October 25, 2005

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Professor Dale Sullivan
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Dear Professor Sullivan:

Enclosed is the report on Veterinary Technology Discourse for the web-based section of
English 320, Practical Writing.

This report is a result of research done on the discourse practices in veterinary
technology. Analysis includes a definition of the profession, background of the discourse
terminology, and a discussion of discourse in veterinary technology with deep analysis of
one document.

If more information is needed this report, contact me by e-mail or the address below.

Sincerely,

Amanda Miller

Enclosure

Discourse in Veterinary Technology

Amanda Miller
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October 25, 2005

Abstract:

This report explores the discourse practices used in veterinary technology. Its purpose is to investigate the discourse practices of a profession to ease the entry into it. Background in discourse theory, methods, analysis of discourse practices with close focus on one forum, and conclusions are discussed. This report uses web available resources, documents retrieved from a local veterinary clinic, and a personal interview to research its findings. The report uses classification to organize the different discourse practices discussed and finds major differences in the audiences that they are written for.

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Introduction:

The purpose of this research report is put into words very concisely by Carol Berckenkotter and Thomas Huckin. "Understanding the genres of written communication in one's field is essential to professional success" (1995). Every profession has certain communication patterns unique to that group, so before entering into the group of veterinary technicians, it would be beneficial to research and study their discourse community.

First, we need to review some of the background of what discourse communities are and how they are defined. Many theories have been published on discourse communities, genres, and the unique forums used to communicate within these groups. A discourse community is a group that has its own specialized communication system. As James Porter describes in *Audience and Rhetoric*, a discourse community is unique according to its members and the forums that they use to communicate (1992). A forum can be anything that people use to communicate such as e-mail, memos, or letters.

Genres are different types of communication that become specialized from the discourse community that uses them. According to Orlikowski and Yates (1994), genres used by members of a community shape the interaction of that community. It makes them a distinctive and organized group. Further, Berkenkotter and Huckin discuss discourse communities as professional cultures. On the topic of discourse community genres used by people within their profession, they state, "To be fully effective in this role, genres must be flexible and dynamic, capable of modification according to the rhetorical exigencies of the situation. At the same time, though, they must be stable enough to capture those aspects of situations that tend to recur" (1995). In other words, a genre

needs to fit the standards kept within the community, but still be flexible to fit many different situations.

The scope of this report will focus primarily on the discourse community of veterinary technicians in the private practice. We will look at how technicians use communication and review the types of documents they use to communicate. We will also examine one document more closely to understand the nature of the communications in this field.

Methods:

To research the topic of veterinary technicians as a discourse community, several sources were needed. I started with internet searches to find material used by technicians as well as developing a background in what discourse communities entailed. Next, I searched surrounding clinics to find documents that they used in every-day practice. From one of the clinics, I conducted an interview with practicing veterinary technician. This interview helped explain how many of the documents are used and how she uses different genres in her profession. Finally, I analyzed one of the documents in depth to further understand how the discourse is put to use.

Results and Discussion:

Before we can understand how Veterinary Technicians use discourse, we need to know more about their responsibility in the profession. Veterinary Technicians have a vital role in veterinary medicine. According to the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) website, a veterinary technician assists a veterinarian or scientist to maintain high standards in animal care. Veterinary technicians require at least two years of college education and must complete the state and national

requirements before they may become licensed, certified or registered, depending on the state. Eighty-five percent of technicians work in private practice, so for the scope of this report we will focus on this group of technicians. In the clinical setting, technicians have many responsibilities, including but not limited to, client education, laboratory workup, anesthesiology, radiography, and surgical nursing.

To find out what the most common genres of communication are used, I interviewed Stacey Tuerk, a licensed technician at Lawrenceburg Vet Clinic, a private small animal practice. According to Stacey, the vast majority (85%) of her time is spent verbally communicating to different people. Most often this verbal communication is with clients both by phone and one-on-one. The second most common method of communication is writing with 10%, leaving only 5% of her time in reading. When writing, Stacey said most of that time was used to take medical notes, write prescriptions, or fill out referrals. Overall, the decision of choosing the method of communication was to use the most thorough and expedient.

Below is a classification outline of the discourse forums that I gathered in my research followed by a brief analysis of each audience based group and how the topics within it are applied.

I. Client-based Audience
   1. Clinical Disease Info
      - Verbal Client Education
      - Treatment of Epilepsy Fact-sheet
   2. Patient Info
      - Discharge Instruction Sheets
   3. Correspondence
      - Phone conferences
      - Sympathy cards
II. Audience of Veterinary Professionals
   1. Clinical Disease Info
      - A New Tool for Diagnosing Acute Pancreatitis, *Veterinary Medicine*

- Ophthalmology, *Veterinary Technician*
- Feline Heartworm Slideshow presentation, Pfizer Animal Health

2. Patient Info
   - Medical Patient Charts
   - Laboratory Workup Sheets
   - Memos from Emergency Clinic
3. Correspondence
   - Referral Forms
   - Vet Technician discussion boards

In the client-based audience classification, the route of communication is both written and verbalized. A lot of time is spent in verbal client education. According to Stacey, this is one of the most difficult tasks. Part of the difficulty is in explaining medical jargon in laymen's terms. That is why some of the documents like the treatment fact-sheet have been developed, so that the client can also have something to take home and review the information discussed. Phone conferencing is also used to answer client questions as they come up after the initial visit. Sympathy cards are used to express the staff's sympathy and keep goodwill with a client after they've lost a pet.

The second classification group is discourse among professionals. In this case professionals include veterinarians, technicians and others in the medical field. This type of communication is different from the client-based audience because of the use of medical terminology in the language. In the published articles on clinical illnesses, much of the terminology is defined so that it may attract a wider medical audience, but in the patient documentation much of the terminology is not defined and the use of abbreviations and symbols develops to save time and space. The referral forms and discussion boards may have the use of medical terminology or not, as the situation permits.

To further understand the discourse of veterinary technology, I have selected a document to analyze in more depth. The document I have chosen is the Discharge Instructions form that is used on a daily basis in the veterinary field (see Appendix A). Discharge instructions are a written form of instructions and recommendations for the client to take home after their pet has had a surgical operation or hospitalization. It is divided into topics of exigency, or problems that require a response such as suture removal, diet and exercise, and bandages. The Discharge Instructions form is often used as a template to answer the most commonly asked questions, but also has areas to fill in individual instruction to the owner like medications prescribed.

Discharge instructions are written to the pet's owner, or the client. A rhetorical audience is often defined by the demographics of the audience (Rybacki and Rybacki, 26). In this case, the demographics are hard to generalize. They are all pet owners, but their knowledge of pet care often varies. Because of this variance, a constraint is put on the technician; they must be careful not to assume too much. "Never Withhold Water!" is typed in bold for this reason. However, questions about the procedure performed are usually covered by the veterinarian before surgery; therefore, we can assume that the clients don't need instruction on this so it is not a topic on the discharge instructions.

The language used in discharge instructions is used carefully. A technician needs to be careful about the pathos, or emotions, that might be implied in the instructions. A client may already be emotional about having a procedure done, especially if it is an emergency procedure or considered invasive. The instruction is usually very neutral in tone to prevent pathos from having a negative effect. Logos is used to show logical post-surgical care like keeping bandages clean and dry. Most of the instructions use this type

of language structure because it can easily appeal to people's common sense. Ethos can be used effectively to establish what would be the best outpatient care. This works well in cases where the patient may have been in a previous state of neglect. A technician can use an ethical stance to suggest a better care situation after the dog returns home, and thereby cultivate in the client a sense of trust. Ethos generally is used in the topic of exercise and may also include housing choices, flea and tick prevention, or diet changes.

Conclusion:

From this report, I can see that communication is an important element in the Veterinary Technology field. The field of Veterinary technology has developed specific formats to communicate with both people in the medical profession and with clients. The use of language structure in these communications is especially important because of the emotions they may portray.

Through researching and generating this report I have seen the difficulties associated with discourse in the veterinary profession and how to communicate effectively. Each individual has their own way to use communication within their field, but overall there are certain formats that are generally followed within the community. After completing this project, I feel excited and confident in entering the Veterinary Technology profession.

Works Cited

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Appendix A:

Sample Discharge Instruction Sheet

DISCHARGE INSTRUCTIONS

*PET'S NAME _____

* SUTURE REMOVAL _____ 2 Weeks _____ 3 Weeks _____ Other

Keep incision clean and dry. Do not bathe until sutures are removed.

*DIET   Withhold food to prevent vomiting and/or diarrhea. **Never withhold water!**
      __X__ 12 Hours

      Resume normal diet on _____
      _____ 24 Hours

      _____ Other (specify) _____

*EXERCISE Limit your pets exercise and/or mobility for _____ days/weeks.

Special Instructions   _____

_____

_____

*BANDAGES Keep Bandages clean and dry. Return for bandage change/recheck in

      _____ Days

      _____ Weeks

      _____ Other (Specify)

*ELIMINATIONS Use shredded newspaper in litter box for 3-5 days. _____

Your pet may have vomiting and/or diarrhea for

1 - 2 (days/weeks).

MEDICATIONS DISPENSED

MEDICATION	DIRECTIONS	SIDE-EFFECTS
Rimadyl –	Pain medication as directed if prescribed.	

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS, DON'T HESITATE TO
CALL US AT (812) 537-0884.