

Teaching Technical Writing Philosophy

Introduction

Written communication marked the beginning of our modern culture, and it continues to be a vital skill, even in an era of 180-character and TikTok videos—perhaps, some might argue, especially in this era. While the language of memes, hashtags, and social media has earned its place in written culture, it does not replace the writing called for in professional circles, nor does it replace the need for teachers of this field. I have a deep passion for an expertly-worded sentence or perfectly-formatted document that I hope to impart to as many of students as possible. Yet for all my personal passion, I also know that writing is a dreaded subject for many students. As a technical writing teacher, I will continue my training and education as my own technical writer to better-share best practices with my students; I will underscore to them the importance of writing for different genres and expose them to different kinds of workplace writing; and, I will incorporate experiential learning activities into my curriculum while also being mindful of any online students' needs.

Sharing Best Practices

Technical writing teachers are also forever students of the field. Grant-Davie believes that technical writing teachers should gain experience in a technical writing job, read and do research in the field, or interview professionals in the industry to gain knowledge (293-294). Not only will these practices improve my role as a technical writing educator, but they can also prove beneficial to my students. For example, after almost 10 years in the professional world, I have written numerous types of technical documents: memos, letters of recommendation, budget proposals, financial reports, etc. With this firsthand experience under my belt, I can share best practices in technical writing with my students, to better-help them transition from academia to industry.

Writing for the Workplace—in the Classroom

In addition to teaching my students *about* workplace writing, I will also provide them with opportunities to *be* workplace writers. By offering assignments on writing proposals or business letters, I can expose my students to the “real-world” work they will one day be doing, helping them shore up their skills and knowledge as a result. However, as Yu explains, this is easier said than done. Issues in translating workplace writing to the classroom include the facts that workplace writing is contextualized (unique to a particular business, job, or culture) and that learning in a classroom environment is structured, while learning in the workplace is incidental (269). To combat these problems, Yu suggests technical writing teachers employ workplace assessment practices to measure how effectively they are presenting workplace writing concepts to their students, such as asking students to write to specific criteria (280). Taking a page from Yu’s book, any real-world assignments I offer in my classroom will also require students to create a rubric against which they will measure their work. For example, if a student is going to write a proposal requesting grant funding, they would need to research the requirements and sections of a “real” grant proposal and subsequently write their assignment to those criteria.

Experiential Learning, Online Learning

Though it is important to bring the workplace to the student via industry-modeled classroom assignments, the reverse is just as vital: I must also provide my students with experiential learning opportunities. Two ways to do so are through service learning projects and internships. Per Nielsen, a student performing a service-learning project partners with a non-profit or other service organization to complete a project and simultaneously enhance their learning in the academic field with which the project is associated (245). These experiences are valuable, producing students with greater intellectual engagement in coursework and a better understanding of course content. Ultimately, students who

engage with their communities via service learning become responsible citizens of not only their *physical* community, but they also learn more about a particular *discourse* community (Nielsen 250). Exposing students to the workplace through internships while *in* the classroom, then, is one of the best ways to educate and prepare them for life *outside* of the classroom.

That said, it is extremely difficult to deliver experiential practices to online students in online classes, which will only increase in number in a post-pandemic world. Clearly, experiential learning is a valuable component of any curriculum, but implementing it successfully in an online environment presents challenges. When instructors, students, and organizations are geographically removed from each other, it can be difficult for an instructor to help facilitate the learning opportunity, or even assess the value a student is deriving from it. While students should take responsibility for their education and practice being independent learners, educators should be guiding the process—not leaving it solely up to the individual. If I do require students in any online courses I teach to complete experiential learning exercises, I will disclose this at the beginning of the course and do my best to facilitate a meaningful service learning project or internship. For example, I could ask students what state they live in and the type of organizations they are familiar with; researching these companies and identifying points of contact will make establishing an experiential activity that much easier—and beneficial—for my students.

References

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