Technical Writing and Community Action

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Introduction

The overall goal I set out to achieve during my Spring 2012 sabbatical project, "Technical Writing and Community Action," was to explore first-hand the ways "real world" writing experiences in Technical Writing classes can help students prepare themselves as writers. My intent and plan was to do this as a volunteer writer for local non-profit organizations, and to simultaneously delve into professional conversations surrounding this approach to teaching and learning.

As I reviewed my sabbatical application in preparation for writing this report, I realized that the overall outcome was exactly what I'd hoped. At the time of the application, I had some expectations for what I'd find, and assumptions about what I'd be able to take away from the experience and apply to my work. But my hope was that I would be surprised, that I would learn something through this experience that I did not expect, and that my assumptions would be challenged. This was the most important goal by far, and I am glad to say it was met.

Project goals and motivation

At the core of my interest in Technical and Professional Writing pedagogy is my interest in helping students find ways to actively and compassionately participate in their communities -- professional and otherwise -- through their writing. While any writing class helps with this, of course, students readily see the practical applications and relevance of the assignments they do in Technical and Professional Writing classes. Because of their wilingness to engage in real thinking about the relationship between their classroom work and their worlds, and their appreciation for the chance to learn writing for which they see such an immediate practical use, these classes are ideal opportunities to help them explore more deeply the ways their writing creates opportunities for community involvement.

In the past, I have used a number of different approaches in my classes to help students make these connections, including Service Learning projects during which students worked directly with area non-profits to write documents that met a real need, defined by those organizations. While these have been successful and satisfying overall, I felt as though more could be done to help students connect what they were learning in the classroom with what they could be doing as citizens. By engaging in the very type of community involvement I was asking of my students (volunteer writing for local non-profits) and also seeking out perspectives of other teachers and scholars interested in these approaches, I hoped to find new pedagogical strategies to incorporate into my own courses and share with colleagues.

Research outcomes

While the list of articles, books, and textbooks I consulted is long, there are a few that stood out as particularly influential and even inspiring for this project. Because these are the pieces that helped me move beyond the initial expectations and assumptions with which I entered this project, these are the ones I will spend time on here.

I was fortunate to read Brendan Faber's *Community Action and Organizational Change* early in the project. Noting an increasing cultural perception of a gap or lack of connection between academia and the world beyond the classroom, he advocates for academics to engage directly in the community. In doing so, he hopes that academia can better define itself and its role, rather than face increasing pressures to have that role defined for it. His argument is that models of academic work are currently based more on observation and description of the world, rather than engagement and activity in it. We need to have a real stake in it, he says, in order to truly feel the risks and rewards.

This line of thinking influenced my work in a number of ways, especially as I applied that way of thinking to the microcosm of my own classroom (do students see their work in my classes as distanced from the rest of their lives? Ultimately, I suspect so, even in a class as "practical" as Technical Writing). In his work as an organizational consultant (helping organizations navigate change) Faber employs a framework that I found helpful: He talks about *Narrative* as the way an organization defines itself -- its own stories about what it is, what it does, its values, why it's important, etc. *Image* is the way an organization is perceived by the outside world; it is not ultimately in the organization's control, though it can have influence. *Identity* is where those meet. For a healthy organization, he says, the narrative and image are very similar or even identical; an organization that has the self-awareness to create and share its own narrative with the world in a way that the world understands and accepts has an identity that is not in conflict. Many organizations experiencing problems (everything from employee morale to dwindling support from others) have a narrative that is different from their image, and therefore an identity that is in conflict. Faber's work as a consultant is to help organizations examine that difference between narrative and image, and help them become the organization that fits the image it would like to have.

My project, of course, was not about organizational change. But Faber also talks about the implications of this at the classroom level: "writing at work and writing at school are worlds apart" (174), he suggests. He argues that, sometimes despite the best efforts of teachers, students generally do not have a stake in their work other than earning a grade; their work typically does not encourage them to take action, assume leadership, or solve problems that matter to them. In these ways, he suggests, it is not preparing them for the world of work. This resonated with me, particularly when I extended that claim to include not just the world of work, but all sorts of communities my students are a part of.

This model of thinking helped me begin questioning something about my own teaching in my Technical Writing as well as other writing classes. As I did so, I first reminded myself that for my LCC students, I am not preparing them for lives they will be leading later; most of our students already work, already have families, already have many things going on in their lives that they can perhaps more actively engage in, as advocates for themselves and others. From Faber, then, I began asking myself: does my *narrative* of why I do Service Learning projects, or

why I have students do assignments that connect them with actual problems / opportunities in their lives, or why I do any of what I do in my classes, match the *image* -- or what students perceive and understand about what they're doing? I suspect not, or at least not fully; while they do appreciate the practical nature of the assignments, and seem to enjoy the chance to work on projects that they identify as important to them, I don't think they fully gain the sense of themselves as writers, with all the power and opportunity and responsibility that comes with that, in their communities. At the end of the term, I suspect the assignments remain academic exercises in their memories, rather than realizations that they have the skills and abilities to make change in their worlds. In other words, while students are by no means dissatisfied with the class, nor am I dissatisfied with what students are accomplishing, I feel there is still a disconnect between what I ultimately hope for, what I try to help them see, and what I suspect they take away from the class.

The next study that influenced my thinking was Susan Kates' *Activist Rhetorics and American Higher Education, 1885-1937*. Kates is interested in ways that rhetoric was taught in college classrooms during socially volatile moments in history, by colleges with direct connections to particular social movements. She explores the approaches taken by faculty in three institutions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Smith College for Women, Wilberforce University (a predominantly African American institution), and Brookwood Labor College. Her focus is "activist rhetoric instruction," which she defines as having three components, all shared by these institutions:

> 1) an understanding of language usage that is tied to self and an emphasis on the ways language creates world view and epistomology; 2) an insistence on writing and speaking assignments that relate direclty to the lives and experiences of specific groups of disenfranchised students; and 3) an emphasis on the social aspects of rhetorical education that make students aware of their duty to others. (13)

For these institutions, according to Kates, education meant an *obligation* (not just opportunity) to help others, to advocate for those who don't have the means to advocate for themselves, and students were being educated accordingly. Kates cites Brookwood's statement of purpose: "Brookwood['s] ... educational work should be related as closely as possible to actual struggles of the workers and farmers, employed and unemployed. It cannot always draw a fine line between 'educational' and 'organizational' work" (12). Students' study of rhetoric went beyond traditional academic forms, recognizing that academic discourse was not persuasive in every community (when recruiting workers to unions, for example).

Kates cites an excerpt from Mary Augusta Jordan, a professor of rhetoric at Smith College from 1884-1921, who anticipates what Paulo Freire later calls the "banking" concept of education: "'the student's mind is a republic of powers, not a receiving vault'" (Jordan, qtd. in Kates 31). Committed to "teach[ing] students how to trust in their ideas so that they could indeed write and speak with conviction" (43), Jordan asks, in her essay "Higher Education," "'do the social and economic relations of sewing women and mill girls owe nothing of their hardship to the neutrality of educated women?'" (qtd. in Kates 49). Education, for Jordan, was a means to gain the confidence and sense of duty necessary to solve such problems.

In studying the pedagogy of Hallie Quinn Brown, professor of education at Wilberforce University from 1983-1923, Kates focuses in part on Brown's attention to ethics, and what that meant for her and her students. "Like [Paulo] Freire," Kates explains, "Brown recognized that social change could come only through an educational venture that extended its concerns beyond economic aspirations." Kates continues, "ethics for Brown defines community, and the language of obligation and responsibility she uses is at the heart of her conception of education" (74).

While these institutions, with their direct connections to specific social movements, are different from LCC, there are several interesting and, I feel, extremely relevant points that resonate with my hopes for my own classroom and pedagogical work. First of all, the curricula in these classes, the types of work these students were doing, were inseparable from the social issues that they were immersed in as human beings. It wasn't just that their lives served as examples for assignments, as material they could draw on for writing topics; the very purpose of doing their work as students was to do the work they must do as citizens. Also, the importance that writing and rhetoric served for these colleges and movements is telling: these communication skills played a central role in their strategy for social change. Writing assignments, for the institutions, teachers, and students alike, were much more than academic exercises; they mattered in very deep and far-reaching ways.

While these two books played the biggest role in framing my thinking about the volunteer work I did and the conclusions I drew, other scholars are worth mentioning as well. The problem of bridging the divide between classroom and workplace especially, and also sometimes beyond that into communities, receives a fair amount of attention among Technical Writing teachers and scholars; as do strategies for doing so, textbooks that have assignments for "real world connection" or even Service Learning projects, and examples of classroom activities created to help accomplish this. Dale Sullivan and Michele W. Simmons are two who were particularly helpful for me as I further defined my thinking in this area.

Another area that became important to me is the use of narrative in Technical Writing classrooms. While this is a technique that is fairly common in other composition classes (having students write literacy narratives about their relationship with language, or about how they've developed as writers, for instance), it is not a common type of activity in Technical Writing. Nancy Roundy Blyler and Sam Dragga helped me think further about the idea of narrative (different from Faber's use of the term, but still resonating with that in interesting ways), and its particular value in Technical Writing classes. In essence, I began realizing that if students are to make the connections I am hoping they will make, between the assignments in the classroom and the demands of the rest of their lives, they will need to explore for themselves how those intersect. I cannot expect them to accomplish this simply by having them respond to externally consructed notions of the problems or situations they will face, or discussions of ethics and values; they will need opportunities to understand their own positions, values, and what matters to them as writers and citizens. As Dragga puts it, in his discussion of helping students think about ethics and writing, we will need to help students do more than answer the question "What would I do?" -- they need to be able to answer "Who will I be?"

Volunteer Writing Outcomes

The second major component of my sabbatical project was to volunteer, as a writer, for two non-profit community organizations. I selected these and made the necessary logistical arrangements in advance in order to be able to "hit the ground running," so to speak, during the first week of my scheduled sabbatical. There were many, many worthwhile organizations that interested me for this work, and the selection process was difficult. In the end, I decided to connect with two organizations that focused on children and families. Both, it seemed to me, were comprehensive in the services they offered, and both had grown rapidly in recent years (to me, a sign of two things: well-run organizations, and services that were meeting very real needs). Also, both seemed to have ample need for someone to tackle a variety of writing tasks: I was confident there would be plenty for me to do.

My reasons for choosing this as a primary focus of my sabbatical are worth mentioning briefly: I had asked students to do this kind of work before, in Service Learning projects; I thought it would be worth doing this myself so I could more fully understand that experience. As explained in my research section, I am very interested in and motivated by ways that writing can give us ways to advocate for ourselves and others, and I want my students to see that as well; I hoped that in doing this kind of work, I would identify opportunities to make it more meaningful and also logistically feasible for students in a class. I also hoped to begin building meaningful connections with area organizations who might be interested in working with my students in future terms; and also better understand how to build and strengthen similar relationships with other organizations later on.

A Family For Every Child

A Family For Every Child (AFFEC) focuses on children in foster care, especially children that are deemed "harder to adopt" -- perhaps because they are over five years old; or have siblings they would like to stay with; or have particular medical, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. Their primary goal is to find homes for every waiting child. Their most visible project is the Heart Gallery: pictures of waiting foster children in a variety of venues around Eugene. But that is only one of the many programs they offer: programs that match waiting children with hopeful foster families, and vice versa; support resources for foster families, hopeful adoptive families, and new adoptive parents; "webinar" meetings that connect hopeful parents and social workers representing foster children from all around the country; they are an adoption agency, and so work with DHS and other agencies to make adoptions happen; they support children in foster homes in a variety of ways, from clothing and school supplies, to special events, to life skills workshops; they have a mentoring program that matches caring adults in the community with foster children who need a dependable adult in their lives; they have a family-finding program that tracks down long-lost relatives in hopes of finding meaningful family connections or even permanent homes for the children; the list goes on.

With all of this, and after seeing the various volunteer opportunities described on their web site, when I approached them I was sure I would be asked to work on a grant application, perhaps; or a report; or to upate some of their promotional materials (brochures, web site, etc.). To my initial surprise, they were eager to have me write success stories. These were stories about children who'd been adopted, or families who'd found a child, or other cases where someone who'd used their resources had had some success.

I interviewed (mainly by email) parents who had recently adopted, mentors of foster children, and others who'd been part of these experiences, and wrote a whole series of stories that both told of the success and also revealed something about the services and resources AFFEC offers. This also developed into a series of interviews with AFFEC staff, out of which I generated several article-length pieces about their programs. Through this work I gained an immense respect for the staff and the work this organization does; the energy, commitment, and the unwavering hope that characterizes all they do.

I also realized something that took me back to Brendan Faber's framework of Narrative, Image, and Identity. These stories I was writing, stories of success for children and families, these were AFFEC's Narrative. By and large, these were written specifically for donors and potential donors; the parties that make AFFEC's work possible. These stories were one primary way AFFEC was consciously creating that narrative; telling their own story in a way that would influence the image perceived by those on whom they depended. Faber might say that the fact that this project was such a high priority for them is a reason why they were able to grow so quickly, why their programs were so successful, and the staff all so energized and positive: they told their own story, they successfuly influenced their own image, their identity was cohesive and in keeping with their own values and priorities. I realized, furthermore, that if it had not been me doing this work, if this had been an assignment I'd had students doing, I may not ever have realized this. It would have been gratifying work, but the depth of its importance to AFFEC may never have occurred to me, and probably would have escaped students as well. In fact, students and I may even have wondered whether success stories were a worthwhile task for a Technical Writing class -- they're not reports, or proposals, or manuals -- we might have missed the real value of the chance to use writing in strategic ways to help an organization like AFFEC do this important work.

Relief Nursery

The Relief Nursery's work focuses on breaking the cycle of child abuse and neglect. Its resources are geared toward very young children, creating healthy, positive formative experiences that will help them become successful socially and academically, and ultimately grow into adults less likely to repeat cycles they were exposed to early in life. Like AFFEC, they have a variety of resources and programs. Their primary program are their therapeutic classrooms for children 0-5 years old. More than respite care, their classrooms incorporate behavioral therapy techniques to create positive and healthy experiences for the children. In addition, they have resources for families such as support groups, fun family events, clothing and supplies, and their classrooms follow USDA nutrition guidelines to ensure healthy meals for the children.

When I approached the Relief Nursery, they had a newly hired, part-time communications manager who was overwhelmed by the work in front of her. She wanted to update and revise their materials for parents, donors, potential volunteers, and the public -- in other words, work on that narrative, tell their story. First, though, she felt the need to better understand the broader context for that story: current national conversations about child abuse/neglect, studies examining the kinds of programs Relief Nursery offered and what they had to say about best

practices and future trends; where Oregon was in relation to national data on these issues; etc. So this is the work I engaged in for them: I conducted research as thorough and exhaustive as I could make it into where Relief Nursery's work fit into the broader conversation. The results of my work could best be described as an extensive annotated bibliography.

Again, without having done this myself, and without having the framework for thinking about this that these ideas about narrative and identity provided, I don't believe I or my students would have fully appreciated the potential power of the writing I was doing. In previous Service Learning projects or similar assignments, the opportunity to do "real" writing has been valuable; the chance to do some actual good in the community has been gratifying for myself and students alike. And the projects have also held the rewards most often cited for Technical Writing classrooms: the chance to experience the messiness and unpredictability of true workplace writing, to respond to feedback from the person who needs that writing; to have "real life" goals and specifications shaping our writing decisions.

But what's been missed in the past, I believe, is the chance to recognize the power in what writers in these situations are doing; a power that comes from really digging in and seeing the role a piece of writing plays in an organization, and the importance it therefore has for the people it serves. Furthermore, as successful non-profit organizations filling very real and urgent needs, and with limited budgets and resources, they are very aware -- perhaps more aware than many other types of organizations -- of their own narratives. They are keenly attuned to the image they want to project, and aware of how writing is the way (or one very important way) to make that happen. In other words, an ideal opportunity for students to really explore that power of writing; but one that, I feel, will be missed without conscious and deliberate attention.

Putting the Pieces Together: Results and Implications for Future Work

Through my research, and the chance I had to think about that research through my volunteer experience (and vice-versa), and to interrogate the reasons why my own "narrative" of my teaching might be different from the "image" students have of what they take away, I came to realize something: I've internalized the idea that if I see something wrong in my world, I can use writing to act on it. As an academic, and as a writing teacher especially, when I see a problem in my world I know that I have writing at my disposal. That is part of who I am, of my identity as a writer and citizen.

But I don't think most students have that sense. As students, they are experienced in having their writing tasks -- what, how, and why -- externally defined for them: by teachers, colleges, supervisors, etc. Even when offered Service Learning projects, or assignments that connect them to problems they care about in their lives/communities, I suspect they write to get a grade, complete their program, and fill out their transcript. This does not mean they don't believe in what they're doing, or care about it, or feel pride at the outcome; simply that I am still not sure they would think to do this themselves, or feel confident to do so, without a class assignment to prompt them.

I do not want to minimize those goals; they are important, and I'm also glad students are

achieving them. But I do want to get beyond them: I would like to help students start to think of themselves as people who have the ability, maybe even the *responsibility,* to take action in things that matter in their lives. Yet despite the fact that they feel they know more about these various writing forms, and have thought more about ethics and responsibility, I don't believe they've made that shift toward thinking of themselves as writers who can use their writing to take action in their communities.

Technical Writing classes, where students already see the assignments as immediately relevant and practical, seem ideal opportunities to try to help them with this deeper shift. Part of this, I believe, is remembering for myself this artificial boundary that students feel (and that I help create) between the classroom community and other communities they are part of. I also need to be aware that, if I'm right that many students' identities as writers have mainly been shaped for them externally -- by teachers, institutions, workplaces, etc. -- one of the main things my classes will need to do is help them explore and start developing their own identities as writers.

Narrative assignments, therefore, become critical -- assignments that, as Dragga said, prompt them to think beyond *what they will do* in response to a writing task, toward *who they will be*. For instance, if students were writing those AFFEC success stories, they should be prompted to explore their own position relative to that project. What does it mean to them to write for an organization advocating for foster children? What are their assumptions and expectations? What do they feel needs to be done in this project? Do they feel invested in this, and how so or why not? What would they expect to learn, as writing students or otherwise? And so on.

Narrative or reflective assignments could also be employed to help students begin to understand the role writing really does play in the world -- how much it shapes what we know, how we understand each other, and how we organize our experiences. The way AFFEC and Relief Nursery's stories, communicated through these pieces of writing, sustain those organizations and allow them to do the work they do, would be good starting points for this exploration. If they can begin to see this, they can begin to understand how much power a good writer has to contribute to their communities, and how much responsibility goes along with that.

My hope is that topics we already work on successfully will become more real to them, and more a part of who they are as writers and members of their communities. If they do start thinking of themselves as writers, they will need to see how writing is often fraught with difficult decisions. They'll need to have a sense of who they are as writers to navigate their decisions ethically. My hope is that they can begin to understand that these are skills that can make a difference, that mean they don't have to sit by and watch things happen, that they can *make* things happen. And perhaps even beyond that, that they have a responsibility to use whatever abilities they have, writing among them, to contribute in these ways.

Conclusion

I can't help but notice that this all sounds very idealistic. In reality, I would not expect this kind of shift to happen in a single ten-week class. In reality, I know that I have some students who already do think of themselves as writers in these ways; others that would never be interested in

doing so. Still, in teaching toward this shift, I would like to think I would be accomplishing something that is very important to me: engaging students in classroom writing activities that are connected and relevant to, if not inseparable from, their lives as citizens. I'd like them to begin internalizing this sense that writing is not simply an academic exercise; it's always for people, by people, and it matters to people. I'd like to help them explore ways that the writing we see, and the writing we create, shapes our collective sense of who we are, what we can do, and what we need to do. I'd like them to understand that communities of all sorts need ethical, responsible, writing and writers. And in order to write ethically and responsibly, I believe writers need a sense of identity that's their own, and a sense of possibility for their writing. As Susan Kates puts it, "our students depend on us for curricula that will offer them a pedagogy of possibility -- one that will help them understand their relationship to language as well as the implications that rhetorical study has for citizenship and service in their lives" (131). I think that Technical Writing classrooms, with assignments that already seem practical and relevant, and easily imagined connections with community organizations, are ideal sites for this; ultimately, I think this has relevance for any of the writing classes I teach. I am grateful to have had this sabbatical opportunity to work with these organizations and to explore this line of thinking.

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