

Comment and Response

Let's Not Ruin Technical Writing, Too: A Comment on the Essays of Carolyn Miller and Elizabeth Harris



Carolyn Miller's article, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing," (*CE*, February 1979) shows what happens when a philosophical or "literary" approach is applied to technical writing. Professor Miller wants technical writing taught against an ethical background:

To write, to engage in any communication, is to participate in a community; to write well is to understand the conditions of one's own participation—the concepts, values, traditions, and style which permit identification with that community and determine the success or failure of communication. (p. 617)

She argues that technical writing should be taught as "an overt consensualist perspective" (p. 616):

Under this communalist perspective, the teaching of technical or scientific writing becomes more than the inculcation of a set of skills; it becomes a kind of enculturation. We can teach technical or scientific writing, not as a set of techniques for accommodating slippery words to intractable things, but as an understanding of how to belong to a community. (p. 617)

Professor Miller says little about the primary goal of the basic technical writing course—to teach students to document information clearly, correctly, and economically. The position that technical writing should be taught against a background of

communalism and enculturation makes technical writing just another English course and ignores the reason students need to take the course—to prepare for the writing they will have to do in business and industry.

Similarly, Professor Elizabeth Harris in "Applications of Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse* to Technical Writing," (*CE*, February 1979) argues that the course should be based on traditional rhetoric and emphasize philosophy of writing. Professor Harris believes that the successful technical writing course should enable students to classify technical writing as "referential" (as opposed to "expressive" or "literary" or "persuasive") and then to decide whether a particular kind of technical writing is "explorative," "scientific," or "informative." All this rhetorical maneuvering is done to force technical writing to fit Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse*, even though the practical reason is never made clear. Professor Harris believes that Kinneavy's theory "helps provide the intellectual depth that many writing courses lack" (p. 630). But I keep asking myself, as I read this treatise on the rhetorical philosophy of technical writing, what this way of presenting the course has to do with the processes people in business must use in writing on their jobs. I sincerely doubt that a research chemist or a personnel manager or an engineer bothers

to classify his or her writing according to Kinneavy's theories or that such a theory would be of the slightest use on the job. Professor Harris also thinks that the course has little value to those students "who are not headed professionally for those places where scientific and technical communication are carried out" (p. 625). In defining technical writing too narrowly, she fails to see the course as preparing all students to write for the world of work.

I am not going to argue that Kinneavy's theory cannot be applied to technical writing or that Professor Miller's views on science are not correct. Both articles are interesting. However, I object to the pedagogy these authors suggest because it is inappropriate to the basic undergraduate technical writing course, particularly when we consider the students who take technical writing and the reasons they are taking it. While such theoretical and philosophical approaches as Miller and Harris suggest might be useful in advanced courses in technical communication, they are unsatisfactory in the basic technical writing course because they ignore the purely pragmatic topics and problems that must be emphasized in the course.

To begin with, technical writing is unlike any writing course traditionally taught by English departments. It existed and was taught in relative obscurity until the literacy problem and the paperwork explosion arrived, seemingly about the same time. Suddenly, technical writing courses are flourishing on college campuses across the country and helping prop up sagging English department enrollments.¹ However, English departments must remember that technical writing has drawn its popularity from the mandate given by business and industry—to succeed, to be promoted, one must speak and

write well.² While freshman composition is a step in the process of developing writing skills, technical writing is not primarily a course in the theory of composition. Its purpose is to familiarize students with various kinds of writing done in the industrial and corporate world. Therefore, the point of view of the business and industrial world of which the student will become a part is the only criterion which should be used to plan and teach the course. Real situations, quasi-real situations, or simulated situations should be used as report subjects. The industrial environment, in fact, cannot be effectively simulated by trying to make technical writing a course in either rhetorical or humanistic theory of communication. Trying to give the course "intellectual depth," as Professor Harris suggests, or give the course ethical dimensions, as Professor Miller wants to do, makes less sense than telling students that their paychecks are going to suffer if they can't write well.

Furthermore, in trying to help students more fully visualize settings and situations which require various kinds of reports, the technical writing teacher must realize how extensively technology, not rhetoric, has affected every area of business and technical writing. For example, the implementation of word processing systems is clearly affecting report processing, and students need to be taught the basic types and operations of word processing systems. In addition, most industrial reports are built from computer generated data which must be compiled, organized, and analyzed both by writing and by visual or graphic presentation. Technical writing texts of the future will include examples

¹Claude Gibson, "Business as Usual: Write, Write, Write," The CEA 1978 National Survey of the Teaching of College Writing, *The CEA Forum*, 9 (October, 1978), pp. 3-9.

²The following two studies clearly indicate the importance of good writing skills for those in business and industry: Homer Cox, "The Voices of Experience: The Business Communication Alumnus Report," *Journal of Business Communication*, 13 (1976), 35-46; Richard M. Davis, "How Important Is Technical Writing?—A Survey of the Opinions of Successful Engineers," *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 8 (1978), 207-216.

of standard types of computer print-outs—cash flow statements, chemical test results, sales figures, metallurgical strength test results—which will be used to give students practice in generating analytic or feasibility reports based solely on computer generated information. Why? Because that's the way reports are being generated more and more by business and industry. Again, the purpose of technical writing is to prepare students to write for the actual world of work. Furthermore, the style and organization of many kinds of memos—confirmation memos, disposition memos, phase completion memos—no longer can be taught by textbook formulas. How they are structured and written is determined solely by the field which uses them.³

These kinds of assignments—the real writing of the real industrial world—have little to do with enculturation or being able to apply Kinneavy's theory of discourse. The point is this: what an English professor thinks should be included in technical writing is *not* important. The requirements of the real world and the departments whose students take the course should determine what is taught. Basically, technical writing, unlike traditional courses in composition, is dynamic, because its existence, its reason for being in the curriculum, is not humanistic but pragmatic. Trying to tie the basic technical writing course to traditional rhetoric or teaching the course like a philosophy course will kill the course as it is taught in English departments. Business and industry are so interested in students having had a good course in basic technical writing that English departments must orient the course to meet the point of view of business or else lose the opportunity to teach the course. The simple truth is that many departments whose students take

technical writing are not convinced that English departments should be teaching the course at all.

The Department of Humanities at the University of Michigan College of Engineering exemplifies this distrust of English departments' handling of both technical writing and traditional composition courses. The faculty of the Department of Humanities have extensively voiced their views in numerous engineering and technical journals read by departments whose students take technical writing. For example, in a recent issue of *Engineering Education*, Professors Stevenson, Mathes, and Klaver stated that they "are skeptical about turning technical writing over to English departments . . . some of the principles taught in English composition are antithetical to basic principles of technical writing. These principles taught in English composition derive from classical rhetoric, from the literary tradition, and from such humanistic educational objectives as self-awareness."⁴ The views of Harris and Miller exemplify the kinds of approach that are disliked by many pragmatically-oriented departments and colleges whose students take technical writing. In addition, the position of the Michigan group is well received by technologists and engineers and business professors who tend to question the value of English courses and English departments. As a writing program coordinator for a technology college, I find that in-house writing programs clearly do have their merits, such as immediate flexibility in planning the course to fit the needs of specific groups. Students *can* receive excellent courses in technical writing in other departments besides English.

Ultimately, I am arguing four points.

(1) Technical writing is, by nature, dynamic. Its purpose is not fundamentally

³To examine how data processing employs typical topics taught in basic technical writing courses, see Rändi Sigmund Smith, *Written Communication for Data Processing* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976), pp. 89-160.

⁴J. C. Mathes, Dwight W. Stevenson, Peter Klaver, "Technical Writing: The Engineering Educator's Responsibility," *Engineering Education*, 69 (1978-79), 331-332.

humanistic or theoretical. As the industrial, technological world changes, so must technical writing.

(2) If English departments insist on making technical writing fit comfortable, traditional roles, if they are not responsive to the requirements of the real world, then technical writing may become as unpopular and unappealing to students as required literature courses. Departments whose students take technical writing are not at all interested in their students studying technical writing as a humanities course or as a course in theory of rhetoric. Considering the practice that most students need in organizing material and in writing clear, correct, effective sentences, there simply is no time in a basic technical writing course to devote to ethics and inapplicable rhetorical theory.

(3) Rather than lament the decaying state of the humanities, English departments should see pragmatic writing courses as an opportunity to show students and the real world that English courses can be useful and profitable, that English professors can actually identify with and contribute to the real world. Why can't technical writing, taught to prepare students to write for the changing world of work, coexist with literature? Literature, the stronghold of enculturation, can teach students a great deal about human nature and communal values. Clearly, students need as much knowledge about the human personality and community as possible when they consider the problems of audience, the concept that lies at the foundation of technical writing. Literature and writing should be seen as allies in preparing students for life beyond the academy, but being allied does not necessarily mean that both subject areas should be taught the same way, from the same point of view, in order for them to work together for the good of the students and for the good of English as a profession. A famous liberal arts dean once remarked that English departments that continue to uphold their traditional role of literary inculcators rather than to

reorient their priorities are trying to sell buggy whips.

(4) Technical writing will continue to increase in popularity because business and industry are demanding literate, articulate graduates. The paperwork explosion is a major problem, a reality which demands verbal facility at a time when student writing and reading skills continue to decline.

The ultimate possibility that English departments must consider is this: students do not necessarily have to receive their writing instruction in English departments. Colleges of science, engineering, and technology are easily swayed by cogently presented arguments from schools like the University of Michigan College of Engineering which have their own effective writing programs. English departments must see that technical writing is presented to meet actual, current industrial and scientific writing requirements. Otherwise, they can expect to see the teaching of technical writing usurped by departments and colleges outside English and liberal arts. These "alien" departments and colleges are, I assure you, very committed to preparing their students to write effectively for the world of work.

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Carolyn Miller Responds:

The technical writing course that I teach at North Carolina State is not, as Professor Tebeaux implies, a course in rhetorical theory or ethics. It is a writing course that is informed by rhetorical theory. A theory of rhetoric, if it is any good, does not ignore "purely pragmatic topics and problems," as Professor Tebeaux asserts, but it informs them and provides ways to approach and solve them. A theory of rhetoric as based in the activities and values of a community in fact suggests the very approach that Pro-