REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Humanistic Aspects of Technical Communication

Sandra Dueck
Simon Fraser University

> Paul M. Dombrowski, ed., Humanistic Aspects of Technical Communica-
> tion, *Baywood's Technical Communications Series, June 1994. 239 pages.*

This edited collection sets out to "challenge the long-standing dualities of sci-
ence versus the humanities, facts versus opinions, and objectivity versus subjectivity"
(p. 1). In place of this dualistic model, the editor, Paul M. Dombrowski, proposes that
technical communication always occurs in a context of social responsibilities, and
not in an objective vacuum.

The primary purpose of this book is to acquaint writing instructors whose
background is mainly literary with some of the social implications of technical com-
munication, and to serve as an adjunct to conventional technical communication
texts. The secondary purpose is to inform a general readership of scholars and pro-
fessionals already familiar with technical communication, about recent humanistic
approaches.

The book contains chapters on the rhetoric of science, social constructionism,
feminism and gender issues, and ethics. The structure is unusual in the amount of
editorial material it presents. Each chapter, with the exception of the introduction,
includes two reprinted articles — preceded by an overview and critical comments on
the chapter topic, a literature review, and a summary of the two articles provided by
the editor.

Chapter One — Introduction — offers an historical perspective on the split
between science and humanism. It identifies two different pedagogical approaches
to technical communication: the first being traditional dualism in which instructors
accept the split and simply adopt an instrumental approach to communication, and
the second being what Dombrowski terms *contemporary holism* in which the

distinctions between fact and opinion, and between objective and subjective positions are called into question. Dombrowski favours the second position, and the editorial material and the selected articles in the remainder of the book also reflect this position.

Chapter 2 — The Rhetoric of Science — efficiently illuminates a polarity of position among contemporary rhetoricians of science. In his overview, Dombrowski observes that while rhetoricians of science generally view science as "a special form of argued persuasion within a particular community" (p. 17), this view can either reduce science to rhetoric as in radical constructivism or it can mean rigorous inquiry into the non-obvious features of scientific communication to produce new insight and further opportunity for inquiry. A.G. Gross' "Discourse on Method: The Rhetorical Analysis of Scientific Texts" takes the radical constructivist position, arguing for the unreliable relativism of science, and the centrality of rhetoric as the "fundamental activity of ... our quest for knowledge" (p. 28). R.A. Harris' "Assent, Dissent, and Rhetoric in Science," on the other hand, while agreeing that rhetoric enters scientific discourse in the form of contentious debate, suggests that this jockeying for acceptance be regarded as one stage in the process of knowledge-making, rather than its *raison d'être*.

Chapter 3 — Social Constructionism — presents the ways in which science and scientific discourse are constructed through social consensus and practice, rather than given *a priori*. Again, Dombrowski's overview is useful in exposing the lines on which theoretical disputes are marshalled — for example, he asks: Are social constructions totally unconstrained or must they answer at some point to the external environment? To what extent is the theory of social construction actually an artifact of science? What groups are meant by the term *social*? Dombrowski's own article, "Challenger and the Social Contingency of Meaning: Two Lessons for the Technical Communication Classroom," describes an assignment in which students are required to analyze testimony given at inquiries into the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle, focusing on the way in which identical scientific data were construed differently by different interest groups.

C.R. Miller's article, "Some Perspectives on Rhetoric, Science, and History," addresses some of the theoretical issues raised by social constructionism, particularly the relationship between the social and the empirical. The article is actually a review of several social-constructionist books. Commenting on Charles Bazerman's work, she observes that his approach — with some qualifications — retrieves social constructionism from unconstrained relativism by "[turning] reference into accountability" (p. 121).

Chapter 4 — Feminist Critiques of Science and Gender Issues — is the least satisfactory. The introductory material effectively presents the feminist critique of science, and the literature review is useful and thorough. However, the first article, "Feminist Theory and the Redefinition of Technical Communication" by A.M. Lay, argues for a redefinition of technical communication pedagogy along lines more hospitable to women. She proposes offering more collaborative writing assignments on the grounds that they are more welcoming to women because "[the] basic feminine sense of self is connected with the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (p. 153). The assumption that women function better than men in small-group settings is unfortunate and ungrounded in any empirical research.

The second article in this chapter, on the other hand, is timely and very relevant. In "Gender Issues in Technical Communication Studies: An Overview of the Implications for the Profession, Research, and Pedagogy," J. Allen addresses the hostile environment technical communication presents to women both as students and as instructors. Her discussion of the feminization of the field of technical communication should be of interest to instructors. However, her call for centrally incorporating assignments that focus on the effects of gender issues in technical communication settings is somewhat problematic. Given all of the other issues technical communication students have to grapple with — social, political, and ethical — as well as the actual production of documents, such a focus on feminist issues could lead to a perceived, if not an actual imbalance in perspective. However, this is an important issue that needs more discussion, and this article can serve as a starting point in such a debate.

Chapter 5 — Ethics — considers the relationship between ethics and technical communication. Ethics in technical communication has become a hot topic. Most technical communication textbooks now have chapters or sections on ethics. However, teaching ethics in technical communication classrooms can be problematic. As Dombrowski points out in his overview, ethics cannot be "reduced to a limited set of definitive points that can then be systematically applied, that is, that [ethics cannot] be treated technically" (p. 182). Thus, any discussion of the topic tends to be either very general and abstract, or situated and specific. The articles included in this chapter both take a situated approach. The first article, "A Basic Unit on Ethics for Technical Communicators" by M. Markel, is actually a description of a course in ethics, beginning with a literature review, a brief history, and some definitions of the term. Markel concludes by outlining some actual classroom exercises. These exercises are case-based because, he argues, codes of conduct are too general to be relevant in the situations technical communicators may encounter.

In the second article, "Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Technical Communication as a Practice," D. L. Sullivan takes a more adversarial stance toward technology, adopting a position similar to that of A. M. Gross in Chapter 2, that science must be subject to social purposes, and that rhetoric must take a central role in promoting public discussion of technology-related issues. Sullivan wants this attitude reflected in the classroom. His concluding statements could be taken as a mission statement for technical communication instructors:

> [By] redefining the function and scope of technical communication we may
> be able to teach it in such a way that students will be able to use technical
> genres yet resist their power. We can even hope that a few among our students
> will find ways to transform present practices and open up opportunities for
> public social action. (p. 232)

But his model requires turning classrooms into theatres where students take on different roles in given scenarios, sometimes for several weeks at a time. Using this method depends on where instructors draw the boundaries of "technical" communication. Does it refer to written documents or to all human behaviour? Surely there is enough work in analyzing written documents to fill all the available time in a communications course?

In sum, for the most part the issues addressed in this book are well laid-out, and there are copious references. As such it is a useful resource for instructors. But, although the book successfully fulfills the second of its purposes, to inform readers about humanist developments in technical writing, it is not clear how it could be used as a teaching supplement, which was its primary purpose. Some articles could be assigned as reading — for example, the ones on science and on social constructionism — but the articles on feminism and ethics deal with issues more relevant to instructors than to students. The ethics chapter has some good ideas for potential assignments, as does Dombrowski's article in the social constructionism chapter, but these are presented anecdotally, lacking adequate detail to turn them into assignment models. With the exception of Dombrowski's article, all of the articles in the book tend to focus on issues rather than language use, and there is little or no mention made of recent work in genre theory. Ironically, Dombrowski's own article comes closest to providing a model for a pragmatic analysis of particular genres of technical language as they engage in the process of social construction. So although the book is useful in a very limited context, it seems to call for a companion work on method and pedagogy to create opportunities for students to investigate the pragmatics of language in social, political, and ethical contexts.