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Writing work, technology, and pedagogy in the era of late capitalism

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between how technologies are presented in professional and technical writing classes and the complicated dynamics of the late-capitalist working world. A growing body of scholarship emphasizes the necessity of including critical theory in well-rounded professional and technical writing curriculums. Some promote theory as a means of helping working writers make more ethically and socially conscious decisions concerning the technologies they help to produce and document. Others promote theory as essential for survival in an ever-evolving, sometimes very harsh, technology-driven marketplace. This article points to some of the weaknesses of both approaches, as it advocates an approach to pedagogy that explores how emerging technologies help to establish the terms of work in the contemporary economy. This pedagogy is intended to unflinchingly examine the more cynical aspects of late capitalism as it locates agency in collective action outside of managerialism and corporate frameworks.

Keywords: Writing and technology; Late capitalism; Pedagogy; Technical; Professional; Theory; Work; Workplace; Marketplace

> I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby... At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.
>
> Herman Melville
> "Bartleby the Scrivener"

The direct relationship between technical and professional writing as an academic field and as a profession in the non-academic working world makes it unique in the humanities. Perhaps

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more than any other field, technical writing operates within a murky, troubled border between a largely intellectual and politically progressive humanism that is concerned with ideology, ethics and social responsibility, and the more narrowly profit-driven marketplace. The difficulties of integrating humanities education with occupational realities are only amplified by the introduction of ever-evolving technologies that profoundly shape the ways professional writers do their work. Writing, technology, economics, and culture are deeply interconnected, and writing work with new technologies begs the same broad social and political critique that generally characterizes humanities education. However, broad social and political critique is especially problematic in professional and technical writing programs where students expect to learn the kinds of skills that can most directly help them get and keep jobs in a competitive marketplace that tends not to value intellectual inquiry. Rigorous, ideologically aware examination of technology and the terms of work in the contemporary marketplace can directly undermine the very assumptions that drive practice/skills-based pedagogy.

I teach graduate courses for technical writing students that explore a range of issues concerning writing and technology, including the historical relationship between technology and literacy and the ethical quandaries and responsibilities that are unique to hypertext and networked authorship. My university is located in a large metropolitan area, and most of my students are already working professionals, many in their late twenties or early thirties. Nearly all have full-time "white collar" jobs, and some already work as professional writers at some level. Some are contract writers; others write documentation at software companies; others work as in-house, all-purpose writers and layout designers at various companies. Students come straight from jobs to class, and it usually takes little encouragement for them to relate scholarly discussions on the social implications of technologies to their actual work experiences.

While the scholarship concerning technical writing and technology certainly leads to lively, constructive conversations and important insights, my students are often skeptical of the general portrait of "the working world" they encounter there. In response to readings that explore the civic and ethical burdens carried by technical writers as "knowledge-shapers," many of these students share personal work experiences that illustrate how they serve largely low-level, instrumentalist functions in their own positions as writers. Most indicate that they do not have the organizational authority to make significant decisions concerning technology design or sometimes even information content. Generally, they create documentation for software that has already been developed; they shape content that has been framed by others, or they edit the work of specialized professionals (programmers, engineers, medical researchers, etc.). Moreover, much of the professional writing work our graduates find isn't permanent. According to the latest available U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004), over a third of those working as writers and editors are self-employed, and many of my own students have moved from one project-based "contract" position to another ("Occupational Outlook Handbook"; see also, Wilson, 2001, pp. 80–81). Though sometimes lucrative, such temporary work arrangements make it difficult for writers to form relationships with coworkers or acquire much decision-making power within particular organizations. Technologies enable organizations within the contemporary economy to increasingly rely on outsourcing and "flexible" relationships between geographically dispersed workers. Though centered around expanding connections through electronic networks, emerging communications technologies