SETTING UP PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL WRITING
COURSES FOR A MIXED AUDIENCE

Candace Séguinot

A problem with teaching technical writing to students is that they are just that--students. You can teach them the theory of organizational behaviour, but if they don't have work experience, that theory will be stored as fact, as teacher-given knowledge. Some aspects of writing like the conventions of spelling and punctuation and techniques for producing parallelism are quite like facts, but the problem-solving aspect of professional and technical writing calls for a different kind of knowledge. Knowing how to direct writing to a given audience implies an understanding of how that audience will react to both the organization and the language of the text. What we have tried to do at York University is give students that knowledge by placing them in classes with working professionals--creating a mixed audience for the course. To do this, we have had to set up our courses to address the professional development needs of business and government. This paper outlines obstacles and opportunities we have encountered in the process.

Institutional Considerations

The most important hurdle in setting up mixed-audience courses is the problem of creating any course or programme in a climate of financial restraint. It is not hard to show that Canada needs technical writers, and that few programmes exist in Canada. However, the arguments that will convince an institution to create new courses or programmes must be based on an understanding of the role of that institution.

Community colleges receive government funding in part from programmes tied to target audiences of the unemployed. Colleges are thus responsible for training and re-training courses, and in some instances for courses which offer professional upgrading. College administrators are therefore in close touch with both government and industry, and they welcome research which points out market needs. Universities, on the other hand, pride themselves on the concept of the liberal arts education which prepares students for change. Concerned about the watering down of academic content, they do not look kindly on marketplace considerations which may lead to weakening of academic freedom. The rationale for establishing a course or a programme therefore has to conform to the overall "mission" of either institution.

Today an institution may then approve courses, but not offer them because of budgetary restrictions. When an institution's budget is independent of the number of bodies it teaches, the tendency is to

rationalize the addition of courses, i.e. approve only those courses where the department concerned agrees to withdraw existing courses to make room for the new offerings. To ensure extra funding to cover the additional costs, community colleges can apply for training or re-training funds, but funding criteria about the target population can restrict the kinds of students who can be accepted. Universities do not have access to these funds in a systematic way, though specific groups in the private sector or quasi-governmental agencies may fund courses which target a particular population. However, both universities and colleges may approve non-credit, cost-recovery courses, provided that they have room--and physical space is a problem--to offer new courses. Non-credit courses in general pass through fewer committees than credit courses, so they may be approved more quickly; professional development courses may be easier to mount than a degree programme for the same reason.

Documenting the Need for Courses

To set up courses that are different from a department's existing offerings, it is necessary to prove that the courses will attract students and that there is a need for the training. Community colleges can set up advisory boards for input from industry, and industry contact is crucial as organizations can actually lobby for the creation of courses. At universities, surveys are useful; to do ours, we used four sources: 1) a list of employers who had advertised technical or professional writing positions in the past year in Toronto newspapers; 2) a list our department keeps of government and business offices that have expressed an interest in our graduates; 3) the Directory of Employers of College and University Graduates in Canada; and 4) the magazine Sources.

Using these sources, we conducted a survey by telephone. The results of our survey showed that heads of documentation departments had very definite ideas about whom they would hire. An even split existed between those who insisted on a technical background for their writers and those who preferred a general arts or journalism background with one or two courses in technology. Naturally those who wanted to hire people with a technical background thought that technical writing courses should teach people to write well, and companies that looked for writing skills first thought that management training with some technology was what was needed. Government departments wanted communication officers who could take charge of the publication process, meaning that writers had to be able to give directions to printers. And in general, employers were concerned about compatibility on a number of different levels; the higher the education level of the creators of the programmes, systems, policies, etc., the better educated the writers had to be. The more specifications-type writing was involved in the job, the more technical the writers' background had to be. When asked what they saw as the biggest shortcoming in the training of the people they had hired, they said the arrogance of people fresh out of college or

university. Finally, the majority of the companies said it was likely that they would be hiring in the future on either a full-time or contract basis.

A need can also be expressed as benefits to existing programmes: our courses are offered in the School of Translation at Glendon College, and we argued that translation students needed these courses. Other proof of need can come from general enquiries received by the institution, input from professional associations such as the Society for Technical Communication (S.T.C.), and comments in student evaluations.

Preparing a Proposal

Proposals for degree credit courses must show that technical and professional writing is an academic discipline and that students will reach an appropriate level of abstraction in that discipline. The course or programme will need to build on strengths already inherent in the departments concerned. A college programme tied to employment funding will address the specific requirements in the programme application form. Proposals also specify whether library, laboratory, and technical resources are adequate and whether present faculty are competent to teach the courses.

Reaching and Addressing the Needs of a Mixed Market

As our courses are offered through the School of Translation, students in the College are already aware of the professional orientation of our offerings. But reaching an outside audience of unilingual computer programmers, office managers, technical writers, etc. means advertising. We let the local chapter of the S.T.C. know of the courses, arranged for a notice in a technical writing journal, and mailed out flyers to government departments. In our case this resulted in a course where the majority of the twenty students the first year were working professionals. This year, with the course listed in the calendar, enrolment has increased past thirty, with roughly one-third from government and industry.

We have already discovered enormous advantages to targeting a mixed audience. Students who write well in their academic studies are often naive when it comes to the priorities of the real world. Having representatives from the government and industry in the classroom means students have access to conventions of a kind which never get written down (Example: Writing for the government, you don't turn people down. You inform them that their request does not meet specified criteria.). Mixing technical people with literature majors makes classroom revision exercises more realistic, and team writing projects work like projects in the real world. For their major project, in the second-level course this spring, a mixed team re-wrote a procedures manual for the government department in which one of the students works.

Of course, there are a number of difficulties with a non-homogeneous classroom.

1. Courses and office hours must be scheduled in the evenings for working students. Full-time students do not appreciate these hours.

2. People who come from work dress differently from full-time students, and getting the students with different backgrounds to work together is that much more difficult when there are very visible barriers to overcome.

3. People who have been out of school for a while tend to want frequent, short assignments with immediate feedback. They want structured deadlines for longer assignments as the workplace has conditioned them to work at the last minute.

4. Technical writers are well paid. Since well-paid Canadians tend to take winter vacations, a policy on absences needs to be announced right at the start of the year.

5. Most professional and technical writers want their studies to be directly relevant to their work. If their positions are secure, they may be more interested in moving up into management than in learning about other areas of writing.

6. Writers sign oaths of confidentiality at work. It will take some time before they will show the instructor the specific kinds of writing they do in the workplace.

7. People who work in the computer industry are usually familiar with more than one system of word processing; people who work for the government often have secretaries. The visual side of writing design and publishing in general will be interesting to the former and difficult to impose on the latter.

We are now expanding our present courses into a Certificate programme for the fall of 1987, so we obviously believe the benefits outweigh the difficulties. For these kinds of courses to work, however, students must have some previous knowledge. They must have either a writing skill or a background in technology to be admitted, and the programme has to build in flexibility so that administrative writers and people from the computer industry can work in their areas of speciality. And last but not least, the programme has to take into account the needs of students employed in positions they will likely keep, as well as the needs of students taking writing as an area of specialization before entering the workforce for the first time.

* * * * * *

Candace Séguinot teaches in the School of Translation, Glendon College, York University, Toronto.