Applying Flexibility to the Search for a Definition of Technical Communication

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Question: How is flexibility both a problem and a solution for defining technical communication? Discuss factors that impact defining the field of technical communication, like humanism, positivism, the history of the field, and other related concepts.

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Introduction

   Technical writers serve as mediums for conveying information to diverse audiences. Because of this role, the field of technical communication (TC) has evolved from the work of the scientific and engineering fields in the early 1900s. This development and diversification of the field led to early definitions quickly becoming insufficient, as well as difficulties in the task of redefining. As I have learned about the field's history and been exposed to various definitions that build upon one another, contradict, are outdated, or simply exclude large portions of the field, I have been uncertain whether it is possible for TC to be defined successfully. Despite the field's running history of failed attempts to define itself, scholars continue to discuss new approaches, analyzing previous definitions as they do so.

   When trying to define TC for new students, employers, or other interested parties, providing a definition that fully encompasses what we do is a long and tedious project. This is further complicated by whether we want to define the field as a whole or only according to what we do within it. Everyone seems to have a similar, yet different, idea of what technical writers do and do not do. A large part of the difficulty in agreeing upon a definition that perfectly fits the field is that there are many different niches within TC. For example, niches that technical writers may work in include blog writing, medical writing, or scientific writing to name a few. All technical writers have different experiences and niches in the field that impact their views of technical communication. There has even been conflict in the field on whether a definition is needed at all, largely backed up by the history of failed attempts at composing a definition, which I will discuss later in this paper. Because of this history and other factors which I will discuss more in-depth, many technical writers compare the different proposed definitions and

examine their flexibility. This idea of flexibility seems to be the criteria that we keep coming back to when discussing proposed definitions.

I believe that if we are going to define the field of TC, we should focus on finding a definition that is flexible and meets most of the needs that previous arguments have brought up. Approaching defining the field through the lens of flexibility, however, has provided its own problems and solutions. This is a common approach that many scholars – such as Miller (2004), Dobrin (2004), and Rutter (2004) – have used in their analyses of definitions of TC. While flexibility could provide both problems and solutions for future attempts to define the field, the benefits outweigh the negatives. The power and legitimacy that a well-written, flexible definition provides could help further the reach and job opportunities for technical writers.

In this paper, I will discuss the history of TC, bringing in the importance of defining the field. In exploring the importance of a definition, I will review several existing attempts at defining the field and the approaches they take, including the factors and theories that these scholars consider, including positivism, humanism, and alternity. I will then compare and contrast how each of these scholars also pull upon the history of the field and previous definitions. Here the issue of flexibility comes into play, and I will define this, discuss how considering flexibility in a definition can be both a problem and a solution, calling upon previous attempts at applying this idea. Then, I will conclude with a discussion of how flexibility provides more solutions than problems.

History of Technical Communication

Recounting the history of TC takes us back to approximately the 1890s to the early 1900s. Connors (2004) notes that recalls of technical communication history are problematic because they usually only include what was written down in textbooks and articles. This means

that oral history, interviews, memoirs, etc. are often excluded. Due to this, we know that specialized courses hardly existed in the 19th century, and English schools began to establish separate English departments within themselves to serve the needs of students wanting to study these areas in 1899. With this in mind, Connors places the early years of TC between 1895-1939, basing this range on the rise of technical writing instruction in America and the lead up to that development. The field has witnessed constant evolution over the past century, starting with the textbooks we use. For example, one of the first textbooks, *A Guide to Technical Writing* by T. A. Rickard, was primarily meant for practitioning engineers, but it was the precursor for the textbooks used in TC college courses today according to Connors. This is evidentiary of the fact that much of a technical writer's work involves research and working with others in the field, as well as working with those outside the field. It also shows our roots in writing engineering and science, which in turn is where we get the "technical" portion of our name and field focus. Connors (2004) also talks about our field's name, noting that early textbooks such as Aydelotte's *English and Engineering* tied the field closely to technology while also broadening it to allow for more liberal and humanizing content and approaches. These similar yet contradicting approaches show how different the views of what could be considered technical writing were from early on in our field's history. The most notable textbook, however, was Sada Harbarger's English for Engineers, which was the first "modern" textbook and was organized according to technical forms, as many of our textbooks and classes today teach.

Much of the changes to our field came with the Depression. Connors (2004) discusses how the Depression hit engineering schools hard, along with everyone else. The World War greatly impacted the changes that came to TC, including the imperative need for new technology. From the 1940s to the 80s, TC experienced advances in pay and prestige and the war and race for

technology with Russia brought new opportunities and positions for technical writers; among the opportunities was the development of proposal writing, which quickly skyrocketed (Connors, 2004). But with these breakthroughs came problems. Though students were becoming smarter, they were also becoming fewer. Moreover, with the increase in opportunities came the need for technical writers to be able to describe their skills and focuses to employers, which proved problematic as the struggle to define TC began. And while the field is even more technologically involved now due to our society's embracement of computers and the internet, enabling us to continuously find new opportunities, we still face the difficulties that come with not being able to agree upon a definition.

This is not an exhaustive history, and I have not covered all sources available due to the limits of this paper. There are many more scholars that discuss the field's history; however, Connors provides a general outline of the field's history in order to understand the diversity of the field and the consequential factors that impact the difficulty to define the field.

Defining the Field

While there are many existing definitions of TC available and it would be near impossible to know them all, it is important to be familiar with some of the definitions, the scholars who proposed them, and the theories they implemented in creating these definitions. Miller, Rutter, and Dobrin apply factors from positivism, humanism, and alternity in their approaches to defining the field. And while these are not the only scholars who give their input on the discussion surrounding defining the field, they are often cited by others and thoroughly discuss these critical perspectives.

TC courses are often taught through a positivist perspective, focusing on form and style and mainly having content related to the sciences (Miller, 2004). With this comes a

consequential tendency towards analyzing audiences based on perceived levels of capability, which is difficult to know for certain and leaves room for error in writing for the audience. According to Miller, positivism is the idea that everything can be verified through the application of science and social laws. However, this critical perspective leaves little to no room for writers to experiment or implement their own voices. As Dobrin (2004) points out, despite our attempts to purify our writing with clear, concise, and unbiased language, we cannot ever be sure how an audience might interpret our words. This is due to the differences in background, education level, and cultural differences that we can never know for sure. Additionally, this perspective does not allow much space for unintended audiences.

The windowpane theory that is paired with positivism discusses the issue these limitations pose. Described as looking through a window, where it received its name, the windowpane theory posits that we can see content but not interact with it in order to maintain objective and impartial writing (Miller, 2004). To better understand the application of these theories, consider Slack et al.'s (2004) three roles a technical writer may take in a workplace: transmission, translation, and articulation. According to positivism and the windowpane theory, writers should most likely take the transmission role, in which they do not greatly change or impact the content, solely working as conveyers/senders of information to an audience. Technical writers may also take on the other roles if practicing according to this theory, but they would likely not have much freedom over the writing. And when applied to the search for a definition, both Miller and Dobrin note that this perspective is inadequate because it relies too heavily on the scientific and engineering fields that the TC was built upon without leaving room for other genres and fields for technical communicators to write about. Regardless, TC's early focus on the scientific and engineering fields played a large role in the way we teach and think

about our field. But despite the way the field is taught, technical writers are employing different perspectives to their work in TC, including in their search for a better definition. Humanism and alternity are good examples of these alternate views.

What sets humanism and alternity apart from positivism is their consideration of outside factors on our writing. Humanism, for example, focuses largely on the communication portion of our field's name, applying rhetorical practices to technical writing and the search for a definition. Rutter (2004) especially calls for the application of rhetoric, noting that technical communicators should "actively create versions of reality instead of serving merely as windows through which reality in all its pre-existent configurations may be seen" (28). This argument is a direct opposition to positivism's windowpane theory. The humanistic critical perspective asks us to consider the other factors that may impact a reader's experience with our writing, such as their education, experience level with the subject, background, and culture. While we may not be able to ever fully know these things about our audiences, keeping them in mind as we write makes our documents more reader-friendly and accessible. Rutter encourages us to take the emphasis off of writing and place it on communication because writing proficiency is not enough. TC also involves the use of rhetoric skills, problem-solving skills, and the ability to work with others. A large part of humanism's approach is encouraging that relationship with the reader on a higher level. Slack et al.'s (2004) articulation role for technical communicator's roles in the workplace best describes this relationship. In the articulation role, the writer involves both the sender and the receiver of the information in their process, employing constant teamwork and communication to get the best document or product. By going straight to our audience and involving them in the process, maintaining a humanistic approach is easier and more effective

because there is less guesswork about the audience's experiences and needs. The role of the audience is often not considered in attempts to define the field, however.

Dobrin (2004) points out that there are generally three approaches to defining TC: it's scientific; it's communicative, not self-expressive; or it's focused primarily on conveying one sole meaning. These are all points that line up with the positivist view. In his discussion of whether a definition should focus on the "technical" or the "communication" portion of the field's name, Dobrin applies the alternity perspective. According to him, alternity "designates the fact that any statement, as it states what is, also brings into domain what isn't" (p. 116). This directly combats the idea that language can be formulized to be clear and fully objective. Language is always playing with the possible because we rely on context, tone, and emphasis, along with our assumptions about others and their experiences with the language. He poses that technology is what's technical about the field of TC and gives his attempt at a definition: "Technical writing is writing that accommodates technology to the user" (p. 118). This definition focuses on there being a transfer of technology involved that goes from designer to engineer to manager to distributor to customer. However, even Dobrin points out that this definition is still problematic before concluding that it shifts the attention to where he believes it should be, technology practices. This is problematic for a number of reasons, the primary being that Dobrin does not leave room for the work that many technical writers do that does not fall into the category of technology practices, which inevitably leads to disagreements over what does and does not constitute TC. Nonetheless, the idea behind alternity presents a unique perspective on the role language plays in finding a definition that suits TC. Language is fluid and much is left to the reader's interpretation in TC, though we do our best to make our points clear. What this points out is that the very heart of our field is built upon the idea of flexibility. We write in many

genres, find work in a variety of workplaces, and convey messages to multiple different

audiences. The issues with each of these approaches to defining the field come down to the fact

that they touch on the importance of flexibility but do not apply enough of it themselves.

Discussion

The above scholar's discussions and their focuses on the issue of defining the field show

that while opinions on definitions often contradict, they all share similar issues. Many of these

issues could be solved, or at least lessened, with the application of flexibility in these approaches.

Accepting that a definition may not encompass everyone's needs and leaving as much space as

possible would be the best approach we could take.

Applying Flexibility

It is important to note that not everyone wants to define the field. For example, Allen

(1990) provides a basis for a growth mindset towards not defining the field, pulling on the

recurring issues with attempts at definitions. While her argument is against defining the field, she

does optimistically note that the issues are resolvable. Some issues she brings up include

broadness, narrowness, personal experiences influencing everyone's opinions about TC, and

what aspects of TC to focus on. The critical perspectives discussed earlier do not all allow space

for consideration of individual experiences and niches. Some perspectives allow for more

flexibility than others. For example, positivism and the windowpane theory push for a rigid

writing style with the insistence on certain tone characteristics such as remaining objective,

unemotional, and impersonal. This leaves little room for invention by the writer, nor for

considerations of how different audiences might read the text. Humanism and alternity, however,

allow for more flexibility. Keeping flexibility and the goal of our writing practices in mind,

which is to communicate effectively, these two perspectives come closer to enabling our field to define itself.

However, all of the problems Allen (1990) points out are all amendable and/or overshadowed by the benefits that flexibility could provide. Allen herself counters these with the solution of a flexible definition, saying, "I predict that the definition will not be a handy one- or two-sentence catch-all. Rather, I think it will have to be an extensive and flexible definition that will have to represent all the complexities and delicate balances… of successful technical writing" (p. 76). While we could choose to not define the field, and other scholars besides Allen do support not defining as well, doing so would mean that we 1) have wasted our time thus far attempting to define the field and 2) we would be missing out on the benefits that defining the field would provide us with. Henning and Bemer (2016) take the idea of flexibility further than Allen's (1990) discussion, combining it with their opinion that a definition will provide power and legitimacy to the field. They discuss concerns over practical skills, conceptual skills, and flexibility, bringing the conversation back to how we apply what we do in the field. Henning and Bemer pose these skills as being the key to gaining power and legitimacy. Power and legitimacy happen on two levels. The first level focuses on the individual and their responsibility to learn and apply skills. The second level focuses on the image of TC as a whole and how we convey ourselves and our skills to others. Prioritizing power and legitimacy in these ways would give us "brand identity" and clarify for others what we do, simultaneously displaying our value to others as well. This is important to consider when developing a definition because this perspective improves both how we view ourselves and how others view us, providing us with more opportunities. The whole hope behind developing a definition comes back to needing to describe what we do as technical writers to others.

While some in TC attempt to come up with better definitions for the field, there are definitions that many in our field do support. Henning and Bemer (2016) cite one of the current "official" definitions that can be found in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook's* entry for TC:

> Technical writers, also called technical communicators, produce instruction manuals and other supporting documents to communicate complex and technical information more easily. They also develop, gather, and disseminate technical information among customers, designers, and manufacturers. (pp. 313-314)

This definition was not added to the handbook until 2011, verifying the field's difficulty in agreeing on a definition thus far that would present a united front. But despite the "officialness" this definition's entry in the Occupational Outlook Handbook gives it, there are still problems with this definition. What this definition does well is it has not been limited to a short sentence and it attempts to apply flexibility. This definition was not well known, as they point out, however, and it raised the issue of whether we should be officially called technical communicators or technical writers. Henning and Bemer (2016) proposed several changes. Among these were revisions that expanded upon the types of documents we produce while remaining not overly specific and minor language changes in the second sentence, both of which allowed for an increase of flexibility in the definition. This revised definition does not limit the genres of writing and documents technical writers produce, and it also is inclusive of the fact that we use theories in our work. Additionally, this definition accurately describes much of what we do as technical writers, which promotes the power and legitimacy our field has. Henning and Bemer's (2016) definition is not perfect, but it shows the direction we should be moving in with defining the field.

Flexibility

Many of the earlier examples were simply not flexible enough and therefore did not come close to being accepted as working definitions for the entirety of TC. They may work to define certain areas with TC, but the goal remains a definition that encompasses what everyone in the field does. Of course, not all needs may be met with even a more flexible definition than those we currently have, and I have no definitions I could propose that would be better attempts than those discussed in this paper. However, continuing to examine and applying the theoretical approaches and flexibility together in the field of TC is one step to gaining a working definition to replace the various ones we currently call upon.

Conclusion

Exploring the idea of flexibility in TC is beneficial not just for understanding the debate around defining the field but also for understanding the role of the technical writer. The diverse nature of our field means that we must be flexible in our writing, research, work with others, etc. We adapt our writing styles according to the styles of the niche we are working in and apply for jobs under various titles because not many employers know what to call technical writers in their job ads. Being able to discuss our field and our own flexibility as technical communicators is an important step towards helping potential employers understand who we are and what we do, however. In this way, we empower and legitimize ourselves individually and as a field.

This is not to say that the application of theories like humanism, positivism, and alternity is not beneficial for our field. In fact, the opposite is true. Applying these critical perspectives, and others, to our approaches to defining the field has been crucial in understanding the way that we conduct research and participate in social discussions. As I discussed earlier, the application of these perspectives led to others analyzing the proposed definitions and building upon them with other perspectives in attempts to correct issues. These theories alone are simply not enough

to approach a definition that will work for the field of TC as a whole. Though, it is also true that flexibility may not be enough to develop a definition that can be agreed upon either. I cannot pose a better definition than the existing definitions our field uses, though we can and do find issues with them regularly. Hopefully, the continued application of critical perspectives and flexibility will yield a definition we can all agree on. How we frame the field to future students and potential employers matters. Because of this, I believe that not defining the field is not an option. In the meantime, I believe that it is up to us individually to continue to empower and legitimize ourselves and what we do as technical communicators.

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