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Feminist Theory and Technical Communication

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Abstract

This essay explores feminism, socially-constructed norms, and the relationship between feminism and technical communication. It argues that undergraduate technical communication programs should include courses that study feminist history and theories as related to the field, claiming that studying feminist theory will improve user-centered design and broaden students' spheres of influence as professionals.

Keywords

Feminist theory, technical communication, feminism, professional writing, gender, user design, design

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Feminist Theory and Technical Communication

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Introduction

Many individuals do not truly understand feminism; they hear the word *feminism* and roll their eyes because they associate the term with passionate women who think they are better than men and should therefore get more rights than men. Extreme feminists like this are actually in the minority of feminists. Unfortunately, rare cases like this have still tainted the way that many interpret the term *feminism*, and it has prevented some of us from researching feminist theory at all.

While many individuals would benefit from studying feminism, technical communicators can especially benefit from researching feminist theories. Feminism and technical communication overlap in many areas because feminism has played and is playing a large role in the field's development (Flynn 1997). Undergraduate technical communication programs should include courses that study feminist history and theories as related to the field.

This article will discuss the three most common types of feminism, its history in relation to technical communication, and the impact of socially-constructed social norms on feminism. I will then discuss why feminist theories should be integrated into undergraduate studies, how studying feminism will improve user-centered design, and how it will ultimately broaden students' spheres of influence as professionals.

Literature Review

Types of Feminism

Most experts who study feminism recognize that there are multiple types of feminism. The most common approaches to feminism are postmodern, liberal, and radical (see White et al 2016; Gurak and Bayer 1994; Flynn 1997).

Postmodern

Postmodern feminists question how notions of gender have become part of "underlying structure institutions" (Gurak and Bayer 1994). They do not view gender or feminism as a stable entity but as a fluid idea that changes often. Flynn (1997) further explains that postmodern feminists focus more on the differences between women themselves, rather than categorizing females into one type of box or focusing on their segregation from men.

Liberal

Liberal feminists, according to Flynn (1997), claim that women “have been excluded from histories of technology because historians have been guilty of sex-role stereotyping” (315). Similarly, Gurak and Bayer (1994) claim that liberal feminists view actual technologies as gender-neutral but targeted towards a male-dominated audience. They aim to integrate women into culture and naturally reconstruct social norms.

Radical

Radical feminists, making their first appearance during the civil rights movements, view society and institutions as gender-biased, and they are determined to expand various fields in order to include women’s contributions. They do not believe that women need to conform to societal standards created predominately by and for man (Flynn 1997). They specifically analyze the differences between men and women and their social/business spheres. Lastly, they view the female population as having identical characteristics and desires; unlike postmodern feminists, these feminists group all women into the same box.

History of Feminism in Technical Communication

Durack (2004), Flynn (1997), Hallenback (2004), and White (2016) agree that women have been largely excluded from technical communication’s history because many domestic technologies, like the sewing machine, are not really considered technical. However, some individuals are rewriting history to include women as key contributors to technology (Gurak and Bayer 1994; Wajcman 1991). Women now receive at least some credit for contributing to technologies like the cotton gin and the small electric motor, among others.

In the past, most technologies catered to a male-dominated culture, largely because the majority of scientists and engineers were (and still are) men. Sewing machine manuals, for example, were written to engage men, even though it was women who primarily used them (Durack 2004). Manuals took on demanding and strict tones and avoided mentioning byproducts that women might produce. Cunningham (2015), Selfe, and Selfe (2004) argue that many technologies still favor males over females, especially in the workplace. These technologies include documentation that categorizes women as technologically incapable. This trait is evident in many product designs, such as companies disguising a women’s razor as lipstick to make it seem less complicated and eliminating visible screws from women’s products (Cunningham 2015). Gurack and Bayer (1994) add to these arguments by claiming that many documents even contain language that have a higher potential of offending women, such as “abort” or “kill” (258).

Socially Constructed Norms

Many researchers agreed that gender differences and biases are socially constructed and not biologically determined (see, for example, White et al 2016; Gurak and Bayer 1994; Hallenback 2004; Sullivan 2011). This implies that both masculinity and femininity are subject to change, depending on how society constructs them. Hallenback (2004) provides extended examples to support this idea. In the late 1880s, women shaped social norms when they made a stand to ride bicycles instead of the “more modest” tricycles, despite

men's attempts to keep women from using bicycles. Some of these women bicyclists even created documentation detailing how and when to ride a bicycle. This essentially put them in the role of technical communicators. They pushed against social norms to create their own. Another example relates to microwaves. Microwaves were first marketed to bachelors; later on, after women re-gendered the microwave to be a product commonly used in kitchens, they were marketed more to women. Manufacturers switched from selling microwaves in the masculine electronics section to selling them in the home and kitchen section of stores.

However, technical communicators cannot simply ignore societal norms in an attempt to produce completely neutral documents (Durack 1998; Cunningham 2015). In the case of 19th-century sewing machine manuals, technical writers did not follow the societal norms that associated women and sewing (Durack 1998). While no one argued that it was mainly women who sewed, no one believed that women should or could attempt sewing once it became possible with a machine, or technology. Therefore, writers created sewing machine manuals that catered to men. They did not adhere to societal norms, and they failed to create user-centered documents. Cunningham (2015) would agree that user-centered design is of utmost importance, and that gender plays a large role in successful design.

“Add Women and Stir” Fallacy

Both Jackson (2007) and Sullivan (2011) warn technical communicators of the “Add Women and Stir” fallacy. This fallacy involves simply adding women to a certain field in order to lessen any gender disparities. While this idea may seem effective in theory, in practice it does not have the long-term effects that really eliminate gender disparities or increase diversity in workplaces. Sullivan (2011) points out that adding women to a field does not automatically enhance their experience in the workplace. In fact, adding women to a field just because they are women could actually make workplace conditions worse for them because men could assume that women were hired because of their gender, not their skills or expertise.

Similarly, Jackson (2007) further explains that this fallacy does not address the real issues behind gender disparity in work places. Companies and employers must understand gender better so they can know what females (and males) hope to gain from workplace scenarios. Furthermore, attempting to fix this gender gap by adding women to male-dominant fields implies that women's success must be measured the same way as men's (Noddings 2001).

Integrating Feminism into Undergraduate Studies

Students should learn about the different approaches to feminism, mainly postmodern, liberal, and radical, in their undergraduate studies of technical communication. As mentioned earlier, these three types of feminism are very different, and they have all played a part in shaping the relationship between women and technical communication. Despite the impact or lack of impact that some of these approaches might currently have on

technical communication, they have had a large role in the past. Students need to see the importance between these theories and technical communication as we now know it.

For example, it is liberal feminists who have fought to reconstruct the social norms that constricted them from flourishing as technical communicators (Gurack and Bayer 1994). Rather than letting society tell them that women could not or should not ride bicycles, women tested the boundaries and taught themselves how to ride, even in public places. And they didn't stop there. Two women, Maria E. Ward and Frances Willard, ended up individually writing manuals that acknowledged women as capable of riding and taught them how to properly ride bicycles (Hallenback 2012). Figure 1 shows an image from Ward's manual, illustrating how women should take charge of their own bicycles.



Figure 1. (Hallenback 2012)

Postmodern feminism is what first introduced women into the field of technical communication because these feminists did not view gender roles or feminism as stable entities; they knew these areas were fluid, so they boldly entered a field that only men typically worked in. Both of these examples illustrate that feminism completely changed the trajectory for women as technical communicators and opened up many opportunities for them. If students study feminist theories and the history that accompanies them, they will make many of these connections on their own. They will also have a more comprehensive understanding of the field's history as a whole.

Given the opportunity to learn about feminism and how it has impacted technical communication as a field, as illustrated in the previous examples, students will be able to observe just how much the field of technical communication has evolved. Observing the field's evolution through a new perspective could also create a deeper appreciation for where the field is today, especially for women. Women will see that they are much more valued than before, they do not have to fight as hard to be seen as credible, and they can take credit for their own work without fearing discrimination (for the most part).

Improved User-Centered Design

Studying feminism will not only give students a broader understanding of technical communication and its history, but it will also give them more insight into understanding and analyzing their users. Better understanding feminism, particularly gender roles, will aid students in creating user-centered documents and designs. Furthermore, it will prevent students from producing work that is discriminatory towards men or women.

In her article “Men are Like Bluetooth; Women are Like Wifi,” Carolyn Cunningham (2015) states that technological design requires choices rooted in social norms. For example, some technologies are associated with men or women, simply because men or women use them more often. Men are more likely to use a screwdriver; women are more likely to use a flat iron. The instruction manuals might reflect the greater audience group; the screwdriver manual will be straightforward and abrupt, whereas the flat iron directions might have a completely different tone. Though these are both generalizations, they convey that certain product instructions will often favor one gender over the other.

We can learn from the past mistakes of technical communicators who failed to create effective user-centered documents, especially for products that are considered more feminine or masculine. When Durack (1998) analyzed 19th-century sewing machine manuals, she discovered that the manuals were written by men and for men, although women were the primary sewing machine users. Rather than analyzing their audience and writing to engage the actual users, these male writers wrote to instruct men, and they ultimately failed to create real user-centered documents. They did not consider writing technical documents for women because women were not known for using technology. Students who study feminism in technical communication will be able to identify these types of mistakes and avoid them in their own work.

According to Cunningham (2015), in a more recent example, Kearny analyzed the product-design of girls’ technologies (Barbie Wireless Camcorder and Daisy Rock Guitars) to see how the design motivated girls. Kearny discovered that the design made girls more aware of their body image; it did not inspire them to become media producers like the designers thought it would. In this case, designing with a certain gender in mind made sense because companies designed these toys specifically for girls. Kearny’s results show that product-design can really impact users, even in unexpected ways, and technical communicators need to be aware of this influence.

Broadened Sphere of Influence

Introducing feminist study into undergraduate technical communication courses will broaden students’ future spheres of influence, in many respects. First, they will have an advantage over professionals in the field who have not considered feminism and its impact on technical communication. They will develop larger pools of theory and history to draw conclusions from, therefore expanding their wealth of knowledge and ideas.

Students who study feminist theory will also gain the respect of a larger audience of professionals than students who do not. For example, women (especially feminists) are more likely to listen to someone who has considered feminist theory and understands feminists' point of view, especially if the writer is a male. Giving students the foundations to further study feminism will ultimately give them opportunities to effectively work and collaborate with feminists, rather than secluding them from future research. This is another aspect of their broadened sphere of influence.

Studying feminism will broaden students' influence in the research world, but it will also create stronger relationships with users of their documents. Because studying feminism can lead to effective user-centered design, as mentioned earlier, technical communicators who study feminism will create more effective documents. Users, women and men alike, will appreciate the intuitiveness of well-designed manuals and documents in general. This will broaden technical communicators' spheres of influence with their users, which can lead to even further research.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the relationship between feminism and technical communication, and I have argued that students should have the opportunity to study feminist theories during their undergraduate studies. In the professional sphere, students who study both technical writing and feminism will have advantages over students who have not. They will have a greater knowledge of the field of technical communication as a whole, including aspects of its history that show how far the field has evolved. Furthermore, students will be able to produce effective user-centered designs and broaden their spheres of influence, simply by taking time to study feminist theory as it relates to technical communication.

Recommendations for Further Research

One of the hardest parts of researching feminism in technical communication was trying to find recent articles on the subject. The majority of relevant articles are dated in the 1990s or earlier, and even the articles from the 2000s are close to ten years old. Professionals should continue to conduct research on the relationship between feminism and technical communication and whether or not the relationship is still improving. New research is vital to validate past findings and discover new ones. If no one conducts research to at least validate the past findings, they will soon be considered outdated and irrelevant.

More extensive research should be conducted on how many technical communication or related undergraduate programs have courses that discuss feminism, whether comprehensively or limited. Furthermore, researchers could ask the following questions:

- How long have those programs included courses that discussed feminism, and what was their reasoning for including them?
- What specific content do those courses teach?
- What are some of the common threads among the various courses?
- What are students' opinions of studying feminism?

Answering these questions would create a solid foundation for compiling new research regarding technical communication and feminism, as well as why students should study feminism in their undergraduate programs.

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