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The Practices of Technical Writing: Bridging the Culture Gaps

Michael P. Jordan
Queen's University at Kingston

JENNIFER CONNOR'S ARTICLE on the cultures of experience and noesis (1994) raises several interesting points worthy of further discussion. This response first identifies the different culture gaps and how we are affected by them, and then argues in favour of continued growth in our scholarly activities as the recognized research arm of technical writing in Canada. Suggestions are also made regarding how we might help to bridge the culture gaps from a position of academic strength.

The idea of two cultures, humanities and science, was first articulated in the Cambridge University Rede Lecture by C.P. Snow (1959 and 1964), a scientist well known for his literary works. He claimed that the two cultures had little in common, and therefore rarely communicated with each other. Since the *belles lettres* movement in the first half of the 19th century, the emphasis of departments of "English" has been with literary criticism and appreciation of fictional works rather than the rhetoric and styles of functional documents. Teachers of language arts to students whose primary interest is engineering, science and technology, are in a unique position to recognize the effects of the two separate cultures.

From the engineering perspective, the study and/or teaching of technical writing is often marginalized because it is regarded as having relatively lower "value" than mathematics, science, or engineering design—both for students and those who teach it. It is, after all, a *humanity!* For example, liberal arts graduates are often deemed to be qualified to teach technical writing, and so engineering departments and faculties (knowing no better) hire them as part-time or adjunct teachers at low rates of pay. This practice reinforces the devaluation of technical writing.

Recognition of the value of our subject and our instruction can only come from academic respect for the substance of our work from fellow teacher/re-

searchers in both the humanities and the sciences. Unlike school teachers, university professors are not qualified as teachers, and we will never win recognition for our profession by claiming teaching as our only—or perhaps even out prime—activity. Instead, we need to be able (as individuals and as an association) to demonstrate high scholarly standards for our research, and thus for the basis of our teaching. In this way, we can re-evaluate the teaching of largely discredited prescriptive rules of usage, and, in general, work to gain the academic respect of our peers both outside and inside the discipline.

This brings us to the other culture gap Connor discusses: that between research and theory building, and practical teaching and experience. Again CATTW and its members are in ideal situations to recognize the effects of these two separate cultures.

From the pure theorist's perspective, there is no need to justify what or even why we are researching a subject. Research is done to build an understanding, to gradually compile a body of critical thought and theory, and to provide an explanation of that most human of activities: language. Correspondingly, those who think primarily in terms of teaching may feel that they already know everything about how language works. They may view research as simply a waste of time, useful only in justifying the time and rank of professors. They may argue that we need instead to concentrate on how we present the material to students, and on how to develop teacher networks to share ideas and methods.

Certainly, as front-line teachers of technical writing, we are faced with the growing practical difficulties of teaching writing, students who have little interest in developing their writing skills, as well as growing numbers of ESL students. Plagiarism, cheating, and the use of ringers have become so commonplace some of us are now reluctant to give students work to do outside the classroom or in groups. We face pressure to provide basic language and technical writing instruction, and to create and lead specialized technical writing instruction for advanced students. These and other pressing needs are strong reasons for teaching-oriented discussion among our membership.

However, as Connor points out, as an association CATTW has grown beyond the need for providing fora for grumbling about our difficult teaching occupation. There are other associations that both encourage new ways of presenting and teaching material, and support traditional writing pedagogies. I believe this is not, and should not be, our emphasis.

CATTW has developed into a unique association, and our journal *Technostyle* is emerging as an important forum for the discussion of high-level research in technical writing in both English and French. Our presence at the Learned

Conferences now ranks highly in terms of the quality of our presentations, attendance, and the quantity of work we offer the community. Internationally established experts as guests at our annual conferences have raised our awareness of wider issues—and have shown others the quality and relevance of our research and publications. The recent special JTWC issue (Harris and Russell [1994]) has strong contributions from prominent CATTW members. It is in this sort of activity that we are making our mark.

The call for more discussion of classroom practice and technique can still be encouraged, however. The broadening of the mandate of both the *Bulletin* and *Technostyle* to include a "Forum" for articles (such as this) on personal reflections and classroom practices, and a "Notes" section for works in progress and ongoing reconceptualizing of issues, should help this aspect of our activities to grow. These activities will help to bridge the research-teaching gap.

By being at the centre of both culture gaps (humanities and science, theory and practice), we can play an important role in helping to bridge the culture gap too. As technical writing, not without some justification, is still often regarded as a Cinderella discipline, we cannot expect to gain personal or group recognition for work that is, or is perceived to be, narrowly technical writing. Our work must meet the scholarly standards of other disciplines: linguistics, sociology, psychology, education, etc. By producing work acceptable to other established branches of intellectual inquiry, we are not only enriching the discipline of technical writing, but also contributing to knowledge in sister branches of research. We are already doing that in some branches of our work, and the goal of securing international reviewers of *Technostyle* submissions will move us further in this direction. Our work is also helping to bridge the culture gap between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand, and engineering and science on the other. The study of technical language structure and style within established linguistic methodologies and theoretical frameworks, for example, encourages others in the humanities to become aware of technical writing.

As for links between technical writing scholarship and pedagogical theory, I believe there is still much work ahead of us. Earlier CATTW discussions about how to teach our subject were largely anecdotal and without scholarly foundation. There is a need for further work in the teaching methodologies of technical writing to bridge both the research-teaching gap and the social science-engineering gap. Such work, however, must meet the same high standards in pedagogical research as does our work in language study, psychology, and sociology.

Our strengths lie in our being researchers as well as teachers, and in our understanding of both humanistic principles and professional practicality. Let

us use these strengths to bridge the cultural and research-teaching gaps and fully develop technical writing as an academically respectable branch of teaching and research.

References

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Michael Jordan is a Professional Engineer with a PhD in Linguistics/English Language. He is Professor of Linguistics and Technical Communication in the Faculty of Applied Science and Research Associate in The Strathy Language Unit, Department of English Language and Literature at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.