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ABSTRACT

This paper examines and comments on the rhetorical dimension of legitimation apparent in the articles in the professional literature of technical communication--this dimension is the epideictic aspect of professional rhetoric. Michael Halloran has shown that epideictic is that dimension of all rhetorical acts which strives to show that the rhetor is representative of the culture in which she or he claims membership. The paper focuses on articles and books that have appeared since 1985. It finds that little has changed: technical communication is still a field that appeals to the ethos of business and industry and to the ethos of the academy; studies practices in industry; tries to suggest improved teaching methods; and tries to make connections with theories outside the field. As in 1985, the uneasy situation of technical communication--its unclear dwelling place--continues to generate laments that writers of text books tend to ignore research in the field. Some significant changes have been found, however: (1) the volume of material in the field is much larger; (2) the caliber of the work appears to be considerably more rigorous; and (3) the areas of specialization are more clearly defined. (Contains a 62-item bibliography.) (NKA)

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Legitimizing Technical Communication, 1985 and 1998

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". . . it [a bibliographic article the history of technical communication] constructs rhetorically the significance of the field by citing scholastic evidence in support of the field's importance." Christa Albrecht-Crane, MTU graduate student, March 1998

"I find that [the author of a bibliographic article the history of technical communication] is less doing the work of a copious bibliographer than he is constructing his argument that technical and business writing is indeed, finally, certainly, look at the evidence, a discipline." Gordon W. Coonfield, MTU graduate student, March 1998

The student comments above point to a characteristic of many articles in technical communication journals. As members of a relatively young academic discipline, technical communication teachers still seem preoccupied with legitimizing the field, and this preoccupation manifests itself in subtle ways in the scholarly literature. This was one of the first impressions I had of the field when I began reading the scholarship in the early eighties, and if the comments by the students cited above is any sign, that concern is still obvious to readers as they enter the field. My purpose in this paper is to comment on the rhetorical dimension of legitimation apparent in the articles in the professional literature of technical communication. This dimension is the epideictic aspect of professional rhetoric. Although epideictic, one of Aristotle's three genres of rhetoric, is often thought of as ceremonial or occasional rhetoric marked by its use of praise and blame, Michael Halloran has shown that it is that dimension of all rhetorical acts which strives to show that the rhetor is representative of the culture she wishes to claim membership in ("Doing Public Business in Public"); Michael Carter has argued that papers at professional conferences are epideictic rhetoric of the type described in Plato's *Menexenus*, the closed-society exchange of esoteric material; and I have suggested elsewhere that there are five functions of epideictic, legitimation being one of them (Sullivan "The Epideictic Rhetoric of Science").

The focus of this paper is on articles and books that have appeared since 1985. I chose that date because it was in that year that I attended 4Cs for the first time, clutching my first-ever paper to be read at a national conference. It was the product of four and a half years of teaching technical communication at a two-year technical college and an extensive independent study the previous summer in which I analyzed the rhetoric of teachers of technical writing in an attempt to find out how they legitimized their profession. The paper had an annotated bibliography of 100 items from the previous ten years. It was neatly divided into two major sections: those articles which attempted to legitimize technical writing by making appeals to the ethos of industry and those that attempted to do so by appealing to the ethos of the liberal arts.

Each of these divisions was subdivided into four sections, the details of which are not important now. However, I claimed that those articles in the first category, those appealing

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to industry, seem to be built on the assumption that technical communication is more closely tied to the world of business and industry than to the academy and so they attempt to study practices in business so that they can be taught to students. In other words, these articles do not approach business and industry with the intent of abstracting knowledge to build a theoretical base; nor do they approach their subjects from a critical perspective. The articles in the second category, those appealing to the ethos of the liberal arts, seemed intent on convincing colleagues in the academy that the field of technical communication is maturing as a research or scholarly endeavor, developing a theoretical base by compiling case studies, by applying theory from other fields (such as rhetoric or literature), and by studying the history of technical communication.

In some ways, little has changed: we are still a field that appeals to the ethos of business and industry and to the ethos of the academy; we still study practices in industry; we still try to suggest improved teaching methods; we still try to make connections with theories outside our field. As in 1985, the uneasy situation of technical communication-its unclear dwelling place-continues to generate laments that writers of text books tend to ignore research in the field; as Carl Herndl says, radical implications of some ethnographic research, "seem irrelevant to the pedagogical task and disappear from the scene" ("Transformation" 27). Conversely, some in the field castigate researchers for becoming too esoteric: ". . . technical communication researchers, to give academic credibility to their work, have developed their own exclusionary language. This increasingly allusive . . . language gives intellectual stature and a sense of erudition to our work, but it also alienates nonacademic users of our research" (Tebeaux, "Nonacademic Writing," 50)

Although the field seems much as it was in 1985, there have been some significant changes. Specifically, I will point to three: (1) the volume of material in the field is much larger; (2) the caliber of the work appears to be considerably more rigorous; and (3) the areas of specialization are more clearly defined.

Increased Volume of Publications in Technical Communication

My first observation has to do with the size of my task in 1985 and the size of my task in 1998-it is a lot harder in 1998 to have a sense that one has read a representative sample of the literature in the field than it was in 1985. There is a much larger body of material to look at now than there was then, and the articles tend to be longer. Whereas in 1985 I consulted only three or four edited collections, and most of those were strongly slanted toward pedagogy, I have now had to consult at least a score of such books. Consider, for example, the following collections: Bertie Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow, *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice*; Carolyn Matalene, *Worlds of Writing*; Rachel Spilka, *Writing in the Workplace*; Nancy Roundy Blyer and Charlotte Thralls, *Professional Communication: The Social Perspective*; Paul Dombrowski, *Humanistic Aspects of Technical Communication*; Charles Bazerman and James Paradis, *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*; Carl Herndl and Stuart Brown, *Green Culture*; Ann Hill Duin and Craig J. Hansen, *Nonacademic Writing: Social Theory and Technology*; John Frederick Reynolds, et. al., *Professional Writing in Context*. Besides this selected list, I know of at least three books in the Landmark Essays series which have just appeared or are about to appear that should be added to the list immediately. Add to the proliferation of research-oriented anthologies the series put out by the Society for Technical Communication, such as John Brockmann and Fern Rook, *Technical Communication Ethics*, Dan Jones, *Defining Technical Communication*, and Michael Keene, *Education in Scientific and Technical*

Communication, and remember that *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, edited by Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami didn't appear until 1985 and that the only substantial collection of theoretical articles before that in the field was *New Essays in Technical & Scientific Communication* (1983), edited by Paul Anderson, John Brockmann, and Carolyn Miller, and you begin to see that there has been an amazing growth in the publication of collections containing research articles.

Still considering books, one now needs to become familiar with a sizable collection of single-authored books, a genre newly evolved in the profession. Even if we exclude books on the rhetoric of science, we find such works as David Dobrin's *Writing and Technique*, Jimmie Kingsworth's and Jacqueline Palmer's *Ecospeak*, Dorothy Winsor's *Writing Like an Engineer*, John Brockmann's *From Millwrights to Shipwrights*, Jennie Dautermann's *Writing at Good Hope*, Elizabeth Tebeaux's *The Emergence of a Tradition*, and Teresa Kynell's *Writing in a Milieu of Utility*.

Whereas in 1985, I could feel fairly confident that most of the articles on technical communication would appear in four journals (*Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, *Technical Writing Teacher*, and *Technical Communication*), I now have those same journals and *The Journal of Business and Technical Communication* and *Written Communication* to contend with, and *Technical Writing Teacher*, as we all know, is now *Technical Communication Quarterly*. As in 1985, one still finds articles in *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*, but one now needs to pay attention to *The Journal of Advanced Composition* and some of the Speech Communication journals, not to mention journals in other fields, such as the history of medicine. In short, not only have the central journals in the field increased in number and size, our consciousness of work that can contribute to our research has widened so that we now find ourselves looking farther afield.

So what are we to make of this growth in publications in technical communication in light of the stated purpose of this paper—to investigate the legitimation of the profession of teaching technical communication? I think it points to two changes, the emergence of specialists trained in the field and the active search for tenure and advancement within the academic world. It is certainly true that people who do not restrict themselves to one field have published and continue to publish work about technical communication; however, as one reads recent work, it becomes clear that many of the writers have decided to make technical communication their primary research area and have therefore built up a considerable list of publications within it. Furthermore, looking at the institutional affiliations and rank of many of the writers, I realize that they are tenure-track faculty seeking promotion and tenure and doing so by publishing in their primary field of instruction. Not too many years ago, people could publish in fields outside their teaching responsibilities and apply those publications to their tenure case—and that still happens—but, more and more, departments and universities expect publication to show expertise and specialization within a single field, the field in which they teach. Those pressures and the consequent professionalization, I believe, are clearly evidenced in the increased volume of publications. The sheer number of the publications exceeds the number that any typical practitioner would find time to peruse, and so I see here a leaning away from the goal of meeting the needs of industry and toward the goal of establishing a viable presence in the academy.

Increased Rigor in the Research in Technical Communication

The second major change that I notice is an apparent increase in the rigor of the research. This change, signaled by a genre shift, began to appear in publications that appeared in the early 80s. The shift became especially noticeable with the publication of the second volume in Baywood's Technical Communication Series, *New Essays in Technical and Scientific Communication*. The first volume in the series, *Directions in Technical Writing and Communication*, edited by Jay R. Gould, consisted primarily of articles suggesting improved teaching and professional practices. Most of the articles are under ten pages long, and only four of the fourteen articles have a "References" section, and some which do have them contain only one reference. Only one article reports the findings of primary research, a report on a study, conducted at the Air Force Academy, of the effects of grading papers using a cassette recorder. In stark contrast, the second volume contains several articles which exceed twenty pages in length. All of them have "References," and a few have several pages of references. Some of the articles are bibliographic reviews, and some report primary historical research or frame theoretical constructions. Although these are merely external markers of rigor and no guarantee of quality, they nonetheless exhibit writers in the field shifting genres, employing the conventions of academic, scholarly articles rather than those of the teaching tip. This genre shift continues in collections in the field--notably in Michael Moran's and Debra Journet's *Research in Technical Communication*, Lee Odell's and Dixie Goswami's *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, and Charles Bazerman's and James Paradis' *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*--and in the articles published in the journals as well.

A second marker of rigor beyond the shift in genre is that the research reported in such collections and in journal articles is now clearly self-aware of the constraints of methodology, whether that methodology be textual analysis, as in Bazerman and Paradis, ethnographic as in Matalene or Spilka, or historical as in a forthcoming book edited by Killingsworth, Kynell, and Staples. Discussions of method, such as Jennifer Connor's "Medical Text and Historical Context: Research Issues and Methods in History and Technical Communication" Carl Herndl's "Teaching Discourse and Reproducing Culture," Geoffrey Cross's "Ethnographic Research in Business and Technical Writing," Davida Charney's "Empiricism Is Not A Four-Letter Word," and Janice Lauer's and Patricia Sullivan's "Validity and Reliability as Social Constructions" signal a level of concern about the quality and implications of research that was largely absent from the literature in our field fifteen years ago. Always a sign of emerging disciplinarity, preoccupation with methodology is an essential element of legitimation--those who follow accepted practices are deemed professional; those who don't are excluded.

A third indication of the increased rigor is the use of theory to inform discussion. Although articles from the 70s and early 80s also occasionally drew on theories outside the field, such studies tended to be preliminary explorations of how various theories' might prove useful, whereas researchers and scholars in the field today display a sophisticated grasp of theory in several areas and acumen at using them to explicate or critique their subjects. Some of these theoretical perspectives are new to technical communication in the last fifteen years. For instance, one now often finds Feminist critiques such as Mary Lay's "The Value of Gender Studies to Professional Communication Research" or the special issue on "Historical Contributions by Women to Technical Communication" in volume 6 number 2 of *Technical Communication Quarterly*. But researchers in the field draw on a wide range of theory including genre theory (Berkenkotter and Huckin), rhetorical theory (Katz; Walzer and Gross), and sociolinguistics (Gunnarsson) and they cite a wide range of theorists, among

them philosophers of science like Feyerabend (Dombrowski) and continental philosophers such as Bourdieu (Herndl, "Transformation of Critical Ethnography") and Habermas (Wells).

The increased rigor apparent in the genre shift in the field, in preoccupation with methodology, and with reliance on theory to inform critique is a direct appeal to legitimation based on the notion that professionalism in academic research is marked by excellence and erudition rather than by common sense of practical experience. Thus, this change, like the first, indicates a gravitation of publications away from the ethos of industry and toward the ethos of the academy.

The Emergence of Lines of Research in Technical Communication

Finally, comparing publications in the field prior to 1985 with those since, I see increased delineation of areas of research interest. Although there have always been articles on the teaching of technical writing or on its history, these areas can now be constructed as lines of research building on previous work in the field. Ethnographic studies of writing in nonacademic settings have proliferated in the last fifteen years, and these were rare in 1984. Sub specialties are now emerging, and at least one, having combined with research interests from other disciplines, has now become a major area unto itself: the rhetoric of science draws scholars from such disciplines as chemistry (Bauer), philosophy (Fuller; Pera), sociology (Latour and Woolgar), linguistics (Halliday and Martin), communication studies (Prelli), Economics (McCloskey), history (Pera and Shea), English (Gross, Bazerman). At best, the union between technical communication and the rhetoric of science, which one saw everywhere in the early 1980s as an attempt to yoke technical communication to a powerful source of legitimacy, was a marriage of convenience. The boundaries between the two fields are still not clearly defined, but it is more problematic today to pass over the distinctions between the rhetoric of science and technical communication than it once was.

Among those sub specialties clearly within the boundaries of technical communication which are beginning to emerge include medical writing (Connor), environmental writing (Killingsworth and Palmer), public policy rhetoric (Waddell), visual communication (Barton and Barton), international technical communication (Special Issue 11.3 of *JBTC*), information technology (Duin and Hansen), document testing (Special Issue 11.4 of *JBTC*), governmental (Odell) or public service writing (Doheny-Farina), and the history of technical communication (Tebeaux, *Emergence*)--areas that supplement technical writing scholars' traditional interest in the writing done by engineers (Winsor). As areas of special interest develop in the field, the need for bibliographic articles has arisen. For example, in the area of the history of technical communication, there now exists at least five often cited review articles or bibliographies: Mathes and Pinelli, Brockman, Moran, Zappen, and Rivers.

As these special areas of research continue to emerge and established bodies of literature gather around them, it becomes difficult to publish in the field without having spent the time needed to become familiar with previous work. Despite what some of our colleagues in traditional English departments may think, it is no longer the case that one can wade into the field of technical writing and contribute without having first developed a sense of the publications, the topics, the research projects, and prior contributions. Like the first and second change in the literature discussed earlier, this change indicates the professionalization of technical communication as an academic field rather than as a

practical profession.

Conclusion

I do not wish to pretend that this paper represents an exhaustive or even a balanced sampling of the literature in the field of technical communication. There is a growing number of publications that focus exclusively on the concerns of professional communicators, concerns such as document design (Shriver), project management (Hackos), and international technical communication (Hoft), and many of these publications exhibit the influence of the business world. It is clear that the professionalization of technical communication as a professional practice in industry is also moving forward, but in my reading for this paper, I have been taken with the increased professionalization of technical communication as an academic discipline. The epideictic dimension of published articles and books knits the writer to the community she addresses and simultaneously constructs an image of that community. Although it is possible for that constructed image to be an unrealistic portrayal of the community, in order for the article to be published, the referees must be comfortable with the community of readers implicit in the text. It has been my goal in this paper to compare that implicit image with the image evoked by articles only fifteen years ago. Much more secure in their own identity and with the increasing status of the profession, writers of articles now enact an ethos of an academic research field that was only beginning to emerge in the early eighties. I am in no position to say whether or not we have finally arrived, but I am in a position to say that we have come a long way.

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