Writing Support for the Online Technical Writing Service Course: A Feasibility Study

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Abstract - The technical communication and writing center fields share similar historical origins, tend to experience marginalization from their parent discipline of writing studies, and value collaboration and multiliteracies. Consequently, scholars and practitioners in technical communication and writing center studies can both learn from each other about how to improve writing instruction and student support. In particular, frequently used research methods in technical communication such as user experience and service design can be effectively applied to designing writing support resources. Therefore, my dissertation project studies the feasibility of offering writing support services to students enrolled in my department's technical writing service course. Additionally, this study offers two kinds of services that my institution's main Writing Center does not offer: discipline-specific (specialist) and online tutoring. Those familiar with Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) may find this paper of interest because this study uses disciplinarity to interrogate the ways in which students enrolled in the technical writing service course can and should be supported in online spaces, especially as the trend toward online higher education increases.

Index Terms - Collaboration, multiliteracies, online writing instruction, service design, technical writing service course, user experience, writing centers.

INTRODUCTION: MERGING WRITING CENTERS AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Within writing studies as a whole, the writing center and technical communication subfields have been historically misunderstood and devalued. North famously responds to the misunderstanding of writing centers by disputing their association with grammar, remediation, and "special problems in composition" [1, pp. 433-434]. Along the same lines, Connors points out the problem of both English and engineering faculty in the mid-1940s ostracizing courses, noting that, "neither freshman composition nor technical writing courses were claimed or championed by either side" [2, p. 12]. Conditions for the course remained the same through 1959 when technical communication was "Still considered a low-level service course [...] assigned to graduate students and instructors" [2, p. 14]. Writing centers, too, are frequently viewed as "a low-level service," as North's "manifesto against [...] marginalization" demonstrates [3, p. 92]. In Connors' historical documentation and in North's own English department, literature faculty have presented their work as superior to that of technical communication and writing centers.

However, technical communication and writing center scholars need not continue to occupy positions as "outlaws" [3, p. 92]. Rather, scholarship from these subfields can offer methods for overcoming or responding to a shared sense of marginalization. Johndan Johnson-Eilola argues that technical communication, in addition to technical communication courses themselves, "has traditionally occupied a support position in both academic and corporate spheres" [4, p. 177]. Likewise, writing center professionals can relate to occupying the low status of a "support position" in higher education settings. Instead of being viewed as a site of research that contributes to theories and practices for teaching writing, "writing center work is [...] regarded as akin to other types of 'support services')," meaning it is beneath "the 'real' work" of the tenure-track professor [5, p. 31]. In order to "relocate [increase] the value" of technical communicators' work, Johnson-Eilola proposes to shift from a support role to one of symbolic-analytic work. By Johnson-Eilola's definition, "**Symbolic-Analytic Workers** possess the abilities to identify, rearrange, circulate, abstract, and broker information. Their principal work materials are information and symbols, their principal products are reports, plans and proposals" [4, p. 182, his bolding]. In many ways, what Johnson-Eilola describes sounds a lot like writing center work: for example, instead of working with paying clients, tutors work with students to assist them in increasing their ability to revise and improve reports, plans, and

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proposals—genres typically included in the technical writing service course. A writing center tutor can alert a student that the proposed tasks in a proposal need more specific detail or that sections need descriptive headings. Recently, writing centers have even ventured into the "corporate sphere" at the Federal Reserve Bank in Philadelphia, revealing an emergent application for writing center practices in the workplace [6].

My feasibility study, then, merges technical communication and writing center subfields by designing writing support services for students enrolled in my department's technical writing service course. I begin by outlining technical communication's and writing center studies' shared pedagogies of collaboration and emphasis on multiliteracies. In tracing values that these two fields share, I suggest ways in which writing centers can support curricular goals in the technical writing service course. Next, I contextualize discipline-specific (specialist) and online tutoring, two services this study provides because they are not currently offered to technical writing students in my institution's main Writing Center. In order to conduct this study, I then propose introducing technical communication methodologies to writing center research. Lastly, I sketch the study's outline and its implications for technical and professional communication (TPC).

Shared Foci in Technical Communication and Writing Centers

First, pedagogies of collaboration are common and even foundational practices in both technical communication and writing centers. In fact, Lay finds collaborative writing so integral that she suggests including this concept in any definition of technical communication [7]. Additionally, Coppola asserts that "the new technical communication service course would include [the concept of] collaboration between and among students and teachers" [8, p. 262]. Indeed, students in many technical communication courses are assigned collaborative projects in order to prepare them for workplace writing scenarios [9, p. 251]. The ability to write collaboratively with colleagues, although under-researched according to Allen et al. [10], is in high demand. According to a more recent study of alumni from professional and technical communication programs, respondents collaborate with work colleagues on 40% of their work [11, p. 279].

Whereas technical communication gives consideration to collaboration in terms of how workplace tasks are delegated and defined, collaboration is defined a bit differently in writing centers. Berry and Dieterle [12] offer a useful summary of Muriel Harris's explanation of two main kinds of collaboration:

> (1) multiple authorship collaboration, oftentimes seen in group projects or group essays where writing decisions are jointly made, and (2) collaboration in learning about writing, seen in peer consultations in multiliteracy centers where tutors facilitate learning about writing but the writer makes all final decisions regarding the text being discussed. [p. 18]

The first definition, multiple authorship collaboration, is the kind with which technical communicators are likely most familiar; the second is more typical in writing center settings. Collaboration based on learning about writing tends to be one-on-one between a student and a tutor or teacher [13], but some writing centers are seeing an increase in group consultations [12]. Group consultations can be especially beneficial to technical writing students involved in collaborative projects, preparing them to work with colleagues and in online environments. Like technical communicators, writing centers are also finding the modes and mediums in which they collaborate are changing, most notably because of the internet [14], [15].

A second reason for bridging these subfields is that they both devote attention to multiliteracies. Cook outlines six "layered literacies"—basic, rhetorical, social, technological, ethical, and critical—that should form "a theoretical frame for technical communication pedagogy" [16, p. 5]. In Cook's estimation, integrating these literacies into course assignments allows students to develop "specific workplace skills" that are applicable not just to "a specific vocation" but also to "lifelong learning" [16, p. 24]. Selber also supports bringing multiliteracies into the classroom and creates a framework for approaching functional, critical, and rhetorical computer literacies [17]. Like Cook, Selber believes students need to be exposed to a "wide array of literacies [...] in order to participate fully and productively in the technological dimensions of their professional and personal lives" [17, p. 234]. However, Selber doesn't think teaching and integrating computer literacies into the curriculum comes easily; he asserts, "Significant departmental and institutional investments must be made in support structures that will make it possible for a critical mass of teachers to do their very best work" [17, p. 233]. While Selber does not mention writing centers, they can certainly be fashioned as a "support structure" in the endeavor to prepare students to be not only users of technology but also its designers and critics.

Some writing centers have refigured their spaces, services, and tutor training to accommodate students working on multimodal assignments in response to Selber and New London Group's [18] emphases on incorporating multiliteracies into writing instruction. In a somewhat prescient example, Thomas, Hara, and DeVoss relate how Internet Writing Consultants at Michigan State University help students develop web pages and web content, encouraging "clients to draw designs for their Web pages on paper, creating visual maps of their sites and planning the information for each page," as well as "suggest[ing] ways to use hypertext to its fullest" [19, p.

72]. These activities should sound familiar to those in technical communication. Other scholars propose even more extensive possibilities for multiliteracy centers. For instance, Murphy and Hawkes reimagine writing center professionals as digital content specialists with an array of skills, such as XML scripting, which the specialists can use along with "style sheets, and object technology [to] create tutorials, rich media reports, and utilities that can be shared with colleagues" [20, p. 180]. Here, Murphy and Hawkes's idea to train tutors as digital content specialists is evocative of Johnson-Eilola's definition of symbolic-analytic work where tutors use their functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies to assist writers with rearranging information in a digital environment.

Areas of Concentration

This study is an effort to offer two kinds of services that our main Writing Center does not offer: specialist and online tutoring. Writing center scholars tend to value a generalist approach to tutoring writing [21], [22], [23], so specialist tutoring approaches that reflect disciplinary expertise do not receive as much attention in the literature. However, what the relatively few studies on specialist tutoring approaches have found is that familiarity with disciplinary genre conventions lends to the effectiveness and accuracy of writing advice [24], [25], [26], [27]. While the study does not propose to end the ongoing generalist versus specialist tutoring debate, it does premise that specialist tutoring approaches may benefit students enrolled in the Technical Writing online course. Tutors trained with a generalist approach to writing tutoring may not be familiar with concepts and genres important to the technical communication field: Technical Writing course objectives include designing graphic content and producing online and print documents, for instance. Writing coaches can assist with these assignments to a certain degree, but a lack of familiarity with design principles might leave them unequipped to offer extensive feedback on the rhetorical choices associated with these objectives. Thus, feedback from tutors in this study could offer students a different perspective on their work than could the main writing center.

Another area of concentration for the study is researching how to support students in online sections of Technical Writing. With approximately 73% of sections of Technical Writing at Virginia Tech offered online and no online tutoring available through the Writing Center, my institution stands in opposition to the CCCC Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI) [28]. Most relevant is OWI Principle 13: "OWI students should be provided support components through online/digital media as a primary resource; they should have access to onsite support components as a secondary set of resources" [28]. In other words, if students are taking an online writing course, they should have access to an online writing lab (OWL) [29]. Currently, I am working with the department of Technology-enhanced Learning and Online Strategies to identify an API plug-in for Canvas, our LMS, through which to offer online tutoring services. Through the participant observations mentioned above, this study will contribute to a slowly growing body of research on writing tutoring in online learning environments.

Technical Communication Methodologies in a Writing Center Setting

Broadly, this study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to obtain a variety of data that reflect what resources users want, how these resources should be designed, and what effect services have on key stakeholders. Knowing the extent to which technical communication and writing centers value collaboration and multiliteracies, this feasibility study seeks to introduce user experience (UX) and service design methodologies to writing center research. Because user experience is intended to "reduce the friction between the task someone wants to accomplish and the tool that they are using to complete that task" [30], this methodology is appropriate for designing writing support services for technical writing students. In a higher education setting, students often seek writing center services in order to "reduce the friction" between their current writing abilities and those they are expected to demonstrate in a specific writing assignment (and, later, in the workplace).

I take North's assertion that the "writing center [...] defines its province [...] in terms of the writers it serves" [1, p. 438] to demonstrate how UX is applicable to writing center research. With student writers as their main users, writing centers should design effective products and services that help students accomplish the task of becoming better writers. Importantly, tutoring and resources are the "tool [students] are using to complete that task." Humans are not tools; rather, a tool is a well-designed service that helps humans accomplish a task or goal. As a result, service design, a subset of user experience, is a meaningful focus for this study's methodology.

Service design is essentially a process for ensuring all material and intellectual parts of a service improve the way users and service providers interact. Because "understanding people is at the heart of service design" [31, p. 22], I aim to show how this method can prove useful to those conducting writing center research. I find service design especially applicable to researching writing support because "Services are about interactions between people, and their motivations and behaviors" [31, p. 22]. After all, the bulk of writing center work is tutoring, and

what is tutoring but an interaction between people with special attention to their motivations and behaviors?

In order to focus on people and their writing needs, I use surveys, interviews, and participant observation. While these methods are not new to writing center research, UX and user-centered design methodologies are not frequently used in writing center scholarship [32], [33], [34], [35]. Notably, all of the research cited here has been conducted by writing studies scholars associated with Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL). Usability testing was a particular focus in all of this scholarship, showing the researchers' attention to how users interacted with resources on the Purdue OWL's website. Though not a method to be overlooked, usability testing is generally employed after a service or resource has been designed, and because this is a feasibility study, the foremost concern is gathering input from key stakeholders to design services for technical writing students. Therefore, UX and service design offer *a way of thinking about* how to create writing support services in addition to assessing how well the services reduce friction between users and their goals.

I. Designing a Specialized Writing Service with Technical Writing Students

Various scholars have published on the process of creating specialized writing centers [36], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41]. Scholarship in this area certainly acknowledges students as important stakeholders, but students themselves did not seem to be directly involved in *designing* writing services. For instance, Tomlinson claims to have "fair grasp of student needs and desires" [41, p. 6] and therefore only interviewed faculty while researching how to create a business communication center. To return to one of the guiding principles of service design, Polaine et al. note, "Service design is about designing with people and not just for them" [31, p. 41]. I account for this concept in the study by conducting surveys and interviews with students, asking about resources they used while taking the course as well as their likelihood to use potential resources. This approach gives students an opportunity not only to estimate their interest in potential services but also to offer ideas that myself, their instructors, and the department might not have imagined.

In addition to surveys and interviews, participant observation (also known as shadowing in service design terminology) is an important part of this feasibility study's methodology. Participant observation "provides rich, in depth, and accurate insights into how people use products, processes, and procedures. It is very useful for understanding context, behavior, motivations, interactions, and the reality of what people do, rather than what they say they do" [31, p. 54]. In other words, participant observation allows researchers to see student writers and tutors in action and not rely solely on what they report via surveys and interviews. Of course, this method is not new to writing center research (for instance, see [42] for an excellent and in-depth study of observations of tutoring sessions). What service design offers here is an "understanding [of] how different touchpoints work together to form a complete experience" by "do[ing] research with people in the situations where they use the service. Study how people use a service at home, on the road, and at work, and then connect the dots" [31, p. 45]. Because this study focuses on online tutoring services, touchpoints can include the devices students use, the LMS where they access their course information, and the API plug-in used with the LMS to provide tutoring services.

STUDY OUTLINE

With an overview of the circumstances and values that unite technical communication and writing centers, as well as the reasoning behind importing technical communication methodologies into writing center research, I now offer an outline of my dissertation research. In the first stage of my two-part study, I employ survey and interview methods to answer the research question, *What are the needs of Technical Writing instructors and students that an online, interactive space (such as an OWL) can address?* Survey and interview data will be used to design a support system for students enrolled in Technical Writing in the fall of 2018. For instance, the survey findings from students who have already taken Technical Writing will reveal what kinds of help they sought while completing their assignments, such as whether or not they visited the Writing Center, and what kind of services or resources they would have preferred to use if provided. Survey findings from Technical Writing instructors will reflect firsthand observations and experiences with students to determine what kinds of support services instructors would find useful. Because I argue online writing instruction (OWI) has a great deal of room for improvement and reimagination, I am interested in respondents' wildest and most creative suggestions for support. Those familiar with Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) may find this project of interest because its use of disciplinarity to interrogate the ways in which students enrolled in the technical writing service course can and should be supported in online spaces, especially as the trend toward online higher education increases.

CONCLUSION

While the majority of writing centers serve students from all majors (the generalist tutoring approach), there seem to be a growing number of specialist writing centers cropping up throughout the country. According to the National Census of Writing, 26% of survey respondents reported their institution has a course-based or writing

fellows program [43]. Surely, technical writing students visit their writing centers and receive appropriate revision advice. At the same time, scholarship is emerging that challenges the generalist tutoring technique, one of the hallmarks of writing center practice. Another hallmark of writing center practice, face-to-face tutoring, is also changing as a result of the prevalence of online courses. To contend with these changes, technical communication and writing centers can join forces using their shared focus on collaboration and multiliteracies in a way that may elevate the status of the two subfields within the larger field of writing studies. Not only that, but also methodologies typically used in technical communication—specifically, user experience and service design—may offer writing center researchers a way of expanding their thinking about the purposes behind traditionally used methods. Service design holds potential relevance to and appropriateness for writing center research because of its focus on people. Because writing center work is highly context- dependent, service design can offer a systematic approach to creating, improving, or revisiting writing center services. In particular, writing center professionals are interested in how effectively online tutoring serves students. When people constitute the heart of writing center services, establishing a connection between the two is important.

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