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A Flare from the Margins: The Place of Professional Writing in English Departments

Kathryn Rentz

Last year, when we revised the requirements for the English major at the University of Cincinnati, we took seriously a significant finding from a survey of our graduates: that well over 90 percent of our majors do not go on to academic jobs in English. In response to this fact, we somewhat reduced the literature requirements to allow room for more writing electives, and, perhaps more symbolically significant, we created a new course, “Discourse Communities,” to serve along with three other courses—“The Study of Language,” “Literary Theory,” and “Advanced Composition”—as “toolbox courses,” any two of which each English major would be required to take. In this way, the analysis of different kinds of professional discourse—managerial, technical, medical, legal, journalistic, and so on—could become a core component in our English majors’ education.

While those of us in professional writing regarded these changes as a welcome signal that what we teach does, in fact, belong in the English department, the terms of that belonging were not extensively discussed at the faculty meeting where these changes were approved. In proposing the inclusion of “Discourse Communities” in the major requirements, we relied on justifications already favored by our literature and composition colleagues—that is, that texts and the realities they create are socially constructed; that particular discourses can be seen as instances of larger, institutionalized areas of discourse constraining the lives we live; and that it is part of our job to alert our students to the power relations inscribed in texts of all sorts. To get the course approved at the meeting, we had to point out more than once that this was not a course in producing professional discourse, but instead one taking a critical (as in both analytic and criticizing) approach. I think I know what the outcome would have been had we taken it into our heads to propose an actual professional writing course as a “toolbox” course instead of one devoted to the critical gaze.

Yet professional writing instruction is a significant component of many English departments across the country. Of the 525 or so English undergraduate programs represented in a 1991 Modern Language Association survey, 65.4 percent offered professional or technical writing (Huber 1996). More

English departments offered professional writing courses, in fact, than courses in the history of the language, literary criticism and theory, women writers, or ethnic and minority literature. Between 1980 and 1985, 36.8 percent of these departments added professional writing to their curricula, making it the largest area of growth in English studies during this time, outstripping creative writing, rhetoric and composition theory, literature criticism, ethnic and minority literature, and women's literature. The average number of professional writing sections offered by the departments was reported as 6.9 per year—more sections, for example, than in creative writing, in the American or British literature surveys, or in all literary period courses combined. Moreover, nearly half of the responding departments reported that they offered an undergraduate concentration in professional writing. According to research conducted by the Society for Technical Communication, there were twenty-eight M.A. programs in professional writing as of 1994, almost all of them housed in English departments (including ours at the University of Cincinnati)—and some of the twenty-four M.S. programs in technical and professional communication listed here were also in English departments (Keene 1997).

If you were to read any of the books depicting English studies that have come out over the last fifteen years, you would never guess that professional writing figured significantly into English departments' missions or activities. I have examined a number of these books: *Textual Power* (Scholes 1985), *Professing Literature* (Graff 1987), *The Future of Doctoral Studies in English* (Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin 1989), *Work Time* (Watkins 1989), *What Is English?* (Elbow 1990), *English Inside and Out* (Gubar and Kamholtz 1993), *English As a Discipline* (Raymond 1996), *The Employment of English* (Bérubé 1998), *The Rise and Fall of English* (Scholes 1998), *Language and Limits* (Tuman 1998), and *The English Department* (Winterowd 1998). While many of them make an effort to articulate a vision of English studies hospitable to both literary studies and composition, I find it astonishing that these authors, even the composition experts, ignore the presence of professional writing in English departments.

Does this neglect imply that professional writing can simply be folded into composition studies—that the two areas of writing instruction are largely interchangeable, and thus that what we say about the relation of composition to literary studies holds true for professional writing as well? Or is professional writing a nasty little secret of English departments, one representing an embarrassing compromise with capitalism and the technostate about which we'd rather not speak?

As someone who teaches and does research in professional writing, I can attest that the former assumption is not correct. True, with the help of such articles as Carolyn Miller's (1979) hugely influential "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing," Elizabeth Harris's (1982) "In Defense of the Liberal-Arts Approach to Technical Writing," and many that have appeared since in business and technical communication journals, we professional-writing types have learned to be, to some extent, critical pedagogues, rescuing professional writing from positivist views of language. But we also do want our students' writing to be successfully instrumental. (Patrick Moore [1999] has been causing a skirmish in the professional communication journals by reasserting the primacy of this value in our field, but I suspect that even those who disagree with him disagree largely with his extremism.) A clash between the values underpinning composition and professional writing recently surfaced when I served as a reader for a graduate student's critical paper, the capstone experience in our professional writing M.A. track. As a teaching assistant, this student had taught both "English Composition" and "Writing for Business," and she had written her paper on the concept of "community" in those classrooms. The part of her paper about making the composition class a "contact zone" worked well, of course; it is a widely accepted goal of composition instruction nowadays to attune students to diverse discourses, and the power differentials inscribed therein, as represented in the composition classroom. When she tried to apply the concept of contact zones to the business-writing class, though, she floundered, finally depicting students' need to learn about different communities in that context as a matter of audience analysis, a strategy for more persuasive writing. During her oral defense of her paper, I asked, "Is it possible that you had trouble putting contact zones into play in the business-writing class because those students probably already belong to one huge, more or less homogeneous community—that is, those who basically want to succeed as members of a capitalistic, technological society, whose functioning depends heavily on sameness, not difference?" The leveling effect of these values had not occurred to her. She sensed that the concept of community played differently in the two kinds of writing instruction, but rather than dig down to why this might be so, and to the potential dissonance between composition and professional writing, she resorted to the fact that the two realms of writing instruction both draw on rhetorical principles. (Actually, I think professional-writing classrooms could benefit greatly from the concept of contact zones, but as Laurie Grobman [1999] points out, the professional-writing teacher needs to think carefully through the hows and whys of importing this composition concept.)

No, professional-writing and composition courses, as they're currently taught and understood by those within these fields, are not the same. So does that mean that the second explanation of our absence in descriptions of English departments' work applies—that our colleagues in literature and composition are deliberately averting their eyes from our shamefully close relations to business, science, and technology? If this is true, then all the efforts to lay bare the problems and conflicts of English departments seem to me to stop short of what may be the biggest conflict of all. Professional writing is here in English departments. What do we bring to the table, and why are we allowed to sit at it? As the pages of our journals attest, we in professional writing have been trying ever since becoming an academic presence to figure out on what bases we exist, but we could use some help from those intellects who purport to analyze and theorize English studies as a whole. Figuring out the relationship of professional writing to English would provide guidance to those shaping undergraduate and graduate curricula, and it would help us help our students to integrate their learning experiences in courses that now seem implicitly at odds in many ways. And who knows? Maybe honestly considering this relationship would bring to light suppressed values and inconsistencies whose airing could lead to a more comprehensive, convincing vision for English studies in general.

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