

Words Matter: How Paying Attention to Documents Can Make Cooperatives Stronger

Workshop Outline

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1. Why co-ops should pay attention to how and what they write
 - a. Texts aren't neutral but are
 - i. social actions
 - ii. concretized agreements revisited again and again by readers
 - b. All stages of writing are imbued with issues of power
 - i. Context
 - ii. Conflict
 - iii. Responses to recurring situations
2. Introduction to my project
 - a. Site: cooperative in mid-size city in Midwest
 - b. Lasted 2 years
 - c. Methodology: social theory of genre and ethnography
 - d. Methods:
 - i. Collected and compared texts written through various stages of development
 - ii. Interviews and observations
 - iii. Analysis included using a social theory of genre and rhetorical analysis
3. Project Takeaways
 - a. Ambiguity is often used to create flexibility or compromise into a document
 - i. Often things that were too "touchy" were written around, rather than addressed
 - ii. Left gaps in the processes and documentation
 - iii. These gaps continued to build or stay around after people who remember why the gaps are there are gone
 - iv. The story of how these gaps were "written around"—the touchy subjects—were lost as time went on
 - v. Deployment and reinterpretation of texts: texts become the "heavy"
 - b. Accidental Exclusion
 - i. Not everyone involved in writing due to
 1. Access to discussions
 2. Access to technologies
 3. Comfort with difficult discussions
4. Strategies
 - a. Be transparent about writing and revising documents—even seemingly mundane drafts.
 - b. Circulate drafts and get input before a draft is ratified. Revisit as necessary, "i.e. living documents."
 - c. Context: write a short paragraph in meta-data giving context to the document: who the authors were, what situation did it respond to/ try to fix, who does it affect, when should it be revisited?

- d. Make sure everyone has viewing access to documents
 - e. Create a culture where audience, purpose, and context of documents is considered recurrently
 - f. Deal with conflicts any way you can head on instead of “writing around” the conflicts
 - g. Be very mindful of ambiguous language as it can set you up for trouble later, as the original authors move on and original context changes
5. Workshop on org docs
- a. Participants will break up into small groups (or do as a group if small enough) and practice analysis on their own documents (or sample)
 - b. Things to look for:
 - i. Inclusive language
 - ii. Ambiguous terms
 - iii. Detailed language for addressing issues that might arise
 - iv. Ability to redress grievances
 - v. Authorship