8]. He distinguishes between *basic empathy*, which refers to the recognition of emotions felt by other people (e.g., recognizing that someone is angry or has some behavioral intention) and *reenactive empathy*, which requires a mental reenactment or imitation of the thought processes of people to fully understand and explain them. When we talk about empathy needed by communication experts and professional writers, reenactive empathy appears to be the kind of empathy that is referred to.

Various researchers have focused on the underlying dimensions of empathy. It is generally agreed upon that empathy is a multi-dimensional construct, although the psychometric studies into the quality of empathy scales are not univocal regarding the specific dimensions which can or must be distinguished (cf. [9-11]).

In the medical literature, a distinction is made between the mental state of empathy and the expression of empathy in doctor-patient communication, suggesting that it is possible to empathize with patients without convincingly expressing it [12]. Communication skills serve as a mediating or moderating factor in the relationship between the doctor’s empathic state of mind and the patients’ experience of empathy. The distinction seems to be useful for communication experts and professional writers, too. They must have the mental state to empathize with their audience, and also possess the writing skills to express this in their documents. Note that this distinction only applies to writing or revising tasks, and not to the task of detecting and diagnosing reader problems in documents.

When looking at empathy as a mental state, it seems useful to distinguish between attitudinal and cognitive aspects of empathy: are communication experts and professional writers willing to consider the needs and preferences of their readers, and are they capable of doing so? In an educational context, Gehlbach developed a framework focusing on these two predispositions (propensity and ability), and connected them to personal and contextual characteristics, assuming that empathy will be both person- and context-dependent [13]. In practice, it may sometimes be hard to distinguish between the two aspects, though, as they will often be intertwined.

This leads to the following tentative model of factors associated with empathy (Figure 1). Empathy starts with professionals’ attitudes towards and competences of considering readers’ needs and preferences. Writers and experts must be aware that it is one of the main aspects of their craftsmanship to tailor their documents to specific audiences. They must also be aware that the standard tips and tricks in the textbooks they have read will not suffice to do this. Writers must also have the skills to empathize with a particular audience. To some extent, such skills correspond to individual talents, but some of them can be supported by training, experience, and techniques used in the design process. We assume a reciprocal relationship between the attitudinal and cognitive aspects of empathy. The third important factor is writing skills. Again we assume a reciprocal relationship with empathy. On the one hand, writing skills may be influenced by the attitudinal and cognitive aspects of empathy: a thorough understanding of the reader may reinforce writers to carefully consider and conscientiously apply the many guidelines for effective writing. On the other hand, writers’ knowledge about effective writing may also lead to knowledge about the needs and preferences of readers. Finally, we assume that the reader-friendliness of documents depends on the professionals’ writing skills as well as on the attitudinal and cognitive aspects of empathy (both moderated by writing skills).

Figure 1. Role of empathy in document design.

There is a lot of literature about empathy, but, much to our surprise, only a fraction of it stems from academic communication researchers. As early as in 1955, Speroff drew attention to the importance of empathy and “role-reversal” for face-to-face and written communication [14]. The role reversal that he describes corresponds perfectly with role of reader feedback in modern document design processes (“Role reversal is utilized when a person in receipt of a communication either transcribes or verbally reports back what the communication intent means to him”). In 1960, Gompertz reviewed the psychological literature on empathy and analyzed its relevance for mass communication [15]. He concisely summarized his findings in nine assertions, which, among other things, stress the potential importance of empathy for effective mass communication, presuppose that empathy is a skill which may be consciously developed, and assume that empathy will play a central role in the development of theory in mass communication.

Most notably in the medical sciences, empathy is often addressed as a key factor in developing patient-centered and patient-friendly health care [12]. The awareness has grown that traditional curricula do not promote empathy among medical students [16,17]. Studies focusing on the experiences of doctors who become patients show that a role reversal leads to rich and surprising insights in the effects behaviors of medical professionals may have [18,19]. It is recognized that, even though professionals are in face-to-face contact with patients all the time, they forget about the “people behind the disease” [20]. It is often assumed that problems with empathy may be associated with work pressure and divided attention (cf. depersonalization as one of the aspects of burnout), with a lack of real contacts with the patients or receivers, and, interestingly enough, with power: people with high power appear to lose their empathic skills [21]. These explanations seem to apply to the situation of communication experts and professional writers as well: there is a lot of time pressure, the professionals’ contacts with real readers from the target audience are sporadic, and there is a power-relationship between the professionals and their audience.

Stepien & Baernstein give an overview of educational strategies used to improve the empathic competences of medical students, and the results of (rather limited and problematic) evaluation studies [22]. The first strategy focuses on the self-management of students: they have to keep up with work pressure and take care of their personal wellness. Although this may be helpful, it only affects empathic skills indirectly: it does not contribute to the competences or attitudes of students. The second strategy is the communication skills course: students are trained to behave empathically towards patients. We believe that this is the most superficial way of teaching empathy: it is based on guidelines and overt behaviors, and only affects

attitudes and experiences indirectly. The last two strategies are, in our view, the most drastic and fruitful ones. The third strategy is based on narratives: reading literature, visiting theater productions, and/or writing reflective accounts of personal experiences with illness [23]. The fourth strategy is based on experiential learning: students are forced to take the position of the patient and experience their reality. They may visit chronically ill people at home, talk with them, get to know them and see how they live [24]. They may even be forced to literally go through the experiences of patients, like the nursing students who had to wear disposable undergarments both dry and wet to experience continence management issues themselves [25]. In both cases, the qualitative accounts of the students’ learning experiences show that the students were strongly affected by these confrontations.

The same kinds of strategies have been proposed by various researchers in the context of writing and software design. Even though all writers know what it is like to be a reader, they cannot seem to effectively access this knowledge when writing, reviewing or revising documents. Educational strategies in which student writers are confronted with reader feedback appear to be more effective than traditional strategies involving textbooks and guidelines [26-28]. Høegh *et al.* found similar effects when software developers observed user tests of a software package [29].

Problems with Empathy

In this section, we will explore the problems writers have to face when trying to empathize with their audiences. We have reviewed the literature and made an inventory of problems faced by communication experts and professional writers. We will discuss these problems and connect them to the concept of empathy. Three clusters of problems will be discussed: the overall lack of reader orientation, the distance between professional and readers, and contextual factors.

Overall lack of reader orientation

The first cluster of problems involves a lack of reader orientation among communication experts and professional writers. This relates to the attitudinal aspects of empathy. In an earlier study, in which we asked experts to judge the severity of reader problems, many examples of this were found [30]. We found that experts often stick to their own judgments about a document, and do not think of the intended readers. The text was seen as something anonymous, about which the experts were able to make witty and knowledgeable remarks. Readers were blamed for the problems they put forward. If experts cannot even empathize with readers when they are confronted with

their feedback, it becomes questionable whether they can ever see a text from the readers' perspective.

Distance between professionals and readers

A second cluster of problems involves the cognitive, experiential and attitudinal differences between experts and readers. Research shows that there are many such differences, which may easily threaten the professionals' empathy. It is often assumed that it is easiest for experts to empathize with people that more or less resemble them [13,31]. Problems in this cluster involve the cognitive aspects of empathy.

Differences in text or genre familiarity. A first difference between experts and readers may involve their closeness to the document. If experts have been working on a document some time, they may become blind for their own textual errors [32,33]. This has only been demonstrated for simple (spelling) errors, but may also apply to problems with formulation, organization, or content. Documents that are familiar to the experts may be harder to evaluate for reader problems than documents that are new for experts. At an intertextual level, genre conventions may be expected to work in the same way: experts who have gotten used to certain conventions, may be less likely to question them for new audience groups.

Differences in language or culture. Experts and readers may also differ in terms of language or culture. If experts and readers differ considerably in, for instance, age or subculture, it may become hard for experts to speak the readers' language or come up with the right arguments. Schriver demonstrated this when she asked adolescents to imagine what kinds of persons had written a set of health-related brochures [1]. Answers like "a Nancy Reagan wanna-be" and "a white hippie who thinks he's cool, but he's not" show how easy it is to hit the wrong note. Other studies show that experts may be blind to the problems of jargon that they have gotten used to: it appears hard to predict for experts which terms are familiar to the readers and which not [34-36].

Differences in prior knowledge or expertise. A relatively well-researched phenomenon is the influence of differences in prior knowledge or expertise. Experts usually have more prior knowledge or expertise regarding the subject matter of documents than readers. These differences may be due to general educational differences but also to the institutional context in which the experts work or their necessary preparation in the pre-design phase towards writing the document. Hayes *et al.* conducted an experiment showing that high prior knowledge hinders people in estimating the comprehension problems readers experience in a document [37]. They

called this "the knowledge effect." Hinds investigated the effects of expertise on people's sensitivity for novice user problems, and came to similar conclusions: the "curse of expertise" hindered the experts to accurately estimate the time it would take to perform tasks with a cell phone [38].

Conflicting interests. In some cases, there may also be a difference of interests between experts and the readers. Erev & Cohen, for instance, showed that readers have a preference of receiving probability information in a numerical form (e.g., percentages), whereas the providers of information prefer using verbal probability indicators like "often" or "probably" [39]. The conflicting needs to receive the information as precise and unambiguous as possible and to provide information without being over-precise lead to this "preference paradox."

Differences in perspective. Another important difference between experts and readers involves the perspective from which the information is seen. This corresponds to the difference between the plain language movement and document design. Ideally, the information provided to readers is not only popularized and freed of unnecessary jargon, but also presented from the readers' perspective. In practice, the perspective from which experts are presented with information may differ considerably from the readers' perspective. One can think of possible clashes between scientific information (necessarily containing uncertainties) and readers' needs for definite answers to their questions, or of policy or legal information and readers' needs for specific information for their individual situation. In writing processes, the change of perspective may be too big a step for experts. In reviewing processes, experts may simply follow the text as a given and forget about the requirement to change perspective.

Differences in evaluation standards. Finally, there seems to be a difference in evaluation standards between experts and readers. The term "evaluation standards" was coined by Baker, and refers to the various aspects of a document evaluators may pay attention to [40,41]. Communication experts and professional writers appear to be considerably more sensitive to presentation issues than readers, who are primarily concerned with the usefulness and the credibility of the information offered [5,6]. In the same vein, experts may rely too much on very subtle variations in the formulation. This corresponds to our experiences with revision on the basis of reader feedback: De Jong revised six public information brochures on the basis of plus-minus reader feedback, and established an increased overall effectiveness; at the same time, however, many of the word-level revisions did not have any effect on readers' appreciation [42].

Contextual factors

The last cluster of problems that we will address are contextual factors. In every document design process, there may be factors that inhibit writers or reviewers from taking the role of the readers and anticipating their needs. As a result of these factors, experts may even forget to reflect on the needs and preferences they themselves would have as a reader. These problems may all refer to the attitudinal as well as the cognitive aspects of empathy.

Functional complexity of documents. A first and strongly underestimated factor is that many documents involve a complex system of functions and target audiences [43,44]. This may even be more true for websites. When there are multiple audiences with multiple purposes, it becomes harder for experts to incorporate all reader perspectives in their evaluation. For instance, Schellens, De Jong and Witteveen found that an alimony brochure, which had to inform both the alimony receiver and the alimony provider, implicitly chose the perspective of the alimony receiver and neglected the provider's informational needs.

Risks of a superficial reviewing mode. Communication experts and professional writers are accustomed to reviewing documents for various purposes [45]. Proof-reading and editing are among the most common purposes of reviewing. In this mode, experts may tend to read a document superficially to see if it makes sense and to check the document for flaws. The task perception of expert reviewers may or may not include the actual use of the information. Research has shown that reviewers will detect more problems with the content of a document when they are actually using it [46]. For instance, the problems of a website's menu structure will only start to show when experts try to use it to find specific information. This is the rationale behind the scenario evaluation method we developed for municipal websites, which actually seems to facilitate experts to focus stronger on the readers' needs than they would do in an unguided evaluation [47,48].

Incompatibility of writing and reading perspectives. An interesting but still under-researched problem is that writers (or, for that matter, reviewers) may not even have access to the needs and preferences they would have as readers. Wright *et al.* showed this phenomenon in a series of experiments, where receivers of route directions preferred to get a map and information providers stuck to verbal descriptions, even though they were capable of drawing a map [49]. We have seen many other examples of the same phenomenon in formative evaluation studies we conducted. A possible explanation for this problem is the cognitive load of text production processes. Maybe the task of producing information gets so intensive or

requires such different skills that it is hard for the writer/reviewer to simultaneously take the readers' perspective. Another explanation would be that certain text production tasks activate a limited gamut of presentation options—for instance only verbal descriptions.

Internal focus of document design teams. The last explanation for a lack of empathy with readers lies in the organization of document design processes. Many discussions about the quality of documents will first and foremost focus on the interests and opinions of internal stakeholders within the organization. This is nicely illustrated by a study by Raven into technical review processes of computer documentation [50]. She found that the majority of the revisions by the technical writers were made to "maintain a good interpersonal relationship" with the reviewing technicians, and that the technical writers sometimes revised passages without fully understanding them themselves. The same processes were described by Gans in a journalism context: not the general public, but the colleagues and superiors played a significant role in decisions about news items [51].

Conclusions

In this article, we presented a first overview of the role empathy plays in writing and review processes. Despite the studies we were able to find, it is easy to see that a lot more research is needed in this area. In the present situation, it is possible to identify possible shortcomings regarding empathy, but future research should help us identify which problems occur in which situation, as well as provide thorough explanations for the problems and, if possible, suggestions to solve them.

We want to finish this paper with two preliminary suggestions. In organizational practice, it seems important to acknowledge the limitations of expert judgments about documents and websites. We tend to believe less and less in concepts such as "discount usability engineering" as it was once coined by Nielsen [52]. Organizations may end up making many small investments in the quality of documents without ever making a serious chance of excelling in their documents or websites. In our view, serving readers requires an overall commitment to communication quality in the organization. This would include the systematic development of empathic skills among communication experts and professional writers, as well the thorough and careful use of reader-focused evaluation research.

In academic writing and communication programs, we think it is important to focus more on the empathic skills of students. Traditional writing textbooks cannot suffice to develop the skills of becoming a successful

professional writer. As was earlier pointed out by Schriver [26] and others, it is important to incorporate extensive reader feedback and role-switching exercises in academic writing programs. In addition, we think it may also be worthwhile to ask student-writers to reflect on the importance of empathy and on the problems writers may experience with it.

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