

Linda Myers, editor

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## Professional Communication and the Politics of English Studies

Michael Mendelson

This essay is based on the proposition that professional writing belongs on equal footing with other courses in the English curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Distilled into its most compact form, the proposition rests on the logic of the following syllogism:

Rhetoric embraces writing in the workplace;  
English Studies includes rhetoric as well as literature;  
Therefore, English Studies extends (or ought to)  
to writing in the workplace.

It is, of course, the parenthesis, the "ought to," that is the problematic feature of this syllogism. For the parenthesis acknowledges that while professional writing courses have been a staple in many English departments for more than a decade, their actual status is still very much in question.<sup>2</sup> If such is the case, and I believe it is, any proposal for the integration of professional writing into the English curriculum will need more than the strict logic of a syllogism to be persuasive. In the end, the reform proposed here will require persistent dialogue on the part of department administrators and faculty; careful attention to curricular innovations of schools in the forefront of professional communication (hereafter RPC, for rhetoric and professional communication, the standard name for this emerging discipline); and proof supplied by teachers of RPC that their professional interests are in fact consistent with the activities of the department linguist, and composition specialists.

But a general willingness to discuss reform is in itself no guarantee that reform will be the end product of even the most well-intentioned efforts. What we need is a set of practical guidelines that plot a path for RPC from the margins to the mainstream of English Studies. Without such guidelines, all courses in professional communication (including business writing, technical writing, visual communication, editing, argumentative writing, and writing internships) can too easily be added to the departmental course list but ignored as important contributors to the actual spectrum of discourse studies. In this essay, I will focus on those particular issues that we must confront and those practical steps we might take if we hope to achieve substantive reform.

I put forward this proposal knowing full well that curricular debate over professional writing is far from resolved at many schools.<sup>1</sup> I know that some dedicated teachers of English believe strongly that RPC courses are too vocational, too mundane, too likely—in some curricular manifestation of Gresham's Law—to drive out what they feel to be the more appropriate study of British and American literature. Recently, a director of the ADE wrote to me claiming that "students can learn about the practical genres in many places in our society (including the school of business), but the English department is the only place they can learn about the literary genres." Implicit in such comments is an attitude of contempt and dismissal, a perception that the business of English Studies in some way becomes sullied by an association with professional communication. Such an attitude is, I am sorry to say, still widespread. But my goal in this essay is not to engage in what I consider a lingering skirmish in the long campaign to make composition studies legitimate; rather, I wish to advance a pragmatic agenda for those who already understand that English is a multi-disciplinary area made more robust by extending its fundamental concern with linguistic competence into promising new territories.

My proposal for integrating RPC into the English curriculum must not only contend, however, with the vestigial contempt of many traditionalists; it must also recognize the strong local flavor of most academic politics. Simply put, the politics of my department are not the same as the politics of yours, even though we may both be involved in discussing the role of professional writing in the English curriculum. Let me acknowledge, then, that my experience with issues of curricular reform comes from a large public university in the Midwest, Iowa State, where—after four years of discussion—the Department of English now has an undergraduate area-of-concentration in Rhetoric and Professional Communication, as well as a doctoral program in the same subject. Inherent in Iowa State's redesigned curriculum is a vision of English Studies as an inclusive rather than exclusive experience, a vision that extends not only to diverse literatures and academic essays but also to the kinds of texts our students will be producing and interpreting as professionals. The claims of this vision seem to me to operate for any English department.

So on to the matter of integration, or how can RPC be effectively incorporated into the English Studies curriculum, not only at schools like mine, but anywhere. My approach here will be twofold, and not especially startling: 1) integration of RPC courses will involve a comprehensive review of the department's program of study rather than piecemeal additions to the existing curriculum; and 2) barriers to integration can be effectively scaled by efforts on the part of RPC faculty to increase their

research profile. What follows is my attempt to more fully define what "integration" and "research" ought to mean in the context of this discussion.

By integration, I mean nothing less than the incorporation of all branches of English Studies (linguistics and creative writing, as well as literature and rhetoric) into a seamless curriculum that does not play favorites. The goal of such integration is to engage our students in the full spectrum of language study, and while the force of precedent may mean that there are more literature courses than anything else, an integrated curriculum will be one in which students are effectively encouraged to sample from a full menu of options. This basic definition generates a number of specific issues we must confront if integration is to go forward.

First: In an integrated program, disciplinary links between RPC courses and the rest of the English and institutional curricula will be established through course prerequisites and careful sequencing. All too often a course in business communication, perhaps in tandem with the technical writing course, floats about in some ignored eddy of the writing program, totally without mooring in the curriculum and without causeways to and from other courses. We can begin to contemplate the relationship of such courses to the rest of the curriculum by addressing the following questions:

- What are the appropriate prerequisites for professional writing?
- Do rhetorical theory, literary study, and additional training in advanced composition enhance the study of professional writing? Or alternatively,
- Does professional writing prepare a student for additional, more advanced work in rhetoric and/or composition?
- How does professional writing fit in with a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program, or more broadly—how do WAC programs address the subject of rhetoric in the workplace?

Once these questions (and the more specific ones that follow from them) have been addressed and responded to, RPC will have a more appropriate anchor in the English curriculum and, just as important, students and their advisors will be better able to address the relation of professional writing to a particular program of study (see Brereton, 284-94).

Second, a related point: We must begin to think about the relation of RPC to the English major. The rhetoric of the workplace is very different from that of the academy; and, as repeated surveys indicate, college graduates can plan on spending between a quarter and a third of their time writing (Anderson 30ff). Our own informal surveys at Iowa State indicate that if teachers are taken out of the pool of English graduates, business is clearly the dominant career for English majors, and communication, in one

form or another, is their principal activity on the job. If, however, the program of study for the major bypasses existing courses in RPC, or if existing courses do not meet the minimal standard for an effective introduction to professional communication, then perhaps our majors are ill-prepared for the rhetorical challenges of professional as well as academic cultures. In either case, the faculty has an obligation to contemplate the relationship between the major and the future of its graduates.

At Iowa State, we are attempting to fulfill this obligation by requiring our majors to begin their studies with a block of courses that introduces them to the broad scope of the discipline. After separate introductory courses in literary studies, rhetorical analysis, and linguistics, each student chooses from a group of upper-division writing courses (which includes four RPC options) and completes a theory course in either the literary or rhetorical tradition. Students then focus their advanced study in literature, RPC, or teacher-education. In this program of study, then, rhetoric is not an addendum. And while most of our majors enter the program assuming that the study of English is equivalent to the study of literature, their curricular experience exposes them to a range of approaches that accurately reflects the breadth of our discipline. The student who emphasizes literary studies in this curriculum will have some acquaintance with non-belletristic writing, while students who opt for an RPC emphasis can build a program of study that can include as many as half their courses in professional communication. Our hope is that no major is excessively one-sided in his/her emphasis, while RPC-oriented students need not feel as though they are in mutiny from a predominantly literature program.

Third: If, as is the case at most schools, a single business or technical writing course is to provide English majors (as well as undergraduates from a pot pourri of disciplines) with effective training in professional communication, then we must approach RPC in theoretical as well as practical terms. Our subject is essentially rhetoric: the study of discourse and the complex of activities that surround the creation and reception of meaning within working cultures. Our goal is to supply students with the knowledge required for participation in and critique of the discourse practices of professional communities. Business writing courses dominated by such formalistic trivia as the buffered opening for correspondence and a calculus for readability cannot fulfill this goal. Only the framework provided by rhetorical theory can provide students with an adequate understanding of the nature and function of linguistic interaction, an understanding sufficient for them to comprehend and respond to a working world saturated by textuality and characterized by a myriad of conventions, formats, and styles.

In other words, our courses in RPC must be no less theoretically rigorous than a course in Shakespeare that introduces students to feminist or new historicist perspectives, or a course in argumentative writing that appeals to Stephen Toulmin or Chaim Perelman. Such a requirement places substantial demands on teachers of professional writing since most texts in the field remain almost entirely devoid of theory. Nonetheless, teachers with training in rhetoric and composition or teachers who have tried to keep abreast of research developments in the area should be able to augment the utilitarian materials of the available texts with adequate information on, for example, the Aristotelean triad, the Burkean pentad, or Bakhtinian dialogics. Without such informing theory, RPC courses can easily degenerate into the kind of skills-training that many opponents of these courses see as the unalterable nature of the beast.

Fourth: The teaching of professional writing should not be viewed as a departmental albatross to be borne by professors whose principal interests lie elsewhere. In 1985, the ADE reported that 26% of the teachers assigned by English departments to RPC courses were literature specialists with "no special training or experience in professional writing" (Rivers 51). My guess is that the majority of additional teachers who routinely staff RPC courses developed their "experience" not in graduate school or the workplace. Rather, most teachers of RPC continue to be "bootstrappers" (i.e. teachers who have trained themselves in the discipline) who may or may not appreciate the differences between academic and professional discourse.

There are two potential responses to the preponderance of bootstrappers in the professional communication classroom: departments can 1) hire from the soon-to-be-available crop of PhDs in RPC, and/or 2) make a concerted effort to train those faculty members with other specialties whose teaching responsibilities have come to include RPC courses. Option One will naturally be a matter for careful scrutiny, but administrators and faculty should know that since 1990, doctoral level programs in RPC-related areas have sprung up in significant numbers.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, there will be no lack of well-trained teachers/scholars available to departments who are serious about enhancing their RPC faculty. The more prevalent choice, however, will undoubtedly be Option Two, so that the issue of retraining becomes a matter of substantial importance in any blueprint for change.

Let me make clear that I do not automatically doubt the competence of teachers who are initially untrained in professional communication; I have seen too many "English" teachers take up RPC with too much commitment and creativity to make me a general sceptic. But I am

concerned about the lack of opportunities for the professional development of both full-time and occasional RPC instructors. More specifically, my concern is with those teachers (at any level) who, for reasons of scheduling exigence or job availability, are asked to step into a business writing course with little or no exposure to a rhetorical domain that is dramatically different than the area of their own academic training. My fear is that because of the lowly status of professional writing within the curriculum and community there are too many teachers of RPC who feel that they have abandoned, or been pressed out of their native country and are in exile in a foreign and inhospitable land. Would we tolerate a similar situation by repeatedly dislocating a medievalist to the alien territory of 20th century American Literature? If not, what message does our reliance on teachers with limited training or interest in professional writing send to both faculty and students about the place of RPC courses in the curriculum?<sup>5</sup>

The situation is not, however, without remedy. Departments can hold seminars and colloquia on professional communication for teachers in need of retraining. They can institute peer mentoring programs, invite in a visiting scholar in professional communication to lecture or consult, or distribute reading lists and pedagogical materials, all of which can contribute to the preparation of effective bootstrappers. At the very least, departments must make some move to provide intellectual and pedagogical support for faculty members who may know very little about the subject they are endeavoring to teach. The alternative to such administratively-sponsored support is to ask such faculty to choose between doing their homework on their own or not doing it at all. The implication of such a choice is that the department doesn't really care if these courses are taught well because they remain somewhere outside the core of our primary responsibility.

Five: Most teachers of professional writing have no independent committee or forum in which to discuss curricular, pedagogical, and policy issues specifically related to RPC. Under such circumstances, business and technical writing courses are bound to be considered a curricular backwater to be patrolled by the departmental proletariat and visited occasionally by faculty members who consider themselves on temporary leave from their actual profession. Alternatively, faculty members who routinely teach these courses need to convene and discuss the issues raised by their courses. This is especially important if there is no professional communication specialist on staff or if business and technical writing courses have been folded into the administrative purview of the freshman composition or undergraduate curriculum committees. In order to ensure the effective integration of RPC classes, we need to encourage the formation of a separate forum for all those who have become *de facto* specialists in the area,

and we must accord this forum a voice in the administration of the department's writing curriculum.

To this point, I have addressed the politics of integration as they broadly relate to curriculum, staffing, and the department's administrative structure. As I have tried to indicate, the motive and the means are at hand to effect significant change in the status of RPC courses. But if my own experience is any indication, change will require more than bureaucratic integration. What is at stake is the perception of "Who are we as a department?" and "How will this new discipline (RPC) affect our identity?" Such questions require contemplation by the department as a whole; and, as I have noted, cooperative effort on the issue of professional communication can be difficult to achieve. Indeed, the late Donald Stewart refers to programs of advanced study in rhetoric as "islands in the wilderness far ahead of the frontier of the profession and in danger of being destroyed by hostile forces" (193). Nonetheless, if professional communication is to become a member of the English Studies community in good standing rather than a ghetto resident living on the fringe of respectability, then the dominant community (which in most cases is literary studies) must be encouraged to think seriously about the practical issues that follow from my opening syllogism. It is, in my opinion, the responsibility of departmental administrators and officers to provide such encouragement. They can begin to do so by contemplating the five issues outlined above and by promoting forums in which these issues can be openly discussed.

But the RPC staff itself need not wait for department-wide discussion to get under way in order to enhance its own position at the table. Regardless of what the present status of a professional writing course in a department may be, teachers and scholars of RPC can hasten the kind of integration I seek by turning their attention to research. As scholars, we are not so totally dependent on the mediating opinions of the larger community to which we belong; rather, we are individually responsible for earning our own place at the roundtable of English Studies with a currency that is honored throughout the academy. And while the exchange rate for scholarship in RPC may not be universal, the fact remains that research prospects for RPC scholars are especially bright. Moreover, the discipline of English has, on the whole, proven ready in recent years to reconceive the scope of its research interests in considerably broader terms. So I turn to the second section of my "notes on integration" with a full measure of enthusiasm for what active scholarship might do to hasten the inclusion of RPC into the mainstream of English Studies.

The first point to make about a research agenda in RPC is that the field is wide open and significant opportunities exist to contribute valuable knowledge on a host of subjects. Consider the breadth of the parent

discipline of rhetoric, a 2,500-year-old tradition that seeks to define and describe the communication act and, in particular, the various historical, epistemological, psychological, cultural, and technical forces that condition this act. RPC focuses specifically on the rhetoric of written communication within the business, academic, scientific, and technical communities. Its goal is to apply the extensive, varied tradition of rhetorical theory to those practical questions relevant to professional communicators and professional discourse communities. Such questions include the following rather obvious but very extensive areas of inquiry:

- How do professional writers create or collaborate to create discourse, and how do readers in professional settings construct or co-construct meaning?
- How do professionals and novices acquire the specialized skills that allow them to participate in specific discourse communities, and how can writing instructors enhance the learning process?
- How can business writing scholars evaluate the effectiveness of communication in professional cultures, and what contribution can empirical methodologies make to this evaluation?
- And how does the discourse of professional communities reflect and respond to various political, economic, cultural, and technical influences?<sup>6</sup>

The reader will notice that my outline for RPC scholarship emphasizes both the humanistic origins of the discipline and the multi-disciplinary nature of its present practice, a combination that accounts for much of the discipline's excitement and potential. The most enticing feature of this emerging discipline may well be the fact that inquiry into topics like the above has really just begun, so that, to paraphrase Ivan Karamazov, "anything is possible." Collections of essays edited by Odell and Goswami in *Writing in Non-Academic Settings*, by Myra Kogen in *Writing in the Business Professions*, or by Thralls and Blyler in *Professional Communication: The Social Perspective* are indicative of the breadth of the terrain and the applicability of diverse methodologies. And because the field is new, the door remains open to modest studies as well as ground-breaking scholarship. Such opportunity should inspire both novice and veteran scholars as they contemplate the possibilities for research in the rhetoric of the workplace.

Second, as we fill out the map of the new discipline, we must address more fully the need for historical and theoretical research in RPC. We need research like Kitty Locker's investigation of the early correspondence by the East Indian Company or Robert Shenk's discussion of the links between Roman *suasoria* (a kind of history-based writing assignment) and contemporary case-study problems. We need more publications like Douglas and Hildebrandt's *Studies in the History of Business Writing* with its fine essays

on "Business Writing and the Spread of Literacy in the Late Middle Ages" (by Malcolm Richardson) and on Lord Chesterfield's epistolary rhetoric (by William E. Rivers). In short, we need more research that examines historical texts in their own socio/cultural contexts and in the process establishes a lineage for contemporary practice. We also need more theoretical research in the field; more research that posits generalized accounts of the various genres, procedures, and contexts that characterize writing in the workplace; and more research that provides new alternatives to the pragmatism that has to-date quite reasonably dominated research in this most utilitarian of discourse types. In particular, we need to explore more fully the methodological innovations of recent literary and critical theory and to extend the range of our theoretical appeal beyond Aristotle, the *ars dictaminis*, and Kenneth Burke to Foucault, Bakhtin, and Habermas, among others. The result would, I think, be a significantly expanded conception of what rhetorical studies in professional communication can be.

Third, we must remain alert to the interdisciplinary nature of research in writing within the professions. There are natural extensions between our work as rhetoricians and the interests of many other disciplines, such as ethnography, psycho-linguistics, organizational and cognitive psychology, the history of technology, the sociology of group behavior, computer science, even graphic arts. Studies such as JoAnne Yates' *Control Through Communication* and Charles Bazerman's *Shaping Written Knowledge* signal a new refinement in cross-over studies with a rhetorical base; and we can, I think, expect increasing diversity in method and subject as the discipline matures. The effect of such diversity will not be a loss of concentration in our primary research agenda (such a notion is hardly consistent with the heterogeneous nature of the work conducted under the aegis of English); rather, the expansion of rhetoric and composition studies into the domain of business and professional discourse will mean a fuller, more comprehensive application of English Studies to the world around us.

This emphasis on the centrifugal nature of research in RPC brings me to my fourth and final recommendation: we need to move beyond the pale of our own working environment and investigate all those communities that are the putative subject of the discipline—from small businesses to government agencies, from public-relations firms to the local CPA. Broadhead and Freed's *The Variables of Composition: Process and Product in a Business Setting* exemplifies opportunities in this area. And in fact, every teacher of professional communication has a multitude of research options in her own neighborhood. This potential for movement beyond the classroom and into the field is a unique aspect of research in RPC and an additional cause for excitement on the part of independent researchers.



Those who follow this "ethnographic path" will find that not only is there a new continent of composition practice out there waiting to be mapped, but that the communities we seek to investigate—the businesses, factories, agencies, and disciplines—are themselves particularly anxious for the "information transfer" of rhetorical insight from the academy to their own professional cultures.<sup>7</sup>

These comments on research may seem to be leading me toward a rosy peroration in which I anticipate the ready embrace of RPC by the English Studies community at-large. I will stop short of any utopian vision, however, since it seems unlikely to me that we will see a Bakhtinian analysis of corporate annual reports in the *PMLA* or *College English* anytime soon. Nonetheless, innovative research will go a long way toward establishing a place for RPC teachers at the table over which English Studies professionals discuss their common concerns. And indeed, I would argue that RPC research has already begun to assert its common ground with English Studies by contributing to our discipline's constantly expanding conception of textuality. What we need to do now is to take the additional step of opening up English department curricula to a range of discourse that our research has identified as exciting territory for rhetorical studies. There is no longer any reason to declare such territory off-limits to our own majors or too alien to be surveyed by our tenure-line faculty. The time has come to negotiate parity for RPC courses in English departments, to engineer actual integration rather than to plead for tolerance, to embrace an egalitarian conception of the curriculum, and to eschew the false hierarchies that are holdovers from a passing era.

It may well be that a syllogism, despite its appeal to reason, will never be enough to convince the skeptical of the relevance of RPC to our mission as English teachers; but perhaps careful curricular planning and refined, innovative research may be. In any case, they ought to be.

## Notes

1. The terms "professional writing" and "professional communication" apply throughout to both business writing and technical communication courses. As noted later in this first paragraph, the term RPC (for rhetoric and professional communication) is also adopted as the emerging title of this new discipline. An early version of this paper was delivered at the 1990 MLA Convention in a special session on business writing and the English curriculum.

2. An ADE-sponsored survey by William E. Rivers in 1985 indicated that, between 1979 and 1984, almost two-thirds of 568 sample departments either doubled or tripled their enrollment in RPC courses. And yet, 71% of these same departments reported that faculty response to this growth ranged from "reserved acceptance" to "intense disapproval" (51-52). This distrust of RPC courses can be informally

corroborated by noting the very small number of English departments that (as of 1989) offered students the opportunity to pursue an integrated course of language study in an area of the discipline other than literature (see Stewart, 194-199). Finally, John Brereton captures the persistent tenor of much opinion when he notes that business writing has been "disdained by English teachers as beneath the notice of a humanist" (280-281).

3. At the 1992 CCC Convention, I was forcefully reminded of the debate over the place of RPC courses in the English curriculum by Professor W. Ross Winterowd. My colleague, Neil Nakadate, and I had just presented some ideas on the curriculum for doctoral studies in RPC when Prof. Winterowd correctly insisted that major curricular reform was only feasible after the battle between rhetoric and poetics had been resolved; and in a great many departments, such resolution, he argued, was a long way off.

4. Until 1990, Carnegie Mellon and Rensselaer offered the only doctoral programs in professional communication, and turned out a combined total of only about a dozen graduates a year (Chapman and Tate 140-141 & 164-165). Since 1990, Michigan Tech, New Mexico State, Iowa State, and Minnesota have initiated doctoral programs in some form of RPC, while Ohio State and Purdue have incorporated RPC into existing doctoral programs. See also Enos.

5. I should also note that the low status of RPC teachers (on either full or temporary appointment) and their often limited access to professional development opportunities raises serious questions about promotion and tenure. See Tebeaux.

6. This rudimentary definition is indebted to the "Definition of Rhetoric and Technical Communication" in the Michigan Tech proposal for a doctoral program (3-4) and to Janice Lauer and Andrea Lunsford's essay, "The Place of Rhetoric and Composition in Doctoral Studies."

7. Department administrators can, of course, foster the research agenda outlined here by providing research time and travel support and by rewarding scholarly achievement appropriately. And yet, decisions about such support may require a department chair to overcome a natural hesitation about journals (like *The Journal of Business and Technical Communication*) and conferences (like those sponsored by the Association for Business Communication) that seem suspiciously un-English. Nonetheless, I suggest that the return on this investment in RPC scholarship is particularly rapid, as research trends—like collaborative writing and computer-aided instruction—can almost immediately influence the department's pedagogical practice.

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