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Examining the Definition of Technical Communication

Technical writing is “ancient” (p. 4), existing from the beginning of time when “men had tools they needed to communicate about.” Therefore, it has had contrasting definitions depending on the generation or group of people discussing it. Technical communicators have never had a completely consistent definition to refer to and it has been the subject of debate for decades (p. 48). The world of technical communication is ever-evolving and adapting.

Constantly proving the relevance of their positions, technical communicators have had to insist on having a straightforward and necessary presence within education. Thankfully, the rest of the world is beginning to catch up and understand the significance for technical communicators to be needed in every field. The textbook *Central Works in Technical Communication*, written and pieced together by Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber, provides a plethora of definitions and perspectives that attempt to define exactly what a technical communicator is. In this paper, I first examine the explanations and definitions provided by Johnson-Eilola and Selber, then draw my own conclusions of what it means to be a modern-day technical communicator.

Evolving from Technical Writing to Technical Communication

Technical communication is constantly growing as a highly adaptable profession. Beginning as a method used within the field of engineering (p. 4), technical communication has

surpassed a variety of roles to reach their presence in modern day. Pinning down an exact definition of technical communication has been a continuing problem (p. 50). Even now, the definition remains fluid, though Rutter breaks it up into three parts: “Technical writing is one-third writing proficiency, one-third problem-solving skill, and one-third ability to work with other people” (p. 21). This provides a good breakdown of what being a technical communicator entails, though I do agree with Slack, Miller, and Doak and think that there is a difference between being a technical writer and a technical communicator (p. 169), and a distinction should be made.

An example of *technical writing* is a simple instruction booklet, like how to assemble a piece of furniture. The steps are straightforward to write, copy, paste, and repeat. However, all technical communicators know that this is likely not the extent of what their role entails. An example of *technical communication* is a technical communicator being tasked with writing a memo. Human interaction, rhetoric, and complexities intersect while writing a memo, which might surprise those outside of the technical communication community. We understand that to write a memo, there are multiple variables to consider. Accessibility, the company culture, and the likelihood of employees to read the memo, are but a few factors. The technical communicator must take all of these variables into consideration so they can adhere to cultural standards within the company and use persuasive language to hold the attention of the reader or convince them to attend a meeting. This is not something that an objective person, devoid of all emotion and personality, can do effectively. Of course, there might be templates for memo formats or specific documents that can be seen as technical, but there is a human writing the memo, using their own voice—which I think is evident by their writing style.

Technical discourse has existed since the beginning of tools and communication itself, it has always been a necessary facet of human life—though the humanness has been debated for quite some time (p. 49). Miller claims that “good technical writing becomes, rather than the revelation of absolute reality, a persuasive version of experience” (p. 52). She later continues, stating, “If we revise the understanding of science that underlies our teaching, we may be able to restructure our entire discipline in a more systematic way” so that we can “rethink our discipline along the lines of the new rhetoric.” I think that this is fantastic insight. From what I have learned about technical communication, it certainly does use rhetoric in many different ways that the general public do not seem to grasp. As Miller had written this article in 1979, I do think that technical communication has since been recognized and restructured to add the presence of rhetoric, though I think that it certainly has the potential to be promoted even more within the current definition. Technical communication must “associate itself more closely with the traditions of rhetoric and humane learning” (p. 22) and the need to do this becomes “more urgent every year.”

Technical Communication’s Voice

Carolyn Miller states, “In most business situations, the roles of writers and readers, their powers of action and expertise as members of the organization, are more important than other aspect of their personal identity” (p. 59). I believe this to be a common misconception that technical communicators face, as if we do not possess personality and can only follow direct, objective orders. Slack, Miller and Doak agree, stating, “The discourses created by technical communicators have not been considered authored discourses; the technical communicators may be a transmitter of messages or a translator of meanings, but he or she is not—or at least until now—considered to be an author” (p. 162). These are both similar, strong points that address

common issues of technical communicators who are not being given credit for their writings, just because they are considered to be “too technical.”

To present a discussion from a real-world example, in 1978 there was a debate among an English department committee. They discussed if a technical writing course should count as a humanities or an “English” requirement (p. 48). Those who taught literature believed that technical communication had no place on either the humanities or English class lists, without a “real class” as a prerequisite. Of course, the technical writing professors were baffled and strongly disagreed, arguing for technical writing’s humanistic value. People thought this because technical writing was seen as a robotic practice of only writing down the bland and bare facts, completely void of emotion. While rhetoric consists of “symbols and emotions” (p. 49), the exact opposite, which have not always been connected to technical communication. Technical communicators are not mindless robots who only write manuals and memos; we possess the full capability to infuse personality, creativity, rhetoric, advocacy, etc. within our writings. The process and methods for communication are inherently human (p. 21), so technical communicators must “include the human values inherent in the process [of] communication.” All of this supports the viewpoint of technical communication as humanistic and not fully objective. Thus meaning that technical communicators deserve to feel their voice heard and translated through their writings.

A Fresh Perspective

Giving technical communication a concrete definition with no flexibility is not realistic. As this paper has discussed and presented, technical communication is an extremely adaptable profession that has evolved along with the times. Technical communicators have fought to show

their relevance, their personality and voice, as well as the need for technical communication to be included in educational institutions.

Nevertheless, these sources have provided useful information that presents technical communication in ways I had not considered before. The primary definition that resonates with me, is the connection between technical communicator and humanity. Technical communication is much more than an entirely objective profession. Technical communicators bridge the gap between technical *and* communication, so I believe that the current label of “technical communication” is entirely accurate. The need for personality and rhetoric to assist with shaping a document is essential throughout the realm of technical communication and I am overjoyed that the rest of the world is beginning to finally understand and accept that.

I am not naïve enough to think that I am an expert on technical communication. However, my educational background coupled with information provided by *Central Works in Technical Communication*, has given me an abundance of information to consider when it comes to defining technical communication. Being a technical communicator is not always appreciated as it should be, but based on the aforementioned sources and technical communication’s history, I think the future looks bright.

Work Cited

Johnson-Eilola, Johndan, and Stuart A. Selber. *Central Works in Technical Communication*.

Oxford University Press, 2004.