

Ari, R U There?

Reorienting Business Communication for a Technological Era

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As technology changes business practices, it becomes even more important that our students—and we ourselves—think rhetorically. Our pedagogy should help students look at (not just through) new media to understand how new media reshape the rhetorical situation (audience, exigency, constraints) and to use them effectively. Furthermore, new digital technologies that capture and preserve business messages create opportunities and raise new research questions. Viewing business practices through the lens of rhetoric can provide a valuable perspective for research and emphasize the community-shaping aspects (and thus an ethical dimension) of business. Therefore, in this commentary, the authors call for a reorientation of the field of business communication.

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Concerned about the performance of workers at a Kansas City facility, a CEO sent the following e-mail:

We are getting less than 40 hours of work from a large number of our KC-based EMPLOYEES. The parking lot is sparsely used at 8 AM; likewise at 5 PM. As managers—you either do not know what your EMPLOYEES are doing; or YOU do not CARE____ In either case, you have a problem and you will fix it or I will replace you. . . . I will hold you accountable. You have allowed this to get to this state. You have two weeks. Tick, tock.

Besides containing capitalized words and termination threats, the message violated a CEO-initiated company norm by referring to

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"associates" as "employees." Although the message was not intended for public dissemination, by the following day, a copy had been posted on a Web site, and the company's share price was falling (Hayes & Karash, 2001).

Eileen Brown (2005) in the United Kingdom posted her blog (Web log) entry just before noon on July 15, describing an "RTC presence toolkit" that would

enable application developers to easily embed presence, instant messaging (IM) and call control functionality into their applications. By hovering over the presence indicator, developers will have a view of availability information and can use a right-click menu to choose from various modes of communication, including IM and telephony. It's not available yet but it will be a great tool.

Steve, several time zones to the west, commented, "Cool! It would be awesome if there were a few more examples of using the RTC SDK with LCS2005." Carl chimed in, "It's a smart move" and referred readers to his own blog on the subject. Individuals who read these blogs and commentaries have an opportunity to learn about emerging technologies and appreciate the expertise of Eileen, Steve, and Carl (and, perhaps, decide to do business with the organizations that employ such knowledgeable people).

A reference librarian, working with chat software, interacted with a person we designate as Patron 2. The interaction included the following exchange:

Patron 2: I would like info about the political relationship between the USA and Soviet Union since 1968

Librarian: are you interested in books or web pages?

Patron 2: web pages that would help me

Librarian: ok

But Patron 2 was only one of four persons exchanging messages with the librarian, in a phenomenon that has been termed *multicom-municating*. Figure 1 provides a more complete presentation of the interaction. (The interaction with Patron 2 appears in the second column from the left.)

As these brief vignettes and the articles in this special issue illustrate, communication practices in the workplace have changed and will continue to change. As scholars who teach, we must understand the changes so that we can focus our research and design our pedagogy.

Patron 1	Patron 2	Patron 3	Patron 4
How does a bill become a law?	I would like info about the political relationship between the USA and Soviet Union since 1968		
<i>let me get you that</i>			
ok thanks, that would be great	<i>are you interested in books or web pages?</i>		
	web pages that would help me		
<i>here is one page - http://www.aa</i>	ok		
<i>http://www.bb</i>	thanks		
	<i>this page on the history of the soviet union has some - http://www.ee</i>	Hi there, I am looking for [title] and I can't tell if [library] has it.	
thanks			
<i>http://www.cc</i>	<i>http://www.ff</i>	<i>Hello, I will be with you as soon as I can.</i>	
<i>http://www.dd</i>	<i>still looking</i>		hi, I have a hold on a book. I'm trying to cancel
can you send me the one before the one you just sent?			<i>is it on the hold shelf?</i>

Figure 1. Partial Transcript of Four Overlapping Chat Interactions Between One Librarian (messages in italics) and Four Patrons

More specifically, today's environment calls for us to intensify our efforts to help students think rhetorically and to understand business practitioners as rhetoricians or, we might say, as examples of *Homo rhetoricus* (cf. Kellogg, 1994, chap. 1). In this commentary, we describe some effects that technology has on business communication practices,

define business communication for today's technologically enhanced environment, and explore the consequences of changes in business communication practices for both pedagogy and research.

TECHNOLOGY AND ITS EFFECTS ON BUSINESS COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Broadly speaking, we view the effects of communication technology on an individual employee as three sequential waves that interconnect and overlap. First, a new technology enhances a worker's efficiency by reducing inputs and increasing or improving outputs. The promise of improved efficiency is the reason a business adopts a new technology (Yates, 2005) such as a telephone, a file cabinet, a typewriter, a mainframe computer, a photocopier, a personal computer, voice messaging, or chat software. Second, as people explore a technology's potentialities, they realize that it allows or even encourages alterations (not just efficiency or acceleration) in tasks and, consequently, in jobs. For example, word processing software that many companies adopted to enhance typing efficiency (Davies, 1982; Webster, 1996) eventually changed the way in which text was produced (i.e., managers began doing their own "keyboarding"; after all, managers could not be expected to do "typing") and eliminated the typing pool. Third, as individuals adapt to new tasks and jobs, working and living in a world that has been reshaped by technology, they change. They develop new habits, preferences, organizational structures, and lifestyles. As Ong (1971, 1977, 1981, 1992) has argued, they learn to use their brains and nervous systems differently, trusting different senses, producing and consuming new genres of literature and new types of entertainment, becoming vulnerable to a different set of mental disorders, and governing their communities in different ways. For example, technologies for copying and storing messages (e.g., carbon paper and vertical files) and for processing data (e.g., computers) contributed to new approaches to management and new organizational structures (Yates, 1989, 2005). The telephone facilitated distance communication and changed jobs, eliminating some (e.g., office messengers) while creating others (e.g., telephone operators). The telephone also helped reshape lifestyles, contributing to the development of the suburbs and skyscrapers, and increased personal mobility (Pool, 1977). Today portable telephones not only allow employees to initiate and receive calls while traveling but seem to

encourage perpetual contact (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Katz & Aakhus, 2002), affecting privacy and relationships.

Both newer technologies and improved versions of older ones (e.g., chat software, personal data assistants, cellular telephones, wireless e-mail connections, interactive Web sites, fast transmission systems for digital data) are being widely adopted. Although technologies' effects will continue to unfold across coming decades, business communication behavior is (as always) continuing to change.

Here are examples of such changes:

- Some business communicators multicomunicate, using technologies such as chat software (sometimes supplemented by telephone and face-to-face communication) to participate in multiple, overlapping one-to-one interactions.
- Some business communicators telecommute, working from their homes and interacting with colleagues, clients, and suppliers through electronic media; others (who may not even have offices) travel continually, working in hotel rooms, cars, airplanes, and clients' offices. Some entire organizations operate from "instant office" locations around the globe that are rented from companies such as Regus.
- Some business communicators interact with clients in distant locations (e.g., persons in India who operate service desks for U.S. customers), using telephones or text to communicate across differences in time zones, nationalities, and cultures.
- Business communicators in virtual service organizations use advanced information technology to perform services (e.g., medical care) that were traditionally provided face to face.
- Some business communicators use decks of slides from visual presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint) to replace written reports; others supplement written messages with logos, tables, graphs, signatures, photos, and bits of sound.
- An increasing number of business communicators use digital cameras built into mobile phones or located on top of computer monitors to send and receive images.
- Some business communicators are encouraged by their employers to maintain Internet blogs that are available to the public to advertise the expertise of an organization's workforce; some employees maintain personal blogs that reveal information about the bloggers' employers and colleagues.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL ERA

Because business communication is communication used in conducting business (Reinsch, 1996), as technology changes the practice

of business, it changes the profile of our field. We define *business* as the voluntary, profit-motivated (efficiency-seeking) exchange of goods and services, an exchange increasingly conducted in cross-cultural or virtual environments. Humans participate in such exchanges, frequently using money as a medium, with the intent of meeting needs and increasing personal wealth (getting ahead). Within organizations, people try to get ahead typically by seeking greater efficiency, that is, by seeking greater returns for equal or smaller investments of time, effort, or money (Frederick, 1992; cf. Moore, 2004).

We define *communication* as an exchange of symbols and signs with the goal of coordinated action. Viewing humans as embodied (Peters, 1999) and following Barnlund (1970), we understand interpersonal communication as a process in which one person encodes or creates a series of symbols and signs while another actively (and selectively) decodes or creates a message based partially on some of the symbols and signs emitted by the first person. Through iterative cycles of encoding and decoding, the persons achieve a level of overlapping meaning that allows them to coordinate activities and engage in business transactions. Communication is therefore central to the conduct of business, allowing individuals to specify items available for exchange, identify media of exchange, and negotiate prices and conditions. Indeed, the items, media, and perceived values of specie, goods, and services are to a great extent constructed rhetorically so that the practice of business is rhetorical through and through (e.g., McCloskey, 1998; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Understanding rhetoric as "an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1991, p. 36), we discern a successful business practitioner as someone who has the ability to see the available means of influence in each particular business situation.

We consider therefore that the central focus of business communication is one-to-one, small-group, or one-to-group interaction either within an organization (e.g., employees exchanging e-mail messages to make decisions) or across the boundary of an organization (e.g., an employee giving an oral briefing to a supplier or customer). And, following Aristotle's treatment of rhetoric, we regard business as "practical" (Craig, 1989; Miller, 1989). That is, business praxis helps produce and shape a community and a culture and has, consequently and unavoidably, ethical implications (Rentz & Debs, 1987). The quality of life experienced by consumers, suppliers, owners, and employees is significantly shaped by the business activities that help form the texture of community life and the social roles of community members.

Business decisions affect both the natural and the civic environments. They affect the availability of goods and services in a neighborhood, the incomes and lifestyles of employees, the wealth of investors, and the prosperity of cities, regions, and nations. Not surprisingly, business leaders frequently function as civic leaders. Despite occasional conflicts between a business and some of its audiences (Ice, 1991), businesspeople are usually good citizens, if for no other reason than because, for the most part, their good citizenship behavior (and ethics) contributes to their business success.

Business communication pedagogy should focus, therefore, on helping students think more deeply and systematically about the opportunities and challenges offered in rhetorical situations that have been reshaped by technology such as e-mail, chat, or blogs and recognize that each rhetorical option helps shape a community. Concomitantly, business communication research should focus on interpersonal communication associated with business activity and examine business behavior through the lens of rhetoric. The immediate goal of such research would be understanding how technologies reshape interpersonal communication associated with business activity. The long-term goal would be building a body of shared knowledge to assist practitioners, educate students, inform the public, and help develop public policy.

Both the content and methods of business communication research will continue to evolve. The topics that merit study will change in light of the unfolding effects of new technologies. Consequently, by emphasizing interpersonal communication associated with business activity (and the rhetorical dimensions of interpersonal behavior), we are proposing a central focus rather than a limiting perimeter (Reinsch, 1991a, 1991b). Similarly, we are not imposing a priori limitations on research methods. Knowledge is advanced by multiple (including both qualitative and quantitative) research methods that develop over time. The development of new methods is desirable and even necessary in response to new research questions or limitations in existing research methods.

SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

Changes in technology and business behavior have consequences for business communication pedagogy, which must change in both

form and content, two dimensions that can be separated only partially (O'Donnell, 1998, p. 185). In fact, the form of such pedagogy is already changing. Educators and students in business communication (and throughout universities) are gradually receiving new instructional tools and technology-enriched classrooms to complement the already extant electronic versions of library research. More than a decade ago, Lanham (1993) suggested that the basic composition textbook would be replaced by a "dynamic, open-ended information system" (p. 126) and today, many textbooks come with CD-ROMs or Web site addresses. As our own business school plans for a new building, some have argued that the building need not include a computer lab because such labs have been "overtaken by events" (i.e., wireless technology and laptop computers).

Less obvious but more important, pedagogy must adapt to encourage rhetorical thinking in this new environment. For example, the proliferation of new technologies means that business communicators will need to read and write (listen and speak, view and sketch) in a wider array of media and genres—and to choose wisely among the increasingly large number of available media. The increasing number of interactions across boundaries of culture, nationality, and degrees of language fluency requires that communicators master communication in multiple cultures (or develop "pluralized identities," Starke-Meyerring, 2005, p. 476): In the emerging global business environment, a business practitioner needs some of the skills of an anthropologist to adapt to new cultures and learn new languages. Multicommunication impels fast-paced interactions, leaving little time for communicators to contemplate or proofread their messages. The practice of interacting primarily (or even exclusively) through e-mail or other relatively lean media privileges those skilled at projecting an effective presence through the voice, tone, style, or charm of their writing. Today's business practitioners need to communicate in new ways and with even greater versatility and skill. They confront new and continually evolving situations that test their abilities to apply rhetorical principles.

As educators, we can best prepare students for the challenges of communicating in a technological era by helping them think rhetorically. We are not implying that the typical business communication course gives no attention to rhetoric. Nor are we claiming simply that Aristotle is the answer: The new era is not a reincarnated ancient one but rather a new stage in cultural evolution, a secondary stage of textuality in which certain aspects of rhetoric have a fresh resonance

(Bolter, 2001). Communication technologies will continue to produce rippling changes in tasks, jobs, lifestyles, and people. The men and women enrolled in our classes will be prepared for such an era to the extent that they have learned to recognize the complexity of human sensory processes, the sensory extensions inherent in new media, and the ways in which the new media reshape the realities of their interlocutors.

To meet the challenges of using multiple media, using media in new ways, and interacting across cultural (and other) differences, we must recognize the communicative dimensions of a situation, seek to understand others' perspectives, and adjust our own behavior to advance our short- and long-term goals (while acknowledging the goals of our communication partners and the larger community). A rhetorical perspective allows us to look through media and messages sometimes and to look at them at other times (Lanham, 1993). Rhetorical thinking includes careful, systematic analysis directed at messages and media. The former, looking rhetorically at messages, already occurs in most business communication classrooms. But the latter, looking rhetorically at media and the effects of media, presents the most urgent challenge for the future. It requires a careful reassessment of even the most basic rhetorical terms, beginning with the *rhetorical situation* (Bitzer, 1968).

If the rhetorical situation consists of audience, exigency, and constraints (Bitzer, 1968), new media require us to rethink every dimension. What does the concept of *audience* mean in an era in which internal and private messages are so easily outed? If everyone is perpetually in contact, is there only a single, all-encompassing audience? To what new exigencies must a rhetor respond? When, and to what extent and how, is a rhetor expected to project personal presence through a lean medium or across a cultural divide? What are the interpersonal needs of individuals whose senses are being dispersed (perhaps extended to the point of attenuation) by media? To what extent do media create or ameliorate constraints? By allowing individuals to multicommunicate, do media relax the constraint of embodiment (Peters, 1999) and make it possible for one person to be present within several conversations? New technologies are reshaping the human community in ways that can both facilitate and hinder the achievement of a rhetorical task. Most often, this reshaping enlarges the array of potential rhetorical moves and rewards rhetors who comprehend the situation and perceptively assess the available moves.

Rhetorical thinking not only helps individuals with known media but prepares them to adapt to new media as such media become available or to contemplate using familiar media in unfamiliar ways. Historically, only Graham Bell seems to have had an accurate understanding of the potential of the telephone for interpersonal communication (Pool, 1983). Similarly, some of David Sarnoff's achievements at Radio Corporation of America can be attributed to his ability to foresee the ways in which the new medium of television could be used (Lyons, 1966, p. 239). Today, business communicators (like those in the vignettes at the beginning of this commentary) are finding new ways to use media and, in the process, reshaping the business communities in which they work; successful innovations are imitated widely, eventually becoming the norm (Yates, Orlikowski, & Okamura, 1999). While granting the need for additional research, we suggest that those persons who think rhetorically about media are the individuals most likely to be innovative while using them.

As society gradually digests today's new interpersonal media and encounters tomorrow's (some of which are, as noted in the blog quoted near the beginning of this commentary, already a gleam in Eileen's eye), students will need to adapt again and again. Those who learn to look rhetorically at media and their effects will adapt most easily and perform most effectively. O'Donnell's (1998) reflections on the implications of technology for university educators have special force for business communication educators: "We teachers do not automatically deserve a future. We must earn it by the skill with which we disorient our students, energize them, and inculcate in them a taste for the hard disciplines of seeing and thinking," in particular, thinking rhetorically (p. 123).

CONSEQUENCES FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Changes in technology and business behavior also have consequences for business communication research, affecting both the procedures and the content. These consequences include some challenges, but for the most part, they provide opportunities.

One significant opportunity emerges from the relative ease with which digitalized texts can be captured, stored, and made available for scholarly investigation. As e-mail and text messaging replace face-to-face meetings or telephone calls, they generate a potential

tsunami of artifacts, giving scholars better opportunities than ever before to observe the communicative lifeblood of business activity (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Of course, these opportunities bring challenges, including the continuing difficulty of gaining access and, after gaining access, dealing with massive amounts of data, a challenge that may be somewhat ameliorated by increases in computing power and improved text-analysis programs (e.g., ATLAS.ti, QSR NUD*IST). Also, the phenomena we are studying seem to be increasingly chaotic. For example, compare analyzing a trove of letters between two geographically separated practitioners of a previous century, when written correspondence provided the only reliable long-distance communication channel, to analyzing the letters, facsimiles, e-mails, telephone calls, voice mails, and chat messages (perhaps while one or both participants multicomunicate) between two contemporary practitioners. As one illustration of both opportunity and challenge, the Organizational Communication interest group of the International Communication Association (ICA) is encouraging its members to develop research projects on the basis of an archive of e-mail (about 250,000 texts) from Enron executives during an 8-year period. The texts became public record as a result of legal proceedings and have been placed into accessible databases by Steven Corman (who is also a commentator in this issue) and several of his ICA colleagues. Although we acknowledge the challenges of securing and processing large quantities of data, we see digital media as providing an emerging opportunity for researchers, especially those dealing with questions that can be addressed by analyzing written messages.

We expect another opportunity to result from the heightened visibility of communication. Changes in communication technologies and the effects of those changes on tasks, jobs, organizations, and lifestyles (along with increasing globalization and the consequent necessity of interacting across cultural and linguistic boundaries) should make communication breakdowns—and communication—more visible to practitioners. A U.S. practitioner who in 1957 dealt with suppliers and customers in relatively distant states within the United States will by 2007 probably interact electronically with suppliers and customers on distant continents. The difficulties of interacting with persons on the other side of various boundaries, along with making recurring decisions about deploying and managing communication technologies, should call attention to the challenges and importance of communication. This heightened visibility should

increase practitioners' interest in business communication research on topics such as intercultural negotiation or policy development for text messaging.

Heightened visibility may also attract more attention to communication from our colleagues in other academic tribes. Marketing scholars (e.g., Stauss & Seidel, 2004; Turner, Thomas, & Gailiun, 2001; Turner, Thomas, & Reinsch, 2004), for instance, seem to be increasing their attention to interpersonal (employee-to-customer) communication. If that is a by-product of communication's heightened visibility, it may signal an emerging trend that could generate opportunities for interdisciplinary research. To sustain a stream of interdisciplinary research with colleagues in marketing, management, accounting, finance, information technology, or other fields, business communication scholars will need to contribute theoretical and methodological expertise and to present an intellectually engaging perspective on business behavior. Viewing business as a thoroughly rhetorical enterprise can provide one such perspective. Whether sharing the financials of a quarterly report, exploring contractual language with disgruntled customers, responding to challenging questions from reporters, explaining benefits packages to employees, or seeking additional funding from the capital markets, business practitioners must continually communicate. Whatever factors (e.g., expertise, insights, needs, preferences) that might influence business transactions must first be made explicit, or visible, through acts of communication. Thus, every significant business activity includes a rhetorical dimension that business communication scholars can study.

Still another opportunity has resulted from a change in procedures involving the ways in which our scholarship is made available to others. Scholarly journals and university libraries have begun to replace paper documents with electronic ones. As this new rhetoric of academic discourse emerges, we should ponder several questions. In the future, might journals be published only in electronic form? Will an author be allowed (or expected) to update an e-publication as new evidence comes to light or as the author's opinion changes, and if so, how will the peer-review process work for an evolving hypertext document? As technology makes scanning huge bodies of electronic text easier, will the character and value of literature reviews change? Might a frequently accessed and widely linked blog replace an article or a book when evaluating a scholar for tenure? If O'Donnell (1998) is correct that professors are in the "information

organizing" (pp. 175, 156-157) business, then the manner in which professorial research gets evaluated, distributed, and processed is an important dimension of the emerging future.

Changes in technology and business behavior also affect the content of business communication research. At an abstract level, the research questions of the future resemble those of the past (e.g., "What factors make a text or a communicator effective?"). But at ground level, business communication scholars need to explore a whole new set of questions designed to yield better understanding of specific technologies, evolving practices, and new forms of business relationships. Here are some research questions to consider:

- How are humans using and adapting in response to new communication technologies? Qualitative and descriptive studies may be particularly valuable for tracking the rippling effects of change as communicators use (or misuse) technologies and modify their personal and professional behavior (Downing, 2004; Jones, 2005; Turner, 2001; Turner et al, 2003).
- How do technologies interact with the content of business communication messages? Does presentation software impose a particular logic (Worley & Dyrud, 2004a, 2004b)? Do digital media encourage a "culture of play" (Lanham, 1993)?
- How can we teach students to think rhetorically about both existing and emerging media (Brumberger, 2005; Kauger, Ishizaki, Collins, & Vlachos, 2004)?
- How do technologies interact with message genre? Textual analysis should be particularly helpful in understanding how documents are shaped by community expectations and how those expectations change with emerging genres (Louhiala-Salminen, 1999; Nickerson, 2000; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002; Yates et al., 1999).
- What adjustments are needed in theories and models to accommodate the new technologies? Both research and pedagogy are driven by (in addition to folklore) theory and models. New technologies provide an opportunity to reassess our theories of audience (e.g., behavior in a virtual group), emergent trust or distrust (e.g., between a supervisor and a telecommuter; Reinsch, 1997, 1999), message design (e.g., the use of hypertext), and virtually every other aspect of our field (Vaast, 2004).
- What are scholars in other academic fields learning about communication phenomena, and what significance do those findings have for business communication? Boyer (1990) has described the scholarship of integration as "work that seeks to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear," work that addresses the question, "What do the findings *mean!*" (p. 19). We foresee a type of scholarship that might be termed *integmative translation*, scholarship that is integrative, in Boyer's sense, and translates research from other (perhaps quite distant) discourse communities, making it accessible to business communication scholars.

- What moral choices do communicators make (descriptive ethics) when using new technologies? What choices should they make (normative ethics)? The ability to easily make internal documents available to the general public (e.g., a harshly worded e-mail from the CEO) or to unobtrusively divide your presence among multiple interlocutors presents the business communicator with a new set of moral choices.
- What are the effects of new technologies on emotional, spiritual, and psychological health? Several new technologies appear to allow or even encourage a blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, office and home, front office and back office. These blurred boundaries imply that individuals will experience an increasing number of micro-transitions between their various roles and subroles during a day.
- Which behaviors and characteristics contribute to individual performance in a virtual environment (e.g., Turner & Grube, 2005)?
- How do new technologies and behaviors reinforce or erode existing organizational forms (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995)?
- What are the implications of new technologies and practices for privacy and information security for both employees and customers (Heino, 2004a, 2004b; Palen & Dourish, 2003)?
- Which rhetorical tools (e.g., visual aids, figurative language, narrative themes) gain or lose effectiveness when deployed in the new media?
- How do companies decide to adopt, deploy, and manage new technologies such as text messaging? What technologies have they already deployed (e.g., intranet, knowledge management tools) and with what effect (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004)?
- What types of transactions can be conducted electronically? What factors influence an individual's willingness to experiment with a new technology (Turner et al., 2004)?

Questions such as these will require data from practitioners in the workplace (which, as we noted, could be a home, a hotel room, or an automobile). Interaction with practitioners will enrich our teaching and also suggest additional opportunities to study the interplay between technology, business functions, and business communication.

CONCLUSION

Under the influence of new communication technologies, business practices are evolving at a ferocious pace. Those of us who study business communication, and who seek to help future practitioners prepare for business careers, must adapt or become irrelevant. Recently, a midlevel manager enrolled in a class on our campus said that she had never written a memorandum: She sends

e-mails and, occasionally, letters. A senior computer programmer at a consulting firm told one of us that he has not met face-to-face with the members of his team in more than a year: He interacts through e-mail, telephone, and chat software (frequently multicommutating). Librarians multicommutate with patrons. Bloggers describe new technologies that promise to produce more changes. And employees post irritating e-mails from the boss on Web sites and "ping" one another with chat messages, using lowercase letters and abbreviations that characterize that medium.

What can we do? Ping Aristotle.

In this time of change, the fundamental insights of a rhetorical perspective are especially relevant. The rhetorical context changes constantly, and the communicator must continually assess the available means of persuasion.

Ari, r u there?

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