

*Fat Studies: Determining the Effectiveness of Writing Styles
as They Attempt to Relay the Importance of the Topic*

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A thorough rhetorical analysis of any text allows for the close examination of how the text functions, and it allows for the determination of the text's purpose and significance. It is helpful for scientific and technical writers to conduct this kind of analysis in order to truly understand the role of texts. Though, a rhetorical analysis is useful for any writer because it allows him or her to learn about the responsibilities associated with writing, and it allows him or her to recognize the large impact that writers can make on their audiences.

Science and Power Issues

The science and power topic that I am focusing on is called fat studies. Fat studies can be defined as studies at the college level designed to focus on the political and social effects associated with overweight people who are victims of prejudice and stereotypes in society. This area of study is relatively new. The topic has been squeezed into some social science classes in the past, but it is now becoming a class in itself. However, even though classes in fat studies exist, an actual fat studies program has not yet been developed at any university.

Two science and power issues pertain to the topic of fat studies: education and personal lifestyle choices. Obviously, it is easy to see that education is a huge issue

because fat studies is being integrated into the college curriculum. Because the topic is deemed important enough to become accepted as a college course, it has a significant amount of power attached to it. Lynn Bartholome, a former president of the Popular Culture Association, believes that fat studies will continue to gain popularity because we are living in a society that is “preoccupied with size” (Mandel). Therefore, it can be suggested that the power issue will only grow as fat studies becomes more apparent on campuses across the United States.

When analyzing the topic of fat studies, two different viewpoints arise from members of society: one of them supports the integration of fat studies into the college curriculum and the other opposes the idea of fat studies courses. Proponents of fat studies argue that the courses are justified and necessary. Peggy Howell, a chairwoman of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, states that including fat studies courses in the college curriculum would help people realize that overweight individuals are “unjustly discriminated against” (Dave). Proponents of fat studies agree that teaching the subject in an academic setting would lead to more equality among individuals in society. It would allow people to recognize that stereotypes should not be made against people who are overweight, which is similar to the idea that stereotypes should not be made against people of different races, genders, or sexualities.

People who oppose the development of fat studies also present a legitimate argument. They believe that as students learn about the importance of accepting and respecting other people regardless of their size, they are being influenced to wrongly believe that any body size should be considered acceptable and even healthy. Supporting this argument, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that obesity

“increases the risk of diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and hypertension” (Hill). Other medical problems linked to obesity include high cholesterol, coronary heart disease, stroke, and cancer (Weeg). Opponents of fat studies agree that supporting the new academic discipline may prove to be detrimental to the health of society.

The issue of personal lifestyle choices also has power implications in regard to the topic of fat studies. Thomas Diehm, a social worker at the University of Washington, says that we need to focus on the prevention of obesity; however, if our prevention methods do not work, “we need to work with them [obese people] to mitigate the negatives of their obesity to the greatest degree possible...” (Weeg). In other words, individuals can be influenced to maintain a healthy weight by choosing a healthy lifestyle, but instead, they may gain weight because they choose a less healthy lifestyle. As a result of weight that people have gained, society must try to alleviate the stereotypes and discrimination placed on the individuals, which could be done by incorporating fat studies into college academics.

Teaching fat studies on college campuses may be beneficial, but it also has the potential to bring about unhealthy lifestyles that devalue health and fitness, which in turn, conflict with current opinions about ideal, healthy lifestyles. For example, fat studies aim to teach people that obesity should be accepted. Potentially, overweight individuals may then be less likely to maintain a healthy diet and exercise because they do not see a reason for losing weight when more and more people in society are becoming accepting of the excess weight. If overweight people commonly develop this careless attitude regarding their weight, fat studies has the potential to contribute to an increase in the weight of Americans.

Power Texts

I have chosen to focus on four power texts. Each of these texts addresses the issue of fat studies being incorporated into the college curriculum. The texts are as follows:

- “Some Push for Fat Studies Class” from The Daily Collegian Online
- “Fat Studies Cram Into Classrooms” from The Harvard Crimson
- “‘Fat Studies’ Gaining Weight in Academia” from The Daily Pennsylvanian
- “Fat Studies Gaining Recognition in Academia” from The Daily of the University of Washington Online

I believe that the goal of three of these texts is to simply inform individuals about the topic of fat studies. The Daily Collegian Online, the Harvard Crimson, and the Daily of the University of Washington Online each explain positive and negative views on the subject. For example, Margaret Carlisle Duncan, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who has developed a fat studies course, mentions that fat studies courses could help provide treatments for disorders such as bulimia (Dave). In contrast, some opponents of fat studies say that the new discipline “is a way of masking the epidemic [obesity] by making it a part of social discourse” (Hill). By providing pros and cons to the topic of fat studies, these three articles are allowing readers to form their own opinions about the topic.

Interestingly, The Daily Pennsylvanian does not include any negative views on fat studies; it simply emphasizes the need for such studies, and it addresses the growing interest that people are having in the field. For example, Miriam Berg, president of the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, mentions that discrimination against overweight individuals is a “real issue in society” that needs to be combated (Mandel).

Berg's statement is completely supported throughout the article which subtly seems to say that the author of the article may either be biased on the issue or she is not completely informed on all sides of the issue. According to Blum, Knudson, and Henig, some of the best pieces of writing add a dash of skepticism (174). This skepticism helps to engage readers by making them ponder the issue at hand and by entitling them to choose a position on the issue. Skepticism creates a tension that entices readers to continue reading which is exactly what The Daily Pennsylvanian article failed to do.

Target Audience

Of all four power texts, I believe that the Daily Collegian Online, the Harvard Crimson, and the Daily of the University of Washington Online have targeted college students as their audience, while The Daily Pennsylvanian has simply targeted the general public as its audience. This seems reasonable because the three college news stations expect their college students to keep up on news pertaining to their schools; they do not expect many people outside of campus communities to read the college newspaper or to gain access to it online. However, The Daily Pennsylvanian is expected to be read by most members of its surrounding area.

Even though the two target audiences—college students and the general public—seem different, they do share a connection. On the surface, it appears as though the topic of fat studies will only affect university communities. However, because fat studies are being incorporated into the college curriculum, an underlying message is being relayed to all members of society: weight issues are becoming a more relevant and concerning issue. Whether people are focusing on stereotypes and discrimination of those who are overweight or whether they are focusing on potential medical problems and health risks,

it seems as though overweight individuals will continue to remain a target for disapproval, criticism, or pity. It appears that they will not be seen as equal to other people who may be smaller in size than they are. Miriam Berg, president of the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, mentions that overweight individuals are more likely to lose their jobs, lose positions at universities, or lose opportunities for health insurance simply because they are overweight (Mandel). Due to these kinds of insights, the need for fat studies is being pushed onto campuses, which is then being pushed even farther into society as a whole.

Relevance to Sci/Tech Communicators

The topic of fat studies may not be considered exactly “scientific,” but the topic does pertain to the area of social sciences. Because the general public usually finds it easier to understand information relating to people than to unfamiliar objects or concepts, I can deduce that an article written about fat studies would be easier for readers to understand than, for instance, an article written about mechanical engineering. Penrose and Katz mention that human stories, in which audiences can more easily identify with scientific subjects, help general audiences to understand scientific concepts (189). Human stories already exist within the topic of fat studies. Most individuals know of a person who has been ridiculed about his or her weight, a person who has been discriminated against due to his or her weight, or a person who has simply struggled with the issue of weight. The topic of fat studies focuses both on members of society and the topic of weight, which are subjects that the public can identify with.

By analyzing the topic of fat studies, a helpful writing technique has emerged for scientific and technical writers: always keep the audience in mind. In other words,

scientific and technical writers must try to keep the information easily understandable, and they must try to engage their readers by imagining what the readers would find interesting. It is also vital to mention why a topic is important and why it is relevant to the readers. Penrose and Katz explain that most audiences are “...interested in what things ‘do’...”, and they are interested in the effects on public safety, health, and welfare (187). Penrose and Katz then go on to say that writers must focus on “...the practical benefit of a scientific concept...” or theory for their audience, for society, or for humankind, which is called the *application appeal* (188). The writers of the previously mentioned power texts utilize these techniques in their writings—they discuss the equality that would form among members of society as a result of fat studies. It is easy to see that the topic of fat studies allows, quite effortlessly, for an opportunity to explain why the topic is important.

Capstone

For my capstone project, I elaborate on my seminar topic of fat studies, and I gather new insights on the four power texts. In order to generate my own data, I developed my own questionnaire, and I conducted a study by integrating both the topic of fat studies and the four power texts. Here, I will discuss the procedures that were necessary for conducting this study, and I will discuss the results of my findings.

Methods and Materials

My study took place on April 9, 2007, at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Here, I surveyed fifty freshman students from two different introductory English classes. I was able to divide the fifty students into groups of four. This was done because each of

my four power texts needed to be tested by gathering information from a coinciding questionnaire. Of the four groups, two of them contained twelve respondents, and the other two groups contained thirteen respondents. The same questionnaire was distributed in paper form to all fifty respondents, but each of the four groups received a different power text to read which was also in paper form. On this questionnaire, questions were asked to determine the effectiveness of the communication styles used by the writers of the power texts. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions that requested information about the topic of fat studies, and five of them directly related to the particular power text that each respondent had read. Here is the survey that was distributed to the respondents:

Questionnaire on Fat Studies

This survey is being distributed to obtain information regarding the effectiveness of communicating scientific information to public audiences. The survey should only take about 10 minutes to complete. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

1. Do you consider obesity to be a problem in our society today?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Undecided

2. Are you familiar with the subject of “fat studies”?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

3. If you came upon an article discussing the topic of fat studies, would you be inclined to read it in order to learn more about the subject?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Undecided

Please use the following lines to clarify any of your answers above and/or add any other comments about the article.

If you would like further information about this study and/or the results of this study, please contact me.

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Results

After surveying the fifty respondents on the topic of fat studies, some interesting results have emerged. Before reading the power texts, a majority of the respondents (88%) were unfamiliar with the subject of fat studies, while 12% were familiar with the topic. 48% of respondents said that they would read an article discussing fat studies in order to learn more about the subject, while 20% said that they would not read the article, and 32% were undecided. All fifty respondents initially agreed that obesity is a problem in society today. However, after reading the power texts and then answering the same question, only one respondent's answer changed. This respondent read The Daily Collegian Online article, and he or she was then undecided about obesity being labeled as a problem in our society. When respondents were asked (after reading a power text) whether fat studies should be integrated into the college curriculum, the numbers were quite evenly split: 36% said yes, 28% said no, and 36% were undecided. Again, after

reading a power text, a question asked respondents if they would take a class in fat studies if the program was offered at UW-Eau Claire. In response to this question, only 22% said yes, 50% said no, and 28% were undecided.

When respondents were asked if the presentation of information in the articles made them feel inclined to continue reading, the results emerged as follows:

- The Daily Collegian
12 total respondents: 10 said yes, 2 said no
- The Harvard Crimson
13 total respondents: 4 said yes, 9 said no
- The Daily Pennsylvanian
13 total respondents: 7 said yes, 5 said no, 1 was undecided
- The Daily of the University of Washington Online
12 total respondents: 2 said yes, 8 said no, 2 were undecided

The questionnaire allowed plenty of room for respondents to write comments. Here are some of the most frequently mentioned comments:

1. It may be better to offer wellness or fitness classes that study healthy habits instead of a fat studies class.
2. A more liberal viewpoint will probably emerge as fat studies becomes more prevalent in the classroom.
3. The topic of fat studies might gain more interest among those people who are overweight.

During the survey, the respondents were directed to place an X in their particular article to locate where their interest was first captured. Here are some of the areas that were marked by the respondents most frequently:

- The Harvard Crimson
 - “There is a transition from viewing people that were stout as a good thing to viewing people as corpulent or obese, which is a bad thing.”
 - “The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that obesity, which afflicts 30 percent of American adults, increases the risk of diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and hypertension.”
- The Daily Pennsylvanian
 - “Berg said discrimination against fat people is a real issue in society, causing people to lose jobs, spots at universities, and opportunities for health insurance.”
 - “‘Fat studies’ is a growing interdisciplinary area of study at universities across the country...”
- The Daily of the University of Washington Online
 - “The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention links obesity with hypertension, high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, and cancer.”
 - “It’s important to recognize the connections between fat prejudice and other prejudices, and to understand that a fat person is never just fat—they also have a race, an age, a class, a gender, a sexuality and so on....”

*It should be noted that the data under this section for The Daily Collegian Online is not available. Only 25% of the respondents in this group supplied the requested information, and the other 75% failed to do so.

Discussion

After analyzing the collected data, some surprising results have emerged. It is interesting to learn that The Harvard Crimson article (from one of the most prestigious schools in the U.S.) failed to hold the attention of the majority of my respondents. In fact, on the basis of persuading my respondents to continue reading, the Harvard article is ranked in the bottom 50% among the four total articles. This reveals that Harvard is not excelling in every area as we might expect that it would.

Because most of the respondents were unfamiliar with the topic of fat studies, I was able to gain some information about the effects of influence and persuasion that can come from reading articles, and I was able to interpret how the articles can contribute to readers' forming of opinions on topics. In this study, the articles did seem to have some influence on the responses. Before reading one of the articles, 100% of respondents said that they considered obesity to be a problem in our society today, and almost 50% of respondents said that they would be inclined to learn more about fat studies. After reading one of the articles, 98% continued to firmly believe that obesity is a problem in society, only 36% agreed that fat studies should be integrated into college studies, and only 22% claimed that they would take a fat studies class if it was offered at UW-Eau Claire. The articles appear to have had some influence on the respondents. They seem to have led the respondents to believe that fat studies is not a legitimate area of study. If this

trend of discounting fat studies is to continue, this new area of study may not become as popular as some people had anticipated.

When respondents were asked to mark the area on their given article to indicate where their interests were first captured, five or six different areas were marked on each of three articles. Interestingly, one of the areas that was most commonly marked on two articles indicated the health risks associated with obesity. Obviously, the respondents recognize the significance of health risks. Even though fat studies—the main topic of each article—focuses on prejudice, oppression, and stereotypes of individuals who are overweight, a large amount of respondents did not gain interest in the topic until they read the section about health risks. This may explain why the articles influenced respondents to become less interested in fat studies as I mentioned in the previous paragraph. The respondents seem to care less about social ramifications, and they seem to care more about physical and/or health ramifications.

While I cannot make any solid conclusions based on the results of this study, I have been able to gain some insights regarding the effects of writing on its readers. In order to determine the thoughts and opinions of most college students toward fat studies, a much larger survey would need to be conducted. Perhaps the topic of fat studies will inspire further study and similar research in the future.

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