TECHNICAL AND BUSINESS WRITING: CURRENT STRENGTHS, CURRENT WEAKNESSES

A Review Essay

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For some time now, two of the "growth industries" in college and university English departments have been the technical writing and business communication courses. These courses have offered traditionally trained English teachers opportunities for academic employment. The availability of texts has increased, along with the number of courses offered. Ten years ago an English teacher might have been asked to teach a technical writing or business communication course with a very slim choice of texts and little or no professional support. That's no longer the case. Recently a number of texts have been produced to aid the novice teacher's transition into the field of technical and business communication — or is it two fields?

One of the latest of these pedagogical how-to's is *Technical and Business Communication in Two-Year Programs,* edited by W. Keats Sparrow and Nell Ann Pickett. The third in the series produced by NCTE's Committee on Technical and Sci-

entific Communication, this volume aims specifically at "the growing number of technical writing and business writing teachers in two-year programs . . ." (x). The underlying assumption of *TBC* is that most English-trained teachers experienced in basic composition can do a good job of teaching these courses too — with a little help. This text aims to provide that help. In so doing, *TBC* reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of the field as it exists today. Practical advice and broad coverage are the strengths of *TBC,* and mirror the pedagogical strengths of technical writing and business communication. *TBC's* weaknesses play a similar role in reflecting larger problems in the field. In part due to the rapid growth of these courses, and in part due to broader issues, the well-defined area of consensus is surrounded by a highly problematic area of disagreement and contradiction. *TBC,* no doubt inadvertently, illuminates that area about as well as it details the more "practical" core. This surrounding area must not be seen as purely theoretical, however; it profoundly affects the practices of every teacher of these courses. In this paper, I want to discuss, first, the strong points, the solid practical advice provided by many of the articles in *TBC*. Second, I want to discuss two particular problems which *TBC* reflects.

The editors stress the "practical" nature of the 24 articles which appear in *TBC*. As any number of these articles makes clear, a core of "received truths" exists — practices with high reliability which all teachers can confidently use as the basis for sound technical writing and business communication courses. Emphasis on writing as process, problem solving, rhetorical strategies, reasoning skills — all these produce courses of real value.

The 24 articles here are divided into 7 major parts. They take the teacher — or department contemplating creating a course in technical writing or business communication — from a general overview, "Gearing Up," through course design, "Developing the Basic Course," and "Broadening the Basic Course," to specific details, "Developing Classroom Strategies," and "Constructing Effective Assignments." Part Six, "Reading and Writing Reports," is actually a set of alternatives to the standard and often troublesome formal report. Part Seven, "Growing as a Professional," has a single entry, an up-to-date list of "Resources for Teachers of Business, Technical and Vocational Writing."

"Gearing Up" provides a broad overview of the pedagogical, administrative and psychological challenges in setting up

a professional writing course. It attempts to alleviate the fears new teachers may have when facing the "alien knowledges" of sciences and technologies. Thomas Sawyer and Harriett Hogan offer two different approaches to this encounter: Sawyer argues that the basics of science and mathematics are essentially "common sensical" and therefore accessible with a little preparation, while Hogan offers perhaps more down-to-earth advice when she writes that she has found ". . . few students in two-year programs who are sophisticated enough in subject matter to write beyond the comprehension of the writing instructor . . ." (20). She goes on to suggest options for those few students who write at higher levels of difficulty, advice made frequently in this text, to consult with the technical department involved.

The three middle parts of *TBC* contain essays particularly useful to new instructors. Terry Skelton's analysis of James Moffett's discourse theory is helpful; he discusses "abstraction levels" and suggests that group discussions in class, modeled on these concepts, can have "an important impact on the development of ideas and the quality of written work" (49).

Ron Carter's "Writing on the Job: Communication as Design," which stresses writing as process, focuses on the three stages of determining purpose, developing content (invention), and developing appropriate strategies. He then provides a sample exercise to illustrate the process's three steps.

Kitty Locker and Michael Keene's "Using Toulmin Logic in Business and Technical Writing Courses" provides a clear if simplified explanation of Toulmin logic, then shows how it can function as a heuristic and as an aid to audience analysis. Charles Duke outlines an intriguing "public communication internship," which gives students on-the-job writing experience with local and state government agencies, thereby benefiting both students and community. Teachers whose students lack basic technical training and background, as is often the case, will find David Covington's "simulation" exercise and Chester Wolford's use of the case method pertinent.

Thomas Warren's "Teaching the Description of a Specific Mechanism" should be read carefully by new, or even experienced, teachers for a good look at the details involved in making a clear and coherent assignment, preparing students to complete it, and finally, evaluating that assignment effectively. This essay shows what technical writing courses cur-

rently do best; combined with the ones I've previously discussed, it provides a sound rhetorical base for a successful course in technical writing or business communication.

One essential but frequently neglected topic, preparing technical and business students to use the library, is handled well by Elizabeth Tebeaux's "Developing and Presenting Library Instruction." She provides a step-by-step description for a useful course, including a slide presentation and a walking tour of the library. She also provides a useful list of references which would serve as an effective hand-out before or during the course.

The sixth part offers a number of alternatives to the traditional 10-20 page formal report, such as poster sessions and developing summaries of technical and business reports. I am not sure these assignments are real "alternatives" — that is, that they develop the same skills in organization and development that long report writing does — or is believed to do — but most seem useful in their own right. Current research suggests that long reports are infrequently written by technicians and business writers (this would seem to be more true for 2-year graduates).[1] Teachers pressed for time might want to try Kitty Locker's "minireport," which asks students to develop the "structure" of a long report, including a table of contents and a summary, without actually writing the report itself. Stephen Gresham's "alternative" requires students to evaluate a number of professional journals in their field and produce a brief report.

Finally, the "Resources for Teachers of Business, Technical and Vocational Writing" by Carolyn Miller and Bertie Fearing will prove valuable to all instructors in the field. It is instructive to compare this list with one compiled a few years earlier by one of the same authors, and published in Thomas Sawyer's *Technical and Professional Communication: Teaching in the Two-Year College, the Four-Year College, and Professional School.* The earlier list provides 13 pages of entries, of which 5 pages are individual journal articles; the list in *TBC* is 18 pages, with no articles, other than bibliography articles — and I count only 12 entries dated more than ten years ago — an indication of the rapid growth in research in technical and business communication.

Technical and Business Communication fulfills its primary aim of providing new teachers with sound practical advice. But it also reveals some of the problems which cur-

rently beset the field. Problems of "definition" and "coordination" seem particularly acute in *TBC*.

First, the definition of the field or fields under discussion has been an issue for many years; this text, by promiscuously coupling technical writing and business communication, has only exacerbated it. Are technical writing and business communication two distinct fields or a single discipline — or is one a subspecies of the other? Many times before and since Donna Stine and Donald Skarzenski (15-18) set out to distinguish between these courses, attempts to resolve the definition problem have been made. One of the articles in *TBC* becomes entangled in it; in their research Albrecht and Barker became aware" . . . of a problem discussed in technical communication literature: definition of the field" (77). When they surveyed companies in the area to determine their technical writing needs, these companies often reported back that they hired no technical writers, though Albrecht and Barker realize that these companies' "engineers and technicians undoubtedly do writing that is technical" (77). If the problem of definition is not difficult enough, adding business communication to the discussion only adds to the confusion. The writers represented in *TBC* make little effort to distinguish between the two; often quite the contrary. A single essay may treat them both as a single entity and two different courses (91). Since this text is aimed at novice teachers, what must be the effect of such confusion upon them? As an examination of textbook lists, lists of professional associations, and college catalogues indicates, technical writing and business communication are consistently treated as separate fields.

I am not sure why the editors and writers have chosen to conflate technical writing and business communication. Interestingly, the two previous works in the NCTE series focus, quite successfully, on technical writing: Herman Estrin and Donald Cunningham's *The Teaching of Technical Writing,* and Dwight Stevenson's *Courses, Components and Exercises in Technical Communication.* Actually, so does this text, in spite of its title; at least 15 of the 24 articles focus on material far more germane to technical writing than to business communication.

TBC reflects the definition problem common to developing fields, both within and outside academia. A close relationship between technical writing and business communication exists; if this were not the case, the definition problem, or at

least this aspect of it, would not exist. Business communication is a more settled—and limited—field, but its relationship to the specifically technical remains problematic. However, my aim here is not to attempt to define these entangled terms, but to alert readers of *TBC* of the difficulties to be encountered, especially for inexperienced teachers.

My second concern, related to the first, has to do with the very practical and oft-repeated advice in *TBC:* to create strong bonds with the students' technical departments and with their employers and future employers. My concern? It is advice which seems to have had minimal effect upon the writers of *TBC* themselves. With some important exceptions—especially Gladys Abraham's "Writing: An Institutionwide Approach"—course development and assignments exist in a vacuum isolated from contact with the world outside English teachers and textbooks. Even the extensive bibliography reflects a narrow focus; for example, some of the most cogent articles on technical writing appear in journals such as *Engineering Education*—not listed here.

The first article in the collection, James Reinking and George Abraham's "Toward More Effective Technical Writing Courses," recognizes the problem; unfortunately, the most specific counsel they can offer is that "The English instructor and the technical instructor must fully cooperate to meet the needs of students and the community" (7). Sound advice, but what does "fully cooperate" mean in the context of the structure of most colleges? The reason few comprehensive suggestions for coordinating courses are presented in *TBC* is, I believe, that such procedures do not exist or are in the initial stages of development. Like the definition problem, the "coordination" problem is complex and difficult. In part, it is a problem of power: who will develop and control courses and have access to the considerable numbers of students involved? Technical departments are, in general, jealous of their students' time, and they are frequently skeptical about the ability of English departments to teach significant courses. They often question the "authority" of English teachers to instruct engineers, computer technologists and others, as Reinking and Abraham indicate (5). And what's true of the complex relationships between academic departments is even more true when outside organizations, industrial, governmental, and others, are brought into the equation.

These concerns, however, go well beyond the aims and

scope of this text. Within its stated objectives, *Technical and Business Communication in Two-Year Programs* succeeds well, and is a welcome addition to the growing literature for teachers entering the field of technical writing and business communication. Or is it two fields?

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NOTE

[1]See, for example, Faigley and Miller (557-69); also Bataille (276-80).

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BERNARR P. FOLTA

The Editorial Board of the *Journal of Teaching Writing,* along with our many colleagues and readers, extends its deepest sympathies to the family of Bernarr Folta, who died suddenly March 31.

Bernie had just recently accepted the position of Supervisor of Language Arts within the Indianapolis Public School System after being coordinator of English at West Lafayette High School for more than eighteen years. A former president of the Indiana Council of Teachers of English, editorial board member on *JTW* since its inception, and one of the founders of the Indiana Teachers of Writing, Bernie received the E.H. Kemper McComb Award in 1976 from the ICTE for outstanding teaching and contributions to his field. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Ball State University and his doctorate from Purdue University. He leaves his wife, Margery Fletcher Folta; two daughters, Kathy Jackson and Debbie Folta; and three sons, Timothy, Mark, and Daniel.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Dr. Bernarr P. Folta Memorial Scholarship Fund at West Lafayette High School.