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TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS AND WRITING CONSULTANTS:
IDENTITY AND EXPERTISE

by

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B.A. Merrimack College, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of technical communicators and writing center consultants in regards to their identities and the expertise that they bring to what they do. Both fields have struggled with a lack of understanding surrounding what their positions entail and more importantly how they perform in their roles. With this in mind, the goal of this paper is to analyze how the growth of each field and the variations of each position contribute to the issue of identity. Furthermore, as a result of the identity problem that faces each position, I suggest using the theory of liminality, communication theory, and genre theory to examine more closely how technical communicators and writing center consultants approach the work they do.

Technical communicators and writing center consultants perform very similar roles in their respective fields. Both positions have the ability to contribute to various fields through the work that they do. Technical communicators have the ability to communicate in multiple areas without necessarily being subject matter experts in the areas they participate in. The same holds true for writing center consultants who may, in one day, assist students in multiple subjects without necessarily having specific disciplinary knowledge of each area addressed. Outsiders do not understand how technical communicators and writing consultants can communicate within an unfamiliar field, which creates a main area of controversy for both roles. Using the three theories mentioned above, I make an argument for just how it is possible for them to perform in this capacity.

By focusing on how technical communicators and writing center consultants perform in their roles instead of on their writing, their identity and expertise becomes clear and confusion surrounding each field can be banished. Although technical communicators and writing consultants both face similar challenges, their responsibilities differ in ways that affect how these theories apply. Still, all three theories illuminate how rhetoric provides the basis for expertise in both technical communication and writing centers.

DEDICATION

I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my godparents, Stacy and Terry. It was truly your guidance and support that got me to this point. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR AND WRITING CONSULTANT: IDENTITY PROBLEMS AND EXPERTISE

As the fields of technical communication and writing center scholarship have grown, controversy has surrounded them. For technical communication this controversy began when the discipline separated from engineering, where it had its inception, and persists as a debate about whether to teach technical communication within an English or Engineering department. For writing center scholarship, controversy surrounded the move from classroom use of peer tutoring to stand-alone writing center and persists as a debate concerning how a writing center should be structured. As these fields grew, each has experienced extensive changes that lead to a crisis of identity. This identity issue surfaced in the difficulty each discipline has in defining itself and the confusion each discipline encounters from outsiders about its function. Resolving this issue is necessary if the fields are to reach their full potential. As Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke point out in their article, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory”:

...a social identity is a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group...A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as member of the same social category. Through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group. (225)

Without a solid identity, technical communicators and writing center practitioners are trapped in the out-group, arguing about what they do and should do. Consequently, outsiders fail to recognize what technical communicators and writing center practitioners do. This thesis will analyze the identity issues facing both positions, along with provide insight into three theories that support technical communicator and writing consultant expertise.

History of Technical Communication and Identity Issues

Technical communication, first established after the Civil War, was created in response to a need in the Engineering discipline. As Robert J. Connors points out:

During that conflict as never before, field engineers had been important figures, and with the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, the establishment of A & M colleges, and the growing technical needs of postwar America, the creation of schools and colleges of engineering...was a natural step. It was within these schools of engineering that the courses we now know as technical writing courses began. (5)

Before 1870 much of an engineering school's curriculum was based in the humanities; however, as time progressed, only freshman writing courses remained in engineering schools. At that time a common belief was that engineers only needed an introductory course in writing.

Consequently, "...by the schools' own later admissions, they turned out a large number of otherwise competent engineers who were near-illiterates" (Connors 5). Many schools then began to create English departments within engineering disciplines with the goal of addressing these writing problems.

Eventually technical writing courses were accepted by regular English departments, which is the point where the two disciplines split. Engineering had not changed, but the field of technical communication, which was focused on English and writing related concerns, could no longer be seen as solely belonging in the Engineering field. Jennifer Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak describe this occurrence in their article, "The Technical Communicator as Author: Meaning, Power, Authority":

The conjuncture of the increased demands placed on highly specialized engineers and the growing awareness of the complexity and difficulty of encoding their ideas (meanings),

gives shape to the development of technical writing as a discipline in its own right...Course work and textbooks began appearing that were directed toward the technical writing student in particular rather than toward the engineer. (18)

The progression of the field was slow; however, as changes occurred that warranted the break of technical communication from Engineering, the role of the technical communicator was also altered.

The transformation of technical communicator into its own entity was a turning point for the field of technical communication. In his article, "What Do Technical Communicators Need to Know?" George F. Hayhoe describes this phenomenon:

When technical communication began to develop as a profession in the defense and aerospace industries after World War II, technical writers and editors were typically technical experts first and communicators second. Because their audiences were usually other experts, the emphasis on domain knowledge was understandable. But when consumer electronics outpaced military, air transport, and space programs as the largest market for technical communicators in the 1980s and '90s, non-experts became the largest audience for information products. Thus, over the past 20 years, the ability to communicate clearly to non-experts using a variety of media and information types has emerged as the hallmark of technical communication excellence. (151)

Whereas at the outset of the profession, it made sense to use subject matter experts (professionals with extensive knowledge concentrated in a specific area) as writers because they were communicating to other subject matter experts, in today's field, that is no longer the only audience that technical communicators target. Now practitioners must be able to translate field specific information into information that is accessible to a wider range of users who may not

have any knowledge in that particular area. This newer role for technical communicators is echoed in Hayhoe's article, "Core Competencies: The Essence of Technical Communication":

When it became apparent that scientists, engineers, and programmers didn't communicate effectively with these lay audiences, companies in these lines of business began to recruit and hire people with communication expertise to do the job. Thus, technical communication evolved into a fulltime profession, not simply a task that technical people occasionally performed as part of their job responsibilities. (397)

When the end-user changed, so did the needs of the field. Instead of hiring writers who could communicate to other experts, it became necessary to hire writers whose main expertise was in communication. Such a large change from inception to current practice naturally contributes to the identity issues faced by the field.

Many scholars strive to define what a technical communicator does, but definitions are highly varied. For example, in her article, "The Truth About Technical Writing," Kathryn Grossberg quotes Merrill Whitburn as defining technical writing as, "...the application of general communication skills to special kinds of communication..." (15). Grossberg's definition, although very general, does encompass the role of technical communicator in the sense that in this role, a technical writer uses communication expertise to transfer knowledge about a certain topic to others. Pamela S. Ecker echoes the general approach to definition in her article, "Why Define Technical Communication at All." She suggests an alternative to defining technical communication as, "...current practicing professionals of technical communication...should simply acknowledge that all communication—whether it is primarily "technical" or whether it better fits another genre—is multidisciplinary and constantly evolving" (570). Ecker's definition provides support for the idea that technical communication can apply to many areas, while

acknowledging that the field will potentially continue to grow. Ecker's definition also stops short of setting hard boundaries by which to define the field. This may seem somewhat contradictory in the search for an identity; however, when a field is constrained by a specific definition, it can hinder its ability for growth.

Scholar, Richard Calaway, provides a further definition for what technical communicators do:

What a technical writer does is absorb information from subject matter experts, generally the people who have designed and built the product or process being described. The technical writer then typically reads as much as possible about the subject so as to...see some examples of how the project or process might be used. In the ideal case, the writer experiments with the actual process or product, testing its usability and the effects of user error. Finally, the technical writer translates the jargon into something a non-expert can comprehend, complete with detailed examples. (20)

Calaway explains what technical communication is and how it is approached. Similar to Grossberg and Ecker, he refuses to apply specifics to his explanation, which allows the field to be applied to a multitude of areas from engineering to healthcare.

The number of definitions used to describe the field of technical communication can confuse those outside of the field. In his article, "A Question of Identity," Dan Jones addresses this exact issue, "Like it or not, technical communicators interact daily with people who have only a faint idea of what they do. They have relatives and friends who are puzzled by the word technical in front of the word communicator. They have co-workers in nearby cubicles who can only guess what technical communicators do for eight hours a day or more" (3). There is a common misconception that technical writers simply regurgitate information that is produced by

subject matter experts, as reflected in Nicole Amare's article, "Act Well Thy Part: Performing Technical Writer and Engineer."

...some...still pigeonhole technical writers as wordsmiths who refuse to learn the technology...Janet K. Christian describes one engineer who thought technical writers were little more than "glorified clerk typist[s]" and a programmer who labeled technical writers as "those people who flowerize our [programmers'] writing"[3]. (211)

The confusion surrounding the role of technical communicator carries over to the jobs that technical communicators perform in various companies as well. Bonnie W. Hayman reports that from one company to another, technical communicators could hold positions akin to an engineer, while in others they could have a more clerical position. She also points out that in certain companies technical communicators do not have a defined position (6). According to the Society for Technical Communication website, the following list covers the various jobs that fall under the technical communication umbrella: technical writers, technical editors, indexers, information architects, instructional designers, technical illustrators, globalization and localization specialists, usability and human factors professionals, visual designers, web designers, web developers, teachers and researchers of technical communication, and trainers and e-learning developers. The roles associated with technical communication are varied and are not limited to one area.

Although technical communication began with the field of engineering, it can be applied to the medical field, emerging technologies, and software development. As a result, it is hard to define a field that has a number of positions that can apply to so many areas. With such a wide range of roles that technical communicators play, a certain amount of confusion associated with what exactly this field entails seems natural.

Unfortunately, this confusion negatively affects many aspects of the position. To begin with, a lack of understanding of what a technical communicator does can block positive recognition for what practitioners accomplish. This lack of recognition can lend itself to an overall negative association with the profession, causing potential students to avoid studying it. If fewer students study technical communication, educators will be adversely affected, along with their institutions. As a result, not only would there be fewer professionals in the field, but there would also in turn be fewer jobs available as companies would not generate separate positions for a role that is not understood. The confusion about the nature of technical communication expertise can potentially lead to a downward spiral for the profession. Therefore it is worthwhile to consider how a technical communicator can be an expert in their field without being a subject matter expert in the various fields they participate in. In this thesis, I will focus on technical writers in the engineering discipline, the field I work in, because technical writers in this area encounter the most obvious manifestation of the issues addressed.

Technical communication majors have the opportunity, in certain schools, to choose between different tracks which include a technical communication degree in English or a technical communication degree in science. The track that is English-based does not address anything technical, such as engineering; however, the science track does. Despite the split in the type of technical communication degrees, both types of technical writers are trained in rhetoric and have the skills necessary to effectively communicate specific information to a wide range of users—skills that engineers do not learn in their field. As Joseph Jeyaraj points out, “In these relationships between subject matter experts and technical writers, a power differential sometimes exists that affects the technical writing situation” (9). The disconnect that is present

between engineers and technical writers provides fodder for the debate involving technical communicators' roles.

Stereotypes assume technical communicators do nothing more than type up information provided by engineers. Linn K. Bekins and Sean D. Williams suggest in their article,

“Positioning Technical Communication for the Creative Economy,” that this is not the case:

While we [technical communicators] write manuals that outline step-by-step how to repair airplanes, design environmental impact statements that methodically analyze the effect of building on soil and water flows and native bird populations, or document the instructions necessary to install, configure, and use electronic healthcare management systems, such communications have often been misunderstood as static representations of products and not dynamic communications that add value to an organization through service, through making complex arguments instigating public policy, and through innovating. (288)

The authors point out that the work of technical communicators is not as simple as typing up information. It is an active process, based on the act of communication itself that requires more involvement than simply copying the work of a subject matter expert.

Hayhoe echoes the idea that technical communicators have expertise in the communication of information:

...what sets technical communicators apart from word processing operators and desktop publishers is not our ability to use software but rather our ability to communicate technical information effectively. That ability depends on our knowledge of communication concepts and techniques, and on our knowledge of one or more technical domains. It is this knowledge of communication and of technical subjects that constitutes

the body of knowledge that differentiates our profession from others. (“Technical Writers Need to Know” 151)

The ability to effectively communicate within multiple disciplines requires a strong background in rhetoric, which is a large portion of what is taught in the technical communication major.

Despite the fact that technical communicators are trained to make discipline-specific information available to outsiders, “...the technical writer is assumed to be a mere surrogate, or stand-in, for the actual (but busy) sender, the engineer” (Slack et al 18). The field of technical communication produces professionals who have the ability to communicate within various subjects, for however short of a time, and communicate proficiently within these areas. This skill, as Karen A. Schriver points out, often raises one simple question, “Is it better to have an expert writer who is a subject matter novice or a novice writer who is a subject matter expert?” (325) The role of technical communicator was created to complement the work of subject matter experts who do not have training in writing and rhetoric. Unlike subject matter experts, technical communicators are trained to learn new information, to ask questions to better focus the end product, and to create documentation that helps the end-user. Although subject matter experts do have expert knowledge concerning the product, they do not usually communicate to users outside of the field. As a result, they often rely on jargon that can be hard for an outsider to understand. Therefore, to answer Schriver’s question, it is better to have an expert writer who can produce user-friendly documentation, but may be a subject matter novice.

However, the expert technical writer is more than simply a “bridge-builder” or “translator” (Hovde 62) because in order to communicate effectively, a technical writer must analyze the end-user. Thinking of technical writers simply as people who make information from experts more presentable can lead to harmful stereotypes. As Jeyaraj points out, “...evidence

during the past few years indicates that many technical writers are marginalized by subject matter experts in various hierarchical relationships” (10). How should technical writers respond? Hayhoe argues that in order to be proficient in their careers, technical communicators should take the initiative to become experts, not only in their field of study, but also in the fields in which they communicate (“Core Competencies” 397). Hayhoe’s suggestion illustrates that technical communicators can work in an unfamiliar field by using their training to learn about it, adapt to communication styles in that particular field, and use those skills to effectively communicate about that subject. By shifting the focus from what a technical communicator knows to how a technical communicator uses that knowledge, technical communicators can be seen as experts in their discipline and their skill set—not in the area they are attempting to communicate in, for example engineering or healthcare. The same can be said for writing consultants who share many similarities with the role of technical communicator. Not only do both fields have issues of identity, but each field is multi-faceted and can be applied to a number of other fields. The parallels between technical communicators and writing consultants inspired me to address these issues in this thesis.

Writing Center History and Identity Issues

Like technical communication, writing centers also arose from precise curricular needs. In “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History”, Peter Carino provides an overview of the potential starting place. Carino reports, “. . .it is likely that centers evolved from a classroom format known as the laboratory method. This format enabled intervention in the student’s writing process through individual help from the instructor and peer editing groups, two methods shared by writing centers and classrooms today” (12). Carino notes that this method was first

documented in 1904 by a high school teacher and gained popularity as other teachers began to adopt it. The laboratory approach was used in the classroom until 1934, "...when the University of Minnesota and the State University of Iowa (now the University of Iowa) established separate facilities for laboratory instruction..." (Carino 13). This development began what we recognize today as writing centers that are located outside of the classroom. Despite this distance from the classroom, Elizabeth H. Boquet posits that it still remained part of the classroom structure as students would be required to attend a writing lecture and a writing lab, which would take place in the writing center (45).

By the 1940s, writing centers that were separate from the classroom became more widespread and Carino states, "...it can be documented that the number of labs increased with the advent of Armed Forces English, on-campus programs for preparing officers for World War II" (14). This growth made writing centers more widely sought after. In 1950, a University of Illinois study found that of the 55 schools that replied to a survey, 24 had writing labs and 11 were working to get them. During the 1950s and 1960s, publishing focus shifted to other topics in the English community, but in the 1970s, writing centers began to reappear in the literature. Writing centers, "...were created largely to fix problems that university officials had difficulty even naming, things like increasing enrollment, larger minority populations, and declining (according to the public) literary skills" (Boquet 50). The problems universities faced were mainly due to open enrollment, which led to increased enrollment, as Boquet pointed out, and by extension underprepared students. At that time, peer tutors were introduced to the writing center setting and the literature began to focus on the work done in writing labs, instead of focusing on the writing lab itself. This was an important shift in writing center scholarship due to the fact that the newness of writing labs was wearing off and instead of focusing on the existence

of the writing lab, scholars began to delve deeper to examine the goals of the writing center—ultimately, helping to shape the field as we know it today.

The writing center discipline faces similar issues as technical communication. For example, writing centers do not have a universal definition that specifies what every writing center does. Writing center facilities vary from location to location and use different terminology for the people who work in the center. Some writing centers refer to their employees as peer tutors writing assistances, rhetoric assistants, while others refer to them as writing consultants. Name differences can suggest different types of responsibilities. In her article, “Tutoring in Unfamiliar Subjects,” Alexis Greiner describes how two titles differ:

At Rollins, we consider a tutor to be someone who helps a student with subject matter, while a writing center consultant does not share this goal. Consultants help by provoking thought through conversation, posing questions, and engaging writers in the work of writing. A consultant also helps by urging the student to write because the act of writing is itself a valuable way for writers to discover what they do and do not know about their topic and to figure out what they want to say in their papers. (85)

Based on Greiner’s explanation, a tutor aids students with a particular subject, while a consultant is focused on the student’s writing and on helping them to learn to use writing tools beyond that particular session.

Similar to technical communication’s numerous applications, there are also different types of writing centers. Some can be considered general writing centers because they aid students from all majors in writing related concerns. These types of writing centers are usually found in an undergraduate setting. In a graduate writing center the focus is on working with students who are preparing dissertations or theses. In his article, “Peer Tutoring In A Graduate

Writing Centre: Identity, Expertise, And Advice Resisting,” Waring Hansun Zhang describes the interactions that occur in graduate writing consultations and posits that due to their developed identity, it is harder to collaborate with graduate students than with undergraduate students. Beyond the general and graduate writing centers, there are also field-specific centers, for example, engineering writing centers or law school writing centers. According to Kristin E. Murray, in her article, “Peer Tutoring and the Law School Writing Center: Theory and Practice”, “...law school writing centers should be affiliated with the larger legal writing program. Whereas at undergraduate institutions the clientele may be comprised of writers across a wide spectrum of disciplines, law school writing centers, of course, serve only legal writers” (7). This same idea applies to any writing center that is associated with a particular program. Although the goal of focusing on the writer remains the same, the skills of the writing consultant must change from one type to another. Another aspect that adds to the complexity of the role of writing consultant is the need for practitioners to work with English as a Second Language (ESL) students or students with disabilities. Traditionally, these students were tutored or worked with in a separate environment; however, writing centers work with all students and consultants must learn how to interact with everyone. With such a large variety of writing centers that contain workers with differently named roles, the confusion associated with what a particular writing center does can be understandable.

The misunderstanding that accompanies this field is echoed in Stephen M. North’s article, “The Idea of a Writing Center,”

Misunderstanding is something one expects – and almost gets used to – in the writing center business. The new faculty member in our writing-across-the-curriculum program, for example, who sends his students to get their papers “cleaned up” in the Writing

Center before they hand them in; the occasional student who tosses her paper on our reception desk, announcing she'll "pick it up in an hour;" even the well-intentioned administrators who are so happy that we deal with "skills" or "fundamentals" or, to use the word that seems to subsume all others, "grammar"...these are fairly predictable. (63)

Although writing centers attempt to inform outsiders about what they do, this confusion continues to arise. Not only does it affect writing consultants, but the writing centers as well. When faculty members do not understand the goals and the work being done in the writing center, it is likely that they will not suggest that their students go there for help. Likewise, students who assume the writing center is a place where their papers get edited and handed back would not go there for help with developing writing assignments. This leads to less traffic in the writing center, which ultimately shows a decline in use (writing centers track the number of students that visit them each day). If the writing center is not being used, it is likely that the school will no longer provide funding for it because it no longer serves the students.

On the International Writing Centers Association website, Muriel Harris acknowledges the identity issue that writing centers face:

When there is a lack of understanding, outsiders tend to view the center as less important, capable of operating with limited funds and/or facilities, and able to cope with minimal assistance. In times of budget cuts, writing centers are more likely to be viewed as expendable because they are unlike traditional credit-bearing courses. Thus, the tenuous nature of some facilities and their reduced levels of support can demoralize the staff and weaken the writing center's ability to do its work. ("Writing Center Concept")

By reducing confusion associated with the field the significance of what writing centers do can be brought to the attention of those who affect their fate. As with technical communicators, the

solution to this issue for writing centers may be in focusing more on what skills writing consultants and technical communicators use to do their jobs, as opposed to focusing on what they physically do. This idea stems from the number of different writing centers that exist and the many fields that technical communication can apply to. If the fields try to explain every type of writing center or every type of technical communicator to outsiders, it may perpetuate the confusion. However, if the focus is put on how consultants and technical communicators do their jobs (because the approach is the same no matter what writing center or what area of focus), the argument for their expertise and an aid to addressing their identity issues may come to fruition.

In this thesis, I will focus on the general writing center staffed by writing consultants because this is the type of writing center I have worked in and am most knowledgeable about. As with technical communicators working in the field of engineering, general writing centers also provide an obvious example of how the issues described in this paper are manifested. At a general writing center, the consultants confront a wide range of fields and as a result, outsiders have a difficult time understanding their position.

As someone who has worked in both a writing center setting and a technical communicator role, I have noticed that writing centers share many similarities with the technical communication field. To begin with, writing center consultants must be proficient with the English language, communication, and rhetoric, but normally they are not required to major in a particular discipline. As a result, consultants can be compared to technical communicators because they assist students with papers on a multitude of topics, but are not necessarily experts on those topics. North suggests that, "...our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (69). With this in mind, the focus in a writing center is on the writer who is coming in for help, not the paper they are producing. Writing centers aim to help students learn the skills necessary

to compose any paper at any point in time, instead of focusing their help on fixing a paper they are currently working on.

Consultants are not skilled in every single major that they assist a student with. Instead, they are familiar with writing conventions, grammar, and communication styles present in various disciplines. It is also important that writing consultants understand the writing process. In order to be effective in the writing center, a consultant must know what aspects are important to a student's writing process, how to identify where the student is in the writing process, and how to aid the student progress. In her article, "A Tutor Needs to Know the Subject Matter to Help a Student with a Paper: Agree, Disagree, Not Sure," Susan M. Hubbuch addresses both sides of the controversial question of whether a student needs to be an expert in the particular field with which they are assisting a student. In regards to the argument that students should have a familiarity with the topic they are assisting with, she suggests:

The major advantage...that the knowledgeable tutor has is that he or she knows the appropriate questions to ask. A field of study is defined not only by the object of study of a community of scholars but also by the type of questions these scholars ask in order to elicit and to evaluate information about that subject. Thus a tutor who is knowledgeable in a field can be especially helpful to a student by guiding that student to ask questions of his/her subject that are appropriate to the field and by helping the student develop answers to such questions that are in line with the accepted methodologies of that field.

(25)

In order to properly communicate within a given field, a student should know the kinds of questions to ask of that field; however, is there a downside to being knowledgeable in that field? Hubbuch points out that expertise in a given field can cause the student consultant to gravitate

more towards telling a student what to do in their writing and to steer them away from their own lines of query, which does not help them to grow as a writer in that field (26). Unfortunately, this sort of direction goes against the main goal of consultants.

On the other hand, the “ignorant” tutor, as Hubbuch refers to a consultant without specific subject matter knowledge of a field, has an advantage, “. . .because the ignorant tutor has no expertise in the subject matter, the tutor has no choice but to focus on the intrinsic logic of the student’s ideas” (27). This approach can have a much more positive effect on the student because it requires them to explain their ideas and to create a logical argument. Hubbuch suggest that the ignorant tutor is the best candidate to work in the writing center:

At this point it is probably apparent that this ignorant tutor of mine, while she is not an expert in literary criticism or biology or art history, is not so very ignorant after all. In addition to being aware that the style and organizational patterns of a specific paper will be determined by the genre and field in which the student is writing, she is an individual with a logical inquiring mind who cultivates intellectual skepticism. . . .(29)

Addressing both sides of the argument, Hubbuch concludes that a student who is most knowledgeable about writing conventions is the best candidate for a writing consultant. Over time, however, writing consultants do learn the communication conventions associated with various disciplines and can therefore become more involved in the paper’s topic.

Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz, in their article, “Look Back and Say ‘So What’: The Limitations of the Generalist Tutor,” echo Hubbuch’s sentiment. Although they do concede that generalist consultants are limited in the scope of what they can accomplish, they also point out that discipline-specific tutors can be tempted to direct a student too forcefully. Kiedaisch and Dinitz add that the majority of students who seek help from the writing center do so for papers

that are geared towards a general audience, which means that writing conventions are more important than subject matter. Thus consultants who have training in rhetoric can perform in the role proficiently, but also are the best candidates for it.

Michael Pemberton, in his article, “Writing Center Ethics: ‘The Question of Expertise’,” suggests three reasons why generalist tutors (writing consultants) are the best candidates for writing consultants. First, most classes give students writing assignments that require them to use general rhetorical skills, instead of specific discipline knowledge. Second, students who receive such assignments are most likely new to the discipline and are graded more on writing ability rather than on disciplinary conventions. And third, if a consultant has less subject matter knowledge than the student, the student can feel more comfortable by claiming some level of expertise over the consultant, which can also lead to consultants asking questions that the student might not have previously considered (16). With this in mind, the expertise of a writing consultant does not lie in their major they are studying in, but in their actions.

It is apparent that technical communicators and writing center consultants not only have similar responsibilities, but also face similar confusion about their positions. Why would these positions exist, in such different settings, if they did not require some level of expertise? By examining each position in relation to the theory of liminality, communication theory, and genre theory, the expertise required by both positions becomes apparent.

Theory of Liminality, Communication Theory, and Genre Theory Introduction

The first theory I examine, the theory of Liminality, describes how people that don't belong to a particular community (or professional field) gain the ability to navigate between multiple disciplines. The next theory, communication theory, uses three different views (transmission, translation and articulation view) to examine the ways in which information is shared with an audience. The final theory, genre theory, explains how genre is an active social process of communicating discipline-specific information. The combination of these three theories clarifies what technical communicators and writing center consultants do in their roles, thereby contributing to each field's identity.

No standpoint guarantees an unencumbered view—with each theory, some situations may not fully fit. For example, the theory of liminality explains how technical communicators and writing consultants can contribute to various fields while not being considered an expert or a member of those fields. But this theory raises the corresponding question: how can someone who would be described using this theory be considered an expert at anything? The theorists who describe communication theory suggest that in order to be considered someone who has authority in a specific field one must take part in meaning making, but writing consultants are not considered authors in their work. Finally, genre theory can be seen as a theory that can be applied to any field and as a result, the question arises as to what sets technical communicators and writing center consultant interactions with genre theory apart from other fields? These questions will be addressed in the chapters that follow.

The overall goal of this thesis is to provide an argument for the expertise of technical communicators and writing consultants. These positions do not require practitioners to have subject matter expertise, but instead, these roles come with their own type of expertise.

CHAPTER 2: THE APPLICATION OF THE THEORY OF LIMINALITY TO THE ROLES OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR AND WRITING CENTER CONSULTANT

Liminality was first presented as a psychology theory in 1884, and then applied to the anthropology field in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep (La Shure). More recently, in the 1960s, anthropologist, Victor Turner used the theory of liminality to explain tribal rites of passage, specifically, the, "...contrast between 'state' and 'transition'..." (Turner 94). In other words, what occurs when a tribe member moves from childhood to adulthood, and what area does that person occupy when between the two? The 'in-between' phase is what Turner refers to as liminal space: "During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attribute of the past or coming state" (94). The tribe member is no longer a child, but is not yet an adult, therefore residing in liminal space.

Liminal space is the area where people have no ties to any group and thus in this space cease to have an identity. As Turner explains:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (95)

Consequently, this is exactly the space in which technical communicators and writing center consultants thrive. Both positions strive to find positions located in between fields in order to be able to contribute to multiple fields. Although Turner describes this space as lacking identity, it is impossible to leave behind learned skills. Technical communicators and writing consultants

bring their expertise in rhetoric from their respective fields, and use those learned tools to communicate within the field they are working in. For example, a new technical communicator writing about unfamiliar equipment can learn to communicate about it without being an engineering expert. The same holds true for writing consultants, who can help a student with an engineering paper without being an expert on engineering. In this sense, both technical communicators and writing consultants fit Turner's idea of not having an identity, although they do bring expertise from previous areas into future interactions. The liminal space is where technical communicators and writing consultants operate. As a result, outsiders do become confused as to exactly what these roles do. This chapter explains how the theory of liminality can be used to aid in understanding just how technical communicators and writing consultants perform in their respective roles.

Liminality can be a hard idea to grasp; however, by examining the official definition, it is easier to conceptualize. The Oxford dictionary entry for "liminality" highlights two important aspects of how technical writers and writing consultants function. The first definition states that liminal is, "relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process" ("Liminal"). These roles are constantly in a state of transition as their positions require the ability to contribute to various fields, sometimes multiple times in a day. This comes from the need to write or guide an author's writing in different topics or even in different types of writing (i.e. procedural writing, informative writing, operational writing, etc.). Technical communicators and writing center consultants can be faced with constantly switching from one topic to another in order to communicate. When the job is done in that particular area, technical communicators and writing consultants have the ability to transition out of that subject, directing their attention to another, perpetuating the idea of a constant state of flux. For example, technical writers could create jet

equipment procedures one week and helicopter procedures the next. For writing center consultants, this transition can happen even faster. Writing consultants can transition from aiding a student with a psychology paper at the beginning of their shift, to working with papers in biology, English, nursing, business, etc. It is this ability to communicate within various disciplines without belonging to them that constitutes an expertise for both positions.

The second definition, “occupying a position at, or on both sides, of a threshold” (“Liminal”), describes a position located at or on both sides of a threshold. Again, this describes the exact position that technical communicators and writing consultants want to be in. When at a threshold, both roles have the ability to mix rhetorical skills on one side with the field on the other side (i.e. engineering, psychology, etc). They are never in one field for extended periods of time, although both positions draw on their rhetorical expertise as they contribute to other areas. The liminal threshold always requires rhetoric to be on one side, but it can be hard to describe to outsiders. However, in his article, “Liminality and Othering”, Joseph Jayaraj explains how technical communicators function as liminal subjects.

Liminality and Technical Communicators

Jayaraj states “liminal subjects” are professionals whose knowledge of rhetoric enables them to participate in other disciplines and become involved in them (11). More specifically, Jayaraj begins with the account of liminality’s most famous theorizer, Turner. He says:

...Turner (1974)...discussed liminality as a state of flux that emerges at a particular stage in the temporal process of a community. He viewed the movement of communities from one epoch, or stage, to another as a transitional state between two epochs that are, in comparison, not in such a condition of flux. He argued that a transitional state follows a

break from normal cultural patterns; such a state is characterized by the formations of alliances within this new liminal space. At such times, a sense of ‘communitas’ (p. 25) overwhelms the community, resulting in practices that question the normal practices of the community. Following the liminal stage, the community slips back into a stage governed once again by a normal and stable set of practices. Thus, when the condition of flux is resolved, the liminal state either reverts back to the former cultural system, with some adjustments, or remains a greatly changed structure. (15)

Jeyaraj expands upon Turner’s account by suggesting that that liminality can be considered a fluid space between two discursive communities, each of which already embraces well-defined discursive patterns. People within these communities are constrained by these pre-existing conditions; however, a person in the liminal space between the communities can “intervene” or “transgress” these conventions (16). “These interventions and transgressions result in liminal subjects, such as technical writers, being able to form new horizons” (Jeyaraj 16). The new horizons that technical writers are able to create are based on rhetoric and are not defined by the discursive rules of one community.

Rhetorical knowledge, as Jeyaraj points out, applies to every discipline, “Because rhetoric works across disciplines, the rhetorical practices of one discipline cannot constitute the entirety of all of rhetoric’s discursive practices” (17); instead, rhetoric itself is a liminal discipline. Jeyaraj posits:

As rhetoricians, technical writers occupy a subject position located between disciplinary communities...As a result, rhetoricians have the potential to understand various disciplinary rhetorics and, consequently, through their knowledge of rhetoric, to produce

knowledge in different disciplines. In the case of technical writers, they rearticulate discipline-specific knowledge to make it accessible and useful beyond the discipline. (17)

Located between subject matter experts and audience:

...technical writers, through their knowledge of rhetoric, are capable of behaving liminally as they encounter various rhetorics from different discursive frameworks. If we define technical writers as liminal subjects in possession of liminal knowledge, then they should not claim that they have the same specialized expertise that subject matter experts have. They can, however, claim to possess knowledge on how language and culture structure thinking and, more important in the context of technical writing, how interests dominate and drive the interpretative frameworks of a discipline.... (Jeyaraj 17-18)

Thus Liminality explains just how a technical communicator operates. Jeyaraj is not suggesting that technical communicators have no expertise just that their expertise lies outside the fields within which they temporarily communicate. Their rhetorical tools enable them to move from one discipline to the next; the use of these tools is where their expertise lies.

If their expertise lies in rhetoric, then what is rhetoric? One widely accepted definition is, "...a discipline for training students 1) to perceive how language is at work orally and in writing, and 2) to become proficient in applying the resources of language in their own speaking and writing" (Burton). As a scholar in the field of rhetoric, Gideon O. Burton works closely with the goals of the field and provides a great definition. The ability to understand just how language affects writing is an integral skill to both technical communicators and writing consultants.

Liminality and Writing Consultants

Like technical communicators, writing consultants are hired based on their skills in rhetoric and not based on their major. Writing centers desire consultants with a strong rhetorical background in order to communicate proficiently among disciplines. In this way, writing consultants can be seen as occupying liminal space, pulling from their rhetorical knowledge and using it to help students with their discipline-specific writing. As Alexis Greiner, an undergraduate writing consultant, points out, people ask, “How can a consultant majoring in a field such as communication help a student who is writing a paper on a topic like finitely quantifiable abstractions in calculus?” (85). Writing consultant Greiner answers that consultants working with the writing itself rather than the subject, as they may not be knowledgeable on that subject (85). In that way, the consultant can still contribute within that discipline, by guiding the writer to delve deeper into the writing conventions of that field, while not necessarily being an expert in that area. This reinforces the idea that writing consultants work within a liminal space.

Another approach that Greiner suggests for writing center consultants is a reader-centered approach.

Reader-based feedback is a great way to approach unfamiliar matters because it says to the reader, “Look, this is not my field, but your tone and flow reached me through the difficult vocabulary.” Or, “The vocabulary you use is specific and difficult, and your writing needs to be super clear to compensate. I feel confused.” In such circumstances it is useful to ask clients to assume a reader’s role and try to distance themselves from their own writing – so that they can view the paper from a perspective different from their own. (85)

By focusing on how the audience receives the information, the consultant helps the writer revise to meet audience needs.

As a new technical communication major, I worked as a writing consultant. When I engaged with students from different disciplines, I did exactly as Greiner suggests and focused on the student's writing instead of the subject matter. In this way, I was able to give the student feedback, as a first-time reader, concerning how the writing came across. This rhetorically based task allowed me to communicate within the discourse community of an unfamiliar area.

After I stopped working as a writing consultant, I began to work in as a technical writer. As a result, I have learned that technical communicators also rely on audience analysis to guide their content. Unless I consider who the audience is or what the audience needs to know, my writing can fail to deliver the right message. Audience analysis is a rhetorical tool that both positions employ.

Having worked in both roles, technical writing and writing center work are extremely similar; however, they also have very stark differences. For instance, a writing consultant's work is done in short periods of time (half an hour to an hour). During these short sessions, the writing consultant does not attempt to master unfamiliar subject matter, but instead helps the writer work through the rhetorical aspects of the writing. The writing consultant does not need to generate subject matter information, but rather to help the student to make their information more effective. On the other hand, technical communicator's projects can last anywhere from a few months to a few years. Technical communicators have time to learn enough about the topic to produce information about it. This is the biggest difference between the two fields: technical communicators are writing subject specific information from a liminal space (not needing to become experts on the topic), and writing consultants are not writing at all, but are instead using

rhetorical tools from liminal space to help students communicate effectively. Although the goals differ, both operate from a liminal space, and both rely on rhetoric.

If we consider technical communicators and writing consultants to be liminal subjects, how can they be experts in any area? By definition, liminal space lies between fields while expertise resides within a field. For the roles I have discussed in this thesis, technical communicators and writing consultants are experts in the field of rhetoric. Both are hired with a background in rhetoric, and undergo further training after they are hired. Rhetoric is itself a liminal subject, present in every field.

Occupying a liminal space does, at first glance, seem to represent a lack of expertise if liminality is transitional with no ties to any specific area; however, what seems a lack of identity is actually the area in which technical communicators and writing consultants demonstrate their expertise. The ability to communicate between disciplines is not a lack of, but a learned skill.

CHAPTER 3: APPLYING COMMUNICATION THEORY TO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR AND WRITING CONSULTANT EXPERTISE

The second theory I use to describe the expertise of technical communicators and writing consultants is the communication theory as defined by Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak, in their article, “The Technical Communicator as Author: Meaning, Power and Authority.” Although technical communicators and writing center consultants share many similarities in their working roles, technical communicators can be considered authors while writing consultants cannot. Technical communicators write the documents they produce in their roles; however, writing consultants do not. In fact, writing consultants do not want to be seen as authors and instead, do everything in their power to shy away from this label. In so far as writing center consultants have a differing objective than technical communicators, the role of writing consultants cannot be described using the same view of Communication theory, which for technical communicators emphasizes authorship and power. However, I believe that if Slack et al’s second view, the translation view, is expanded to include collaboration, the expertise of writing consultants can come to light. Thus, this chapter will address the argument for technical communicators as authors, while also providing insight into how an expanded translation view can be applied to writing center consultants.

Technical Communicator as Author

Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak provide insight into how the idea of authorship as it relates to the different views of communication theory. Slack et al. suggest:

Rather than authors producing certain discourses, certain discourses are understood to produce authors. To grant authorship to a certain discourse is to grant that discourse a

certain authority... Thus it becomes evident that authorship is a manner of valorizing certain discourses over against others. As such, authorship empowers certain individuals while at the same time renders transparent the contributions of others. (12-13)

This understanding makes it clear that applying the term “author” to a specific role gives that role a perceived power. In any situation, having power grants a person a level of respect and authority. If technical communicators are seen as authors, they will be perceived as having more power, thereby supporting the expertise claim. In order to understand this more in depth, it is important to examine the three views of communication—transmission, translation, and articulation—that Slack et al define:

In the first, the transmission view of communication, the technical communicator is a purveyor of meanings; in the second, the translation view of communication, the technical communicator is a mediator of meanings; in the third, the articulation view of communication, the technical communicator is an author who among others participates in articulating and rearticulating meanings. (14)

Moving from transmission to translation to articulation provides the technical communicator with no power, to a small amount of power, to enough power to be considered an author. This progression is echoed by the authors:

In the transmission view, the technical communicator remains the neutral vehicle facilitating the exercise of power. In the translation view, the technical communicator works to create symmetry within the negotiation of differential relations of power between sender and receiver. In the articulation view, the technical communicator is complicit in an ongoing articulation and rearticulation of relations of power. (14)

The shift of power that is associated with each view of communication is related to the various stages the field has undergone since its inception.

At the start of the technical communication field, the transmission view of communication described how technical communicators operated. In this view, "...the technical writer is merely a surrogate encoder, when communication is successful...the recognition, responsibility, and power is attributed only to the sender" (18). This approach takes power completely out of the hands of the technical communicator and places it with whoever generated the information. Although this view is now inappropriate for technical communicators, it is the view that still dominates how outsiders view technical communicators. Technical communicators are seen as taking the work of others and passing it along to the intended audience, without contributing to meaning making, which perpetuates the confusion associated with their identity. In actuality, the field has moved to the next view of communication and beyond.

The authors date the second view of communication theory, the translation view, as to the 1950s, when technical communication became own discipline; it is still a view that many practitioners in the field struggle to accept. Factors that contribute to this view include, "...the conception of communication as a practice, the conception of meaning as produced through the interaction of sender and receiver, [and] the conception of power as negotiated" (20). Essentially, the translation view of communication theory presents a more active view of communication than the transmission view does. The sender actively encodes a meaning, creates and sends it to the receiver, who then actively decodes the message. Problems arise when the sender encodes one meaning, but the receiver decodes a separate meaning than the sender intends. In this view, it is the technical communicator's job to take the intended meaning from the sender, and encode it

in such a way as to guarantee that the receiver will decode the same message. The technical communicator does have power as the translator of the message, but is not the author.

In the third level of communication theory, the articulation view, the technical communicator is the author. This level transmission and translation one step farther and recognizes the contributions of the translator or mediator along with that of the sender and receiver. Furthermore, the authors suggest, "...any identity in the social formation must be understood as the nonnecessary connection between the elements that constitute it...the way in which elements connect or combine is described as an articulation" (26). Slack, et al, go on to describe how culture plays a large role in the conception of articulation:

The concepts of meaning and power are dramatically refigured...Like any identity, meaning – both instances and the general concept – can be understood as an articulation that moves through ongoing processes of rearticulation. From sender through channels and receivers, each individual, each technology, each medium contributes in the ongoing process of articulating and rearticulating meaning. (28)

In this way Slack, et al, suggest technical communicators have authorial power. "They're [technical communicators] complicit in the production, reproduction, or subversion of relations of power... Technical communicators are authors, even when they comply with the rules of discourse that deny them that recognition" (31). Although technical communicators are typically not considered authors, they deserve recognition and ownership of their work. Recognizing their authorship means recognizing their expertise.

In my experience as a technical writer, I have witnessed all three views of communication. Most often, people outside of the discipline assume that technical writers simply regurgitate the information we receive from engineers and format it to look better. This belief, in

the transmission view, is an outdated viewpoint. Others, including colleagues, believe we take the jargon-ridden information from engineers and make it more accessible to a wider range of users. Although we do sometimes perform this task, the translation view does not fully explain our jobs.

The job I perform as a technical writer is to consult source materials (for example, engineering, operation descriptions, and engineers) in order to understand the product I am writing about. Then I write what is required by that particular project. The product can include procedural content, component descriptions, and part number breakdowns. This information either does not already exist or is not compiled in a user-friendly document. When I reflect on the job I perform, it is clear that I should be considered an author of the products I create because I write them, more often than not, from scratch. As such, I do have authority over the message I communicate to my user, and part of my job is to be aware of the information I am providing. With authorship comes a great responsibility because the information I provide needs to be sufficient for the user to understand my writing. Consequently, I believe technical communication has moved beyond the first two views of communication—fully residing in the articulation view and embodying a position of authorship and expertise.

Communication Theory as Applied to Writing Center Consultants

In a writing center, the main goal is to aid writers so that they can apply what they learn to future writing endeavors. This approach ultimately moves the focus from the writing to the writer. The writing consultant does not try to author the student's paper during a consultation. Instead of telling a writer how to fix the paper, a writing consultant teaches strategies the writer can use to improve. As Stephen M. North puts it, "In the [writing] center...we look beyond or

through that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced” (69). As a result, writing consultants would not gain recognition through authorship, and consequently, would not fit into the articulation view as described by Slack et al. Instead, the interactions that take place between writing consultant and student can be described by expanding the translation view.

Translation view is an active process that takes place between sender and receiver. The sender generates meaning so as to be understood in the receiver’s field. As the authors point out, this process is active for both parties. “...the receiver...actively decodes a meaning based on potentially *different* [sic] frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure” (20). Essentially, this means that although the sender produces a message with a desired meaning, the receiver may take away a potentially different message. To set this in a writing center context, consultants send a message about rhetorical strategies and the writer receives it. The consultant can intend to convey information about how to use commas or how to write a conclusion; however, it is ultimately up to the writer to decode that message and decide how to use that information in the writing. Thus, the receiver remains the author, but this interactive process between consultant and writer does influence the final text.

Slack et al. elaborate on the interactive aspects of translation view, noting that:

...the activity of the receiver [is] just as constitutive of the communication process as that of the sender. Communication is not a linear process that proceeds from sender to receiver, but as a process for negotiation in which sender and receiver both contribute – from their different locations in the circuit of communication – to the construction of meaning. (20)

When both the sender and receiver contribute, the process is interactive, i.e. a collaboration, a term that (unlike “author”) writing consultants do embrace.

In her article, “Collaboration is not Collaboration is not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. peer Response Groups,” Muriel Harris describes writing center activity as, “...collaboratively learning about writing [which] involved interaction between writer and reader to help the writer improve her own abilities and produce her own text-though, of course, her final product is influenced by collaboration with others” (370). Through the interaction between the writer and the writing consultant, collaboration and the translation view come together. Translation view focuses on the communication that occurs during this interaction, while collaboration describes what that interaction is. Harris continues, “The tutor, with the student sitting next to her, can ask questions, engage in conversation, listen, ask more questions, offer support, and ask a few more questions” (371). This interaction helps the student to articulate ideas more clearly, decide what ideas could be added to complete the arguments, or even to help a student begin writing a paper. As such, this collaboration influences the final text in the sense that, without the interaction, the writer may not have arrived at the same conclusions; however, the writer has the final say in how or if those conclusions are incorporated into the writing.

Thus, the translation view describes the role of writing consultants, who contribute to the writer’s creation process (acting as the sender of the message), while the receiver (the writer) decides how to use that information. Because writing consultants have an impact (through their collaboration with the writer) on the final product, they participate in the meaning making process. Although writing consultants do not seek to author student work, in contrast to technical communicators, opposing viewpoints may suggest that writing consultants who focus more on the collaborative interactions that occur in consultations cannot have power:

Articles in writing center theory...all attest to the widely accepted view that tutoring in writing is a collaborative effort in which the tutor listens, questions, and sometimes offers informed advice about all aspects of the student's writing in order to help the writer become a better writer, not to fix whatever particular paper the student has brought to the center. (Harris 371)

If writing consultants focused on fixing a student's paper, then some sort of authorship would be associated with their roles; however, writing consultants refrain from communicating in any way that would lead them to be considered an author. As they do take part in the communication process, there is a certain level of power associated with their roles.

Slack et al. suggest, "To communicate is to exercise power...Technical writers, who are rendered transparent and seen as contributing no meaning, possess no power..." (18). Based on this excerpt, we can gather that the first step to having power is to attempt to communicate. Secondly, if "contributing no meaning" means no power is associated with that instance of communication, then the reverse of that must hold true as well: contributing meaning means having power. Slack et al. describe the translation view as, "...a process for negotiation in which sender and receiver both contribute...to the construction of meaning" (20). Therefore, since both parties contribute to the meaning making process, both roles can be seen as having power.

As Slack et al. mentioned, with power comes responsibility. For consultants, the responsibility comes in the form of refraining from crossing the line into authorship. Consultants have a very unique to play in writing centers and don't need to author the work to demonstrate expertise.

The question arises that if technical communicators and writing consultants both take part in meaning making, how does one have authorship, but the other doesn't? The answer to this

goes back to the explanation that technical communicators actually produce the texts that they work on in their roles; while writing consultants are working with someone else's to better their writing. Through the collaborative process they help the writer to produce meaning, but do not contribute to the actual writing itself. In this way, writing consultants do not have authorship associated with their roles.

Although I have argued that technical communicators author their texts, this authorship is mitigated by other factors. Although I consider myself the author of what I write as a technical writer, I work for a large corporation and as a result, my name is not associated with the texts I produce. Of course, should anything be wrong with my work it would eventually come back to me to fix, but ultimately it is the company name that goes on the product. Internally, I am the author, externally I am invisible. In this regard, my position is similar to ghostwriters or speechwriters who produce products for others. Although they create the information and should therefore be considered the author, publicly, it is someone else who is seen as author. As with the arguments I have made in the chapter, these further scenarios change depending upon viewpoint. The person who delivers a speech written by someone else would see that person as author, while others may see the speech giver as author. Ultimately, the person who generates information to be communicated to others should be seen as an author and those who participate in meaning making should be seen as having power. Technical communicators and writing consultants participate in both processes.

CHAPTER 4: APPLYING GENRE THEORY TO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR AND WRITING CONSULTANT EXPERTISE

Meaning making is a precursor to perceived power because if a technical communicator or subject matter expert can create meaning within their fields, then they have a certain amount of perceived power associated with their roles. As Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak note, the idea of meaning making as a precursor to perceived power. Because power brings with it recognition of authority the more we reinforce the fact that technical communicators and writing consultants make meaning, have power, and deserve recognition for their skills, the more easily their expertise can be recognized. Genre theory extends the idea of meaning making beyond the individual to the discourse community. The goal of this chapter is to provide insight into the application of genre theory to the roles of technical communicator and writing consultant in order to aid in the identity issues that both fields face.

Traditionally, genre theory has focused on classifying various discourses based on noted similarities, such as topic, type of writing, format, etc. Daniel Chandler, in his article, “Introduction to Genre Theory,” points out, “In literature the broadest division is between poetry, prose and drama, within which there are further divisions, such as tragedy and comedy within the category of drama” (1). As Chandler alludes to, different genres can be broken up in a variety of ways. Amy Devitt, in her article, “Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept,” adds that genre theory also has been, “...concerned with classification and form, with describing the formal features of a particular genre, describing the embodiment of a genre in a particular work, or delineating a genre system, a set of classifications of (primarily literary) texts” (574). The focus has remained on all of the ways that a genre can be categorized in order to better understand all facets of it. Consequently, Devitt goes on to point out, “Whether called

genres, subgenres, or modes, whether comprehensive or selective, whether generally accepted or disputed, these systems for classifying texts focus attention on static products” (574). By fixating on “static products”, as Devitt refers to them, we severely limit the potential growth in the various genres we study.

Because of this limitation, Devitt and others urge that we move away from the traditional view towards a more dynamic theory that takes into account the social aspects of categories.

Devitt suggests:

...reconception will require releasing old notions of genre as form and text type and embracing new notions of genre as dynamic patterning of human experience, as one of the concepts that enable us to construct our writing world. Basically, the new conception of genre shifts the focus from effects (formal features, text classifications) to sources of those effects. To accommodate our desires for a reunified view of writing, we must shift our thinking about genre from a formal classification system to a rhetorical and essentially semiotic social construct. (573)

This view of genre is not necessarily a complete change to the theory’s founding ideas, but instead, it updates the already existing theory. Devitt proposes to add a social aspect to genre by examining how genres are first created.

In writing and rhetoric, similar writing situations are frequently encountered. Each time a new situation is encountered, practitioners must learn how to communicate within that situation, essentially creating a new genre. As Devitt points out, “In principle, that is, writers first respond in fitting ways and hence similarly to recurring situations; then, the similarities among those appropriate responses become established as generic conventions” (576). This process is

extremely active; the first time a rhetorical situation is encountered, the writer determines how to react in that situation and each subsequent encounter draws upon that initial reaction:

The fact that others have responded to similar situations in the past in similar ways—the fact that genres exist—enables us to respond more easily and more appropriately ourselves. Knowing the genre, therefore, means knowing such things as appropriate subject matter, level of detail, tone, and approach as well as the usual layout and organization. Knowing the genre means knowing not only, or even most of all, how to conform to generic conventions but also how to respond appropriately to a given situation. (Devitt 577)

In most instances a field harbors pre-conceived notions for how communication should occur. This expanded genre theory helps identify which conventions need to be adhered to in order to be effective.

The genre influences how writers respond, and choose to respond in the same manner for future instances of that genre. Thus, Devitt notes, “If genre not only responds to but also constructs recurring situation, then genre must be a dynamic rather than static concept. . . . As our constructions of situations change and new situations begin to recur, genres change and new genres develop” (579). Thus, genre theory outlines an active process that is constantly undergoing change and reconfiguration. A genre that has been approached in a specific manner for a period of time can be changed when the rhetorical context changes. Carolyn Miller, one of the first theorists to suggest re-envisioning genre as an active process, states, in her article, “Genre as Social Action”:

Since “rhetorical forms that establish genres are stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands,” a genre becomes a complex of formal and substantive

features that create a particular effect in a given situation ([Campbell & Jamieson] p. 19). Genre, in this way, becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action. (153)

Miller brings the static conception of genre into the realm of social action. It is through interactions with the audience and with other practitioners, and through learning from past approaches, that genre becomes active. She argues that this approach should be considered “ethnomethodological”, which means that this newer genre theory would seek to explain the information generated by the actual interactions within a particular genre (155).

Considering genre as a dynamic process, “. . . makes genre an essential player in the making of meaning” (Devitt 575). When the structure of a particular genre changes, its meaning changes as well. As discussed in the previous chapter, if writers make meaning, they have power. Technical communicators and writing consultants who use genre theory in their work participate in meaning making and therefore, can claim expertise.

Technical Communicators and Genre Theory

Communicating among different fields or different genres is part of the work expected of this discipline. Because technical communication field I work in is engineering-based and in the Department of Defense industry. I can be tasked to write procedural manuals for various pieces of equipment. The manual’s content and audience can dictate how the manual will be written. The format, reading level, and information provided is altered based on the branch of military that the manuals are created for. For instance, if I write a procedural document for Component A, it is going to look very different for the Army than it will for the Air Force. In this instance, the

genre is dictated by the customer or reader and the communication approach changes as a result. Another aspect of manual writing that echoes Miller's genre theory is that each instance of communication with the various branches of the government has been previously addressed. As such, there are pre-existing communication rules that make it easier for me, as the writer, to know how to format my products within those contexts.

Technical communication can be considered social action because the ways in which the writing is approached can be changed through interaction with others. A great example of this comes from my own experience in technical communication. One of the main customers I write manuals for is the Air Force, which has a set format that has been adhered to for many years. On the customer side, a new employee was tasked with reviewing our manuals. Because he was new, he was not familiar with the formatting of our manuals and the reasons we format them as we do. We focus each manual section on a particular component, so that when a technician in the field needs to perform maintenance tasks on a single component, technicians can remove that portion of the manual and go to perform their tasks. The new customer requested that we reformat the manuals to a task-oriented format. This reorganization would completely change the manuals so one section would be focused on all removal procedures for all of the sub-components of the piece of equipment, another section would focus on all installation procedures, etc. Unfortunately, the new employee's requested format does not take into consideration the needs of the end-user and therefore, we cannot format the manuals according to his suggestion. However, if we did, it would ultimately create a new genre based on the same information from the existing genre...just reformatted in a new way, manifesting genre theory in its most active form.

Another way in which technical communication can be seen as an actively social area is through the constant communication that occurs among technical communicators, between technical communicators and their customers, and also between technical writers and subject matter experts. In order to create a document that is user-friendly, communication must occur between writer and subject matter expert. The subject matter expert knows how that particular piece of equipment works and is a very valuable part of the process. The technical communicator needs to know what questions to ask (keeping the end-user in mind) in order to get the appropriate information needed to create the most useful document for the ultimate customer. This interaction creates a social aspect to technical communication because it is necessary to interact with people in the field in order to be successful.

In other circumstances, procedural documents are required for new equipment. The customer can be one of only four military branches, which means there are pre-existing formatting requirements that should be followed; however, as the content is brand new, a new genre is created. Genre theory provides a way for writers, readers, and practitioners to standardize their communication. It also provides a way for new practitioners to learn those standards and communicate confidently within those boundaries.

A newer area being addressed in the field of technical communication is the idea of single sourcing. Many companies can reduce production time by identifying areas of a document that are similar across the board. Instead of producing multiple, separate documents that have this same information, single sourcing allows writers to place all of the similar information in one location and produce the necessary document from a single source. This practice does create a new genre because we are using existing information, but producing it in a new way.

Interestingly enough, changing technology plays a large role in generating new genres in the field in which I work. Traditionally, manuals have been formatted to be user-friendly in hard-copy form; however, constant technology changes require numerous format changes. With the invention of the tablet, a small hand-held computer, technicians have become mobile. Technicians can take the tablet with them to whatever piece of equipment they are performing maintenance on. Manuals that are to be used in this setting, although containing the same data, need to be formatted in such a way as to be accessible in this medium; thereby creating a new genre based on an existing one.

Unfortunately, the downside to working in this field, in this type of scenario, is that no formal training orients new practitioners to the common communication methods of each genre. Instead, these guidelines are learned through experience, which steepens the learning curve for understanding the conventions that are already associated with communicating within an existing genre. And with changing genres constantly appearing, the learning curve can be even harder to overcome. A suggestion for improving this weakness is discussed further in this chapter.

Writing Center Consultants and Genre Theory

Writing centers were initially created from a classroom format, as the laboratory approach in which students in a class would perform peer edits of each others' papers. This genre changed as peer editing moved out of the classroom and into writing centers. As the field grew, new ideas were introduced, such as writing consultant training, and writing centers shifted from tutoring to consultations.

In my prior role as a writing consultant, genre theory was present in my day-to-day tasks, but in a different manner than in technical writing. As a consultant, I would work with students

from different majors constantly. Moving from business to nursing to psychology were all real instances of shifting genres. This shift would also happen with the types of writing I encountered. I would work with research papers, five paragraph essays, fictional stories, etc. In working with so many different areas, it became apparent that the discipline-specific communication guidelines were extremely different from one subject to the next. In the instances wherein I consulted a student in an unfamiliar subject, I was trained to rely on the aspects of writing that I was familiar with, such as topic development and reader response. This approach was still helpful to the student and mirrored the idea of liminality in that as a consultant I was able to aid students from different disciplines while not being part of those specific disciplines. Instead, I would focus the advice I gave them from a rhetoric-based perspective. However, not knowing the existing communication conventions in these fields prevented me from providing genre specific help in developing student writing. Similar to technical communication, learning the conventions of the various genres came with time and experience. The more work that I performed alongside students with a business paper, the more familiar I became with business-specific communication, for example.

The other aspect of the writing center role that relates to genre theory is the social interaction that occurs during consultations. Genre theory is now focused on an active, social process and the interaction of student and consultant supports this idea. Although a writing consultant may not be well-versed with genre specific information, they are trained to ask questions that cause a student to think about the topic or paper in a new way. This interaction can help to guide a student to consider the genre-specific needs of that particular work or even perhaps, audience needs. As a result, this very social aspect of a writing consultation contributes to meaning making, and therefore, to the idea of power and expertise of the consultant.

Using Genre Theory for Improving the Roles of Writing Consultants and Technical Communicators

Does a generalist tutor (a tutor who has a strong background in rhetoric, but not necessarily in other genres) make a better writing consultant than one who is familiar with discipline specific information? Kristin Walker suggests, in her article, “The Debate Over Generalist and Specialist Tutors: Genre Theory’s Contribution”, that genre theory provides a way for both generalist and specialist consultants to better aid the students who seek their assistance. She posits, “Within the last twenty-five years, genre theory has returned to an emphasis on the social, the processes by which communicators learn to use genres of their fields... In order for communicators to accomplish goals within a discipline; therefore, they must use the socially accepted forms of communicating within their field” (30). Because learning the, “socially accepted forms of communicating,” within a discipline, makes writers’ work more credible, Walker argues that writing consultants should be trained to recognize discipline-specific guidelines. Consultants can better ask questions that guide a student towards the appropriate types of writing usually seen in a specific field, while also engaging that student in the social interactions that bring about proficiency. Walker states, “Each student must learn for him/herself the processes of becoming initiated into a particular discourse community; this is where a writing center tutor can be most helpful by serving as a guide in this process” (32). Expanded training that gives consultants the tools to guide writers in their disciplines helps writers not only to work more easily with students, but also aids in reducing the learning curve. This training also helps consultants learn the genre-related communication requirements earlier on in their consulting careers, instead of waiting for experience to do the job.

Since every school has a certain number of majors that could potentially be seen in a writing center setting, the writing center should either provide basic training to all consultants in every major the school sponsors or assign each consultant a specific set of majors to become familiar with. All consultants would be familiar with at least two other majors besides their own, other than what a consultant is normally trained in, and students from each major could make appointments with the appropriate consultant. This approach could better help students to become proficient in field-specific conventions by allowing student to learn them in the writing center, instead of expecting students to have that knowledge ahead of time.

For technical communicators, up-front training in genre-specific information would create several advantages. First, productivity would increase. When technical communicators know what questions to ask, necessary information can be retrieved faster because they know what they are looking for. Second, managers would be able to choose among multiple technical writer options for various projects because all of the writers on their team would be knowledgeable in many areas. This training would reduce the learning curve of any new project, speeding the production of the end-item. Finally, genre-specific training would better enable technical writers to not only check each other's work, but also to help one another communicate better.

Genre-specific training would make both technical communicators and writing consultants more effective in their roles. Training aids their ability to move from communicating in one subject to another with ease. A certain level of knowledge is necessary to effectively communicate in a new field, which is exactly what technical communicators and writing consultants strive to obtain when confronted with a new subject matter. The ability to know what to look for and how to use it supports genre-specific training and even the theory of liminality.

Even with a certain amount of knowledge of a field, a technical communicator and writing consultant still has the potential to be confronted with a new topic; however, it is their rhetorical training that provides them with the tools needed to perform in their roles.

Of course, genre theory can be applied to any field, which might seem to diminish the expertise of technical communicators and writing consultants. However, what distinguishes the argument that I make is the fact that technical communicators and writing consultants can interact with completely different genres during their day to day work. In most careers, practitioners work within a field and interact with sub-genres of that specific field. It's the ability to move between such different fields as engineering to healthcare, that requires expertise.

Overall, genres play a large role in the work done by technical communicators and writing consultants. As both technical communicators and writing consultants have expertise based in an active, social environment that is constantly changing, practitioners in each area alter their approaches to making meaning by revising the genres, thereby gaining power and authority in their roles, i.e. expertise.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As demonstrated throughout this document, technical communicators and writing center consultants share many similarities in their roles—from the identity crisis that each position faces to the actual skills used in the jobs that they perform. With this in mind, I've intended to explain how these positions derive their expertise. Throughout this thesis, I have used anecdotal stories from my work in each position, a strategy that supports my ideas, but provides a perspective that is limited; the writing center I write about is a general writing center and the technical communication setting is specifically in an engineering contractor for the Department of Defense industry. In order to provide a stronger argument, I will address variations of the roles I have discussed.

Writing Center Consultants: Specialized Writing Centers vs. General Writing Centers

During the time I spent as a writing consultant, I worked in a general writing center where I could encounter papers from any subject in my day-to-day consultations with students. Some schools provide specialized writing centers that are specific to a curriculum, i.e. an engineering writing center or a graduate writing center. A specialized writing center employs writing consultants who are trained in that particular field. In an engineering school's writing center, engineering students would aid other students with engineering-related writing. In a graduate school writing center, graduate students would help other graduate students with dissertations or theses. In these centers, the ways that writing consultants interact with students differ from interactions in a general writing center and consequently, have the potential to alter how the theories set forth in this paper apply.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the theory of liminality, as described by Victor Turner and Joseph Jeyaraj, argues that it is possible to occupy a “liminal space”, between communities, topics, or fields. In this space, people can, due to their background in rhetoric, communicate between different fields without actually joining them. In specialized writing consultants, the theory still applies in the sense that consultants still have rhetoric-based training, but they would be members of the field along with students. Specialized or general writing consultants would undergo job-specific training in rhetorical techniques which could be relied upon when a consultant is unsure of how to proceed with a consultation. Despite this writing consultant training would not be solely in rhetoric. For example, in an engineering writing center, the writing consultants are students in the engineering program and as such, would be considered part of the engineering field. With that in mind, they would not be considered liminal subjects because they are already a part of the same as other students.

In Chapter 3, I suggest that general writing consultants would belong to the translation view of communication theory because the writing consultant (message sender) is interacting with the writer (message receiver), but does not have control over how the receiver translates the message. I go on to suggest expanding translation view to include collaboration as part of the writing consultant/writer relationship, because their interactions influence the final product, which ultimately means that the writing consultant does play a role in meaning making. As Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak suggest in their article, meaning making is a necessary component for a specific person/role to have power.

When examining this view of communication theory in relation to a specialized writing consultant, the theory still applies. Although specialized writing consultants have more knowledge of the students’ subject or more knowledge of the field-specific communication

conventions in the writing consultant/writer process doesn't change. Specialized writing consultants still have collaborative interactions in which the consultant can help the writer to identify weak areas of the paper or perhaps to consider other ideas to cover. More importantly, when a specialized writing consultant helps a student from the same field, the consultant can better help the student from the same field learn field-specific communication practices.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I examined the applicability of Carolyn Miller's genre theory to the role of writing consultant. As with communication theory, genre theory applies to consultants whether they are specialized or general in their roles and actually, the two theories build upon one another. When examining the translation view of communication theory, we discuss a collaborative process that allows consultants to help guide the writer, but that cannot control how the writer uses the information. With genre theory, the specialized consultant has field specific knowledge that can aid the student in learning communication conventions within that field, because genre is a social process. It's the social interaction that helps students learn. The main difference between a general writing consultant and specialized writing consultant is that a general writing consultant has the opportunity to move from one genre or field to another through writing center work. Specialized writing consultants work within one genre, but contribute to the active and social side of it through their consultations.

Although general writing consultants and specialized writing consultants have different roles to play in a writing center setting, it is apparent that their positions are still very similar. Genre theory and communication theory can apply to both jobs, which ultimately supports their expertise as writing consultants. Even though the theory of liminality does not necessarily apply to specialized writing consultants, I believe it is easier for people outside of the field to see specialized writing consultants as experts than it is to accept general writing consultants as such.

A specialized writing consultant has a clearly defined role because it involves only one field, while general writing consultants participate in many. Despite this, the arguments I have made in this thesis support the expertise of writing consultants and may lessen the confusion associated with their roles.

Technical Communicators: Does Switching Fields Change Theory Application?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the anecdotal stories I provided throughout my thesis for my technical communication experience have been based in the engineering field focused in the Department of Defense industry, although technical communicators can work in many fields. When the focus shifts from engineering and DOD technical communication to another field, such as computer science, the approach to the subject does not change. Technical communicators, no matter the field, still have a strong basis in rhetoric, thereby still being able to move among fields without being part of them. As such, the theory of liminality applies to all technical communicators. The same is true for the articulation view of communication theory. Technical communicators produce a product and as a result, should be considered the author of said product, which results in having power. Finally, genre theory applies to all technical communicators, as well, due to the fact that all technical communicators take part in social interaction and communicate within the accepted norms of their field. Through this communication, they can contribute to meaning making within the field because communication allows for the passing of knowledge and the potential for change. As noted previously, having power creates an identity of expertise. I would also go as far as to suggest that due to their background in rhetoric, technical communicators can move from writing in the field of engineering to writing in computer science and still be effective communicators.

Conclusion

This thesis topic was first prompted by misunderstandings about technical communication. Before I became a scholar and practitioner in the field, I myself was not sure what exactly a technical communicator did and was resigned to believing that they only wrote help manuals. Through my journey of learning about the discipline, I not only found that writing help manuals is not all technical communicators do, but I also came across many people outside of the field who were likewise unsure of what technical communicators did. Many times when I have told someone that I am a technical communication student or a technical writer, I have seen a head nod and feigned understanding. This has happened so many times that now I immediately ask if the person I am telling knows what that means. Approximately 95% of the time, people have no idea what it is. I used to tell people I write help documentation for various pieces of equipment and in response to that, many times I would hear, “So you’re that person! I can never understand the assembly instructions that come with ____.” It does not matter what assembly instructions they are referring to, the point is, technical communicators have a bad reputation associated with the work that they do, when the work they do is actually understood. Even to this day, I meet engineers and personnel outside of my department who are unsure of what exactly I do. Recently, an engineer suggested that all I had to do was copy and paste material from an existing manual into one I will be writing eventually, when in actuality it is not that simple at all. The customer and the actual hardware capabilities change from one book to another, so simply copying and pasting will not do.

Similarly, in my work as a writing center consultant, I had similar experiences where misunderstanding was prominent. Students would stop by the writing center asking for me to edit

their paper. One time a student asked if she could drop her paper off and pick it up later in the day after we fixed it for her. Even some professors do not understand the role of writing centers and send their students there to receive general tutoring in grammar.

With the exception of specialized consultants, both general consultants and technical communicators do hold somewhat confusing positions to the outside world. Due to the lack of a straightforward definition, it is understandably difficult to see a position as one of expertise when it may seem as though it contributes to many fields, but does not seem to hold proficiency in just one particular area. There is a popular saying that fits this situation: “A jack of all trades, but master of none.” This saying relates to both roles and can offer an explanation to outside confusion. How can someone contribute to different fields, but not be recognized as a master of one?

Both fields suffer from misunderstanding by the outside world and as a result, identity issues, but it is critical for these issues to be resolved in order for these disciplines to continue to grow and prosper. In order for this to happen, each member of each field must take an active role in educating outsiders and spreading the word as to what each job entails or else the expertise of writing consultants or technical communicators will continue to be overlooked and confusion will be perpetuated.

Taking an active role in educating people outside of each discipline differs for writing consultants and technical communicators. For writing consultants, I suggest continuing to communicate with faculty members and students, whether through presentations or even digital means, the goals and focus of the writing center. Although today’s society is technologically inclined and writing center websites provide a great medium for delivering information concerning the field, writing consultants need an active presence on campus to communicate to

students. This presence can be anything from posters and flyers that advertise for the writing center or even informative pamphlets that can be handed out during orientation. On a much higher level, schools, as a whole, need to help writing consultants communicate their purpose and the role of writing consultants to the general public.

For technical communication, taking an active role in educating outsiders to the field should involve creating a solid definition of technical communication that includes an explanation of the different roles that fall within this field. Then, practitioners in each position can work to educate those in their career field through face-to-face interactions with coworkers and even through the websites that technical communication groups manage. In reality, technical communicators function differently from company to company and in that regard, technical communicators in each company should really take the initiative to define what the role does and means to that particular business.

With the amount of similarities that exist between technical communicators and writing consultants, it seems almost surprising that outsiders are unsure as to what the two roles do, but it is an unfortunate truth. Due to the wide range of applications each field has, it does not seem plausible that a single definition would encompass absolutely everything that the field entails which further perpetuates outsider confusion. As a result, in order to diffuse the misunderstanding, it is imperative for the focus to be taken off of the explanation and placed instead on how they perform in their roles. It then becomes easier to explain technical communicator and writing consultant roles by using the theories I have identified in this thesis (Theory of Liminality, Communication Theory, and Genre Theory). Furthermore, through this new explanation, associating expertise with the positions of technical communicator and writing consultant becomes a reality.

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