A R T I C L E

Including Technical Communication in General Education

The Proposal, Design, and Outcomes of a New Course

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Abstract. This article analyzes how and why technical communication programs can and should integrate courses within general education curricula, discussing relevant scholarship and our own case study. We address the rationale for positioning a course among traditional liberal arts offerings, the cultural challenges that pose obstacles to doing so, and the potential benefits. We also describe our process proposing a technical communication course for general education, the design of that course, lessons learned, the successful outcome, and the encouraging implications for other technical communication programs and for our field, especially at a time when undergraduate curriculum reform is prevalent.

Keywords. course design, curriculum innovation, general education, humanities, liberal arts, program development, status of technical communication, undergraduate studies

As with sex, learning how to connect one's education and life's work is best done thoughtfully and with responsible adult involvement.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Studley, 2004)

A recent study reports that almost nine of ten American colleges and universities surveyed are "in some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program" (Hart Research Associates, 2009, p. 2). This suggests that now is an opportune time for technical communication program administrators to consider the possible role of technical communication courses in general education, courses that have great potential for connecting students' educations with their work lives. To be clear, we are speaking of technical communication courses that are included in general education, not

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just as basic subjects writing requirements, but as humanities courses on par with those offered by disciplines that traditionally have been associated with liberal education.

Progressive program administrators may want to capitalize on this opportunity to make technical communication studies more central to their institutions and more influential with more students: goals common to most programs. General education courses also may offer immediate benefits to programs, such as higher enrollments, new teaching opportunities for faculty, and possibly even protected status in times of budget cuts. We further maintain that when technical communication shifts to become part of general education there can be larger benefits as well. Although, as we will discuss, many people may not assume technical communication courses are an appropriate representation of the humanities in general education, there is an argument to advance in favor of positioning our discipline within the humanities not just theoretically (as technical communication practitioners have long done among themselves), but in the way courses are represented within a university's goals for liberal arts education.

In fact, we make the case here that one path to progress and advancement for our field might be for academic programs to integrate technical communication studies as humanities electives within the broader curriculum of their home institutions. We expect that many scholars in our field share our enthusiasm for any such opportunity to strengthen the status of technical communication as a discipline and thereby extend the reach of technical communication researchers and teachers.

Our advocacy is energized by our recent experience in proposing and designing a technical communication course as a humanities elective for the general education program at San Francisco State University. The only downside experienced in having our new course become part of the general education program were the challenges posed by the process of acceptance itself: difficulties embedded within a larger cultural challenge. Having surmounted those challenges with the happy result of our course having had successful outcomes, we offer it as a case study for program administrators, describing its local features and benefits while generalizing how they might apply in different circumstances as well.

Before providing fuller context and case study detail, it is important to note that integration of technical communication studies as humanities offerings within general education would not require repositioning academic programs in technical communication (and related fields) from the variety of program homes where they currently reside. Nor would integration require modifying the range of specialized degrees and credentials offered. Of course, once a

course is included in general education, there might be more rigorous oversight, requiring a more standardized curriculum or particular modes of assessment by a general education oversight group. However, for many programs, these expectations might not be either unusual or unwelcome, because they already are common for many composition and service courses, some of which already may be included in general education at some universities.

When repositioning technical communication courses as humanities electives, the issues are different. In this case, the repositioning required is intellectual, political, and practical. Intellectually, the opportunity is for those of us who are technical communication professors to see our subject area as an appropriate subject for general education and to persuade colleagues in other disciplines to share that view. Politically, the opportunity is to develop at least one course that fits within existing guidelines for general education, to market that course effectively to curricular gatekeepers, and to make it accessible and interesting to prospective students whose primary areas of study are in other fields. Practically, the opportunity is to implement the course in a way that maximizes its benefits for students, programs, and institutions. To address these opportunities effectively requires understanding up front the present context in which both technical communication programs and general education programs co-exist.

The Argument in Favor

General education is one of the important and longstanding elements of a liberal education curriculum (Humphreys, 2006). How different institutions specify general education requirements varies, but, as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) notes,

> The shape of the undergraduate curriculum was essentially fixed half a century ago. It combines broad general education common to all students (usually completed in the first two years or out of sequence in later years), more specialized study (a major) to give deeper knowledge of a chosen field, and electives to suit students' individual interests. (p. 16)

In the great majority of institutions, the breadth component of general education is not limited to a core curriculum, but includes distribution requirements, which provide a range of courses that can count as satisfying selected general education goals (Hart Research Associates, 2009, pp. 12–14). In many institutions such distribution requirements may offer the most accessible options for including a technical communication course as a humanities elective, as was true at San Francisco State University. However, other elements of general

education programs—such as thematic clusters and learning communities—may offer technical communication courses as points of entry into general education as well.

The rationale for including technical communication courses among general education requirements for the humanities proceeds from defining technical communication as a liberal art in the sense advocated by Robert Johnson (2009): as a field of study that "engenders the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake *and* one that engenders knowledge of production and, ultimately, of use" (p. 54). This definition, along with the pedagogical norms in our field, connects technical communication studies to several current trends in reforming general education programs. These trends emphasize engaged learning practices, student research, interdisciplinary studies, and more integration of general education with major course work and professional goals to encourage curricular coherence and student engagement (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002, pp. 31–33; Boning, 2007, pp. 10–13; Center for Studies in Higher Education, 2007, p. 20; DiConti, 2004, pp. 167–168; Harris, 2006, pp. 193–197; Hart Research Associates, 2009, pp. 7–14; Huber & Breen, 2007; Raelin, 2007).

In addition, of course, the subject matter of technical communication course work includes traditional humanistic topics and methods such as rhetorical analysis, ethical perspectives, genre development, cultural studies, discourse communities, international and diversity concerns, and the role of narrative in inquiry and knowledge-building. Technical communication courses also teach visual literacy, language fluency, and the writing process—all, again, subjects critical to the skill-building goals of general education programs. In other words, technical communication courses cover much of the same territory as courses in art, literature, and many other disciplines typically included in general education programs.

The Cultural Challenges

However arguable it may be that technical communication courses would be appropriate and relevant as humanities courses for progressive general education programs, the institutional culture that makes decisions about general education programs may not be welcoming. Technical communication courses historically have not been included in general education. In fact, Thomas Barker (2007) reports that his "informal survey of current programs reveals that technical communication is, to this day, not considered a humanities course to count for general degree requirements, in *any* undergraduate program in North America" (p. 26). Although some exceptions doubtless exist, such as SFSU's course (which launched around the time that Barker's comments were published),

clearly general education programs will not include technical communication courses by default, especially not as humanities electives, rather than as courses that might count toward a basic subjects writing requirement. We recently visited the websites of over a dozen universities with well-known and longstanding undergraduate programs in technical communication and could identify only one that included technical communication courses as humanities electives within its general education offerings.

This lack of inclusion is somewhat unsurprising, because, in fact, anyone making the case for including technical communication offerings among humanities courses that should be part of general education may face ingrained attitudes in opposition. Adele Pittendrigh (2007), Susan Steele (2006), and other general education reformers have (sometimes humorously) documented the difficulties, in general, of revising such programs. General education requirements often have long histories and reflect not only defensible educational ideologies and efficient habits but also turf boundaries and intellectual fashions—all of which can encourage impassioned resistance to change, and equally impassioned demands for specific changes whose righteousness often seems to reside in the eye of the beholder. In addition, it can be difficult to implement the progressive integrative principle into general education due to the "harsh realities" that "discourage innovation" in general education: difficulties posed by the disciplinary structure that dominates contemporary colleges and universities (Center for Studies in Higher Education, 2007, pp. 11–19).

It is not easy to add to such a political circumstance an unfamiliar and probably unexpected claim on the part of technical communication. This claim is especially true due to ingrained attitudes about the role of career-oriented and professional programs within the academy. As Jamienne S. Studley (2004) notes,

> Lately academia seems to be consciously embracing the importance of integrating all aspects of the undergraduate educational experience . . . . But even with this comprehensive vision, the dimension of work, past, present and future, is typically left out of the integrative model. (para. 4)

Studley also tellingly quotes a colleague's remark that "the whiff of vocationalism is downright repulsive to many faculty" (para. 5). As Gerald J. Savage (2004) has observed, "among traditional scholars" there is "a lack of respect for technical communication as an academic discipline" (p. 180). This lack of respect may come in part from the comparatively young and interdisciplinary nature of technical communication, which still "struggle[s] to develop intellectual identities for the field and its academic programs" (Johnson, 2009, pp. 53–54). In addition, because our field is career-oriented with close connections to business

and industry (as well as with nonprofit organizations and government agencies), sometimes others who do not understand the humanistic foundations of our practice, teaching, and research may easily misunderstand technical communication as limited to training.

Whether rejection of the legitimacy of a technical communication course as a humanities elective for a general education program is based on lack of understanding or self-serving prejudice, some patient persuasion may be required to build trust. Technical communication professors can remind their colleagues that the

> Philosophy of liberal education depends less on particular subject matter than on an approach to teaching and learning. A student can prepare for a profession in a "liberal," mind-expanding manner, or study the humanities or social sciences (traditional "liberal arts" disciplines) narrowly and shallowly. (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002, p. 25)

It may be particularly helpful to present such a position to college or university administrators as well as faculty colleagues because the role of administrators privileges them both to define their institutional missions broadly and, when necessary, to enforce change (Center for Studies in Higher Education, 2007, pp. 15–19; Steele, 2006, pp. 171–172).

The Potential Benefits

Although it may be difficult to wage, the battle for inclusion of technical communication course work as humanities electives in general education programs could be worthwhile for those who can stomach the fight. For a technical communication program to offer a general education course can improve the program's impact and visibility. This offering can provide immediate and practical benefits, plus have important, positive, long-term effects.

Beginning with the student benefits, many students may more easily find merit in a course about writing that connects directly to their interests. This connection is particularly true because, as Deanne Gute and Gary Gute (2008) note, undergraduates today may suffer from a prevailing "epidemic" of "academic disengagement" (p. 192). Correspondingly, they may hunger to feel that their path to a degree is filled not just with hurdles but also with courses that motivate them and encourage them to actively participate in learning that has "real world" applications.

As for program benefits, among the tangible reasons for developing our program's new general education course at San Francisco State University, one was to recruit potential new majors and minors. Ours is a specialized, career-

oriented, independently housed technical and professional writing program that had offered only upper-division courses before we introduced our new lower-division general education offering. As a result, despite a variety of outreach and promotional efforts, our program often seemed to fly under the radar. Nothing has been more frustrating for us as advisors over the years than meeting students who bemoaned the fact that they "never heard of" our program and "didn't know it existed" until they were too far along on their paths to graduation to make technical communication a focus of study. A lower division course could help to prevent the existence of our program being unintentionally a well-kept secret. Also, nothing has been more worrisome than the low enrollments that have now and again plagued some courses (especially in response to external economic factors such as economic cycles and their employment consequences). These factors have challenged the supportive intentions of our dean, who has struggled with tough decisions about how to allocate resources college-wide, and in the past, needed to justify special accommodations for our program.

Of course, even technical communication programs situated somewhat differently in terms of their home departments and budgets still might struggle, as we did, with what Johnson (2009) has identified as "the 'nonmaterial' problem of making our identities visible" (p. 54). The new exposure to students afforded by a general education course can lead to the advantage of new students joining any technical communication program.

Another reason for our program to develop our new general education course was to take some enrollment pressure off our existing course offerings, some of which we could never expect would enroll a high number of students due to course prerequisites, technical content, lab requirements, expectations for extensive revision feedback in addition to grading, and so on. By designing a course for general education that could be about workplace writing, without emphasizing basic instruction in how to write, we could set the prerequisite bar lower and the enrollment ceiling higher, attracting and enrolling more students. Our new general education course was the only course for which we did not need to cap enrollment tightly to ensure that faculty could provide sufficient feedback for substantive revision. Even for technical communication programs that are more supported by service courses (which our program does not offer), improving overall student-faculty ratios can provide an argument for protecting other under-enrolled classes.

Pragmatically, having a course in an undergraduate technical communication curriculum that does not require as much intensive grading and feedback as other technical communication courses typically do benefits faculty. Additionally, it benefits faculty to teach a technical communication course

with students who are earning degrees in other departments *and* who have independently chosen to take a technical communication course. This benefit is a change from students who have been dragooned into technical communication by major requirements, as is true for many in technical communication service courses. In the case of our program, which does not offer a technical writing service course, this new general education offering provides an added benefit of providing the only opportunity for our program faculty to teach a significant number of nonmajors, which can be refreshing.

Complementing these positive and easily identifiable benefits are other benefits of our new general education course that accrue from improving the visibility and impact of our program. Foremost among them is the academic status and recognition that derive from positioning our new course within the Arts and Sciences Core that is a major component of general education at San Francisco State University. Expanding the mission of technical communication programs from serving self-selected students already interested in our field to also exposing new students and faculty colleagues to our methods and concerns can prove worthwhile. Currently, San Francisco State University is transitioning to a graduation writing requirement based upon principles of Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines. However, at the time we launched our technical communication course for the general education program, both students and faculty across campus often saw writing course work as something relevant only for the English Department to offer and, further, something of a necessary evil. Because the new general education offering from our program positions writing as critical for successfully making the transition from academic studies to professional success, our course demonstrates how learning about writing can include both the reflective and rhetorical aspects typically emphasized in humanistic studies and yet be instrumental as well.

Our field merits having our campus colleagues learn to view technical communication as a legitimate, rich, and interesting area of study. For all technical communication programs, our future success may rely on many people in the larger institutions that we inhabit valuing the contributions of technical communication in ways that go beyond our "image . . . of being a service object" (Johnson, 2009). Obtaining that high regard may rely, in turn, partially upon extending our reach and improving understanding about what we know and do. A worthy goal is to help others become more open to viewing technical communication as belonging among the liberal arts with an added benefit of being an instrumental area of study. Fortuitously, progress toward this goal can derive even from the process required for adding a new course to a general education curriculum. That, at least, was true in the proposal process required for our new, custom-designed general education course at San Francisco State University.

Proposal Process and Course Design

The first step before creating a formal proposal to include a technical communication course as a humanities elective in the general education program at San Francisco State University was to marshal the arguments in favor of doing so and the summary of benefits enumerated above and then to present them for consideration by the dean of our college. Fortunately, although he neither invested any personal enthusiasm in the idea nor engaged to provide direct support, he also did not oppose it and even welcomed at least some practical benefits that might result. Most helpfully, he also suggested consulting with the faculty member from our college who also chaired the committee that would need to approve a new offering among the existing distribution requirements.

This chair of the general education committee accepted the rationale for including a technical communication course in general education, expressed an interest in seeing our proposal, advised us of a looming deadline, and explained the administrative hoops that we would encounter. Most importantly, this veteran of past skirmishes over general education offerings also offered blunt counsel about the politics that might stand in the way of achieving our goal. In this regard, she identified the least contested category of distribution requirements in which a technical communication course offering might plausibly fit, noting that others might require another department in our college to give up turf for us: an outcome that she doubted we could achieve. In addition, she offered to review drafts of our proposal documents before they went to the full committee.

Although our advisor also committed herself to neutrality in her role as chair, not wanting to be perceived as unduly influencing the campus committee in favor of a colleague from her home college, still, it became apparent as the process rolled out that without her savvy guidance our proposal might never have stood a chance. Lesson learned: General education is a specialization with its own dedicated interests and, therefore, no place for the naïve. Having, if not an advocate, at least an insider, helping out can be crucial for technical communication programs interested in moving into the general education arena.

What we quickly learned was that we needed to prepare ourselves to face a curriculum design challenge that we believe is vital to the future of programs in our field: How to position knowledge about technical and professional writing in a way that emphasizes its humanistic approaches, and demonstrates its value to a broad audience. We had to craft all our proposal documents as educational pieces, designed not only to describe our new course but also to explain and pitch our entire field in genres both limited in scope and designed

for other purposes. These forms, and their associated restrictions, probably are similar to those found in the general education bureaucracy of any large institution. They included a fill-in-the-blanks course proposal form with a brief attached syllabus-style summary of course objectives, contents, and methods, a fill-in-the-blanks "assessment matrix" for "course expectations" and another such matrix for "course outcomes" relative to the specific general education distribution requirement for which we were proposing our course, and a "course introduction" summary. The last of these documents was at least one that privileged us to build our argument (and to write entirely in complete sentences and paragraphs). Yet even that posed a challenge, because the summary was limited to one page and we were also told to write it as if it would be read by the audience of students who might enroll in our course—assuming that it passed muster.

In addition to meeting the overarching challenge of explaining our field to an under-informed (and potentially skeptical) audience through such limited means, we also had additional specific issues to address in our course design and our proposal. Both to get a fair hearing for our course from the general education committee and to meet our programmatic needs, our new course faced three specific imperatives: First, the course had to clearly fit the mission of the Humanities and Creative Arts area of "Disciplines and Inter-disciplines" designated as a distribution requirement for our general education program. Second, the course had to be appropriate for a high student enrollment (as many as 50 students in a section). Third, the course had to be suitable for lower-division students from a variety of majors. Although, of course, we had brainstormed course ideas before our initial feelers about a general education offering, once we buckled down to the task of developing proposal documents, we had to refine those ideas carefully, crafting both content and language to fit the decision-making circumstance.

To address the first imperative of addressing our place within Humanities and Creative Arts, we chose weekly class material that introduced fundamental methods and issues in our field. Although we recognized them as fundamental, we knew that our colleagues on the general education committee might not know enough about technical communication to share that recognition, so we used some of our limited space to spell them out. Our course proposal attachment included this list of possible topics for coverage in our new course:

- Ethical considerations in workplace writing
- Teamwork and collaboration in workplace writing
- Effects of internationalization on workplace writing practices
- Channel choices for communications within workplace settings
- Genre conventions for written communications in the workplace

- Document cycling for approvals and mentoring in workplace settings
- Rhetorical analysis of audiences, purposes, and contexts for workplace writing
- Discourse communities in business, industry, government, and nonprofit workplaces

We also referenced these topics in the assessment matrices that were the only vehicle anyone could point out to us to explain what the puzzling label "Disciplines and Inter-disciplines" was supposed to mean. From those matrices, we determined that we needed to address "theoretical and critical perspectives" for study and "methods for interpreting, valuing, and criticizing in given fields or areas," along with "particular understandings, attitudes, and abilities relevant to human values and personal development." The key words in our responses were all drawn from the list above: "culture," "ethics," and so on. Although this attempt to fit complicated issues into a somewhat reductive schema may seem cynical, we were sincere in trying to define technical communication in ways that stressed a kinship with our colleagues that we, at least, felt deeply and hoped they might acknowledge.

To address the second imperative of class size, we were helped by our initial decision to emphasize concepts, not composition. In other words, instead of focusing primarily on teaching writing skills, we focused on how and why people use writing to get professional work done. This focus would allow us both to limit formal writing assignments and expectations for revision and at the same time to attract students who might be averse to a skills-based course. To that end, we specified in our summary document that this course "is not a writing course per se," and went on to explain (again, in a document ostensibly addressed to students) that

> our focus will not be on writing practice and skill development (as in a composition course), nor on producing pieces for mass media (as in a journalism course), nor on creating literary works (as in a creative writing course). Instead, we will analyze the writing people do in the workplace in order to better understand why they write as they do and how well different types of workplace writing accomplish specific purposes. We will take an interdisciplinary approach to this subject, drawing on perspectives from anthropology, communication studies, language arts, and other fields.
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> Documents developed for workplace purposes and communities are often as sophisticated as other texts commonly studied in the university. Like a research paper, they can be guided by rigorous rules of inquiry and principles of effective argument; like

> a classical oration, they can be examples of artful rhetoric; like a powerful news story or editorial, they can be hugely influential; like a good work of fiction, they can be complicated and original. In addition, workplace writing often is linked to many of the key ethical issues individuals and organizations must confront as they carry out their activities. In other words, the writing genres and processes of the workplace represent rich cultures, value systems, and ideologies.

By including in this statement an appeal to difference—defining our course (in part) by what it was not, we hoped to reassure fears and also to intrigue: if what we would teach would not be what readers might have assumed, perhaps they would be curious to find out what to expect. Therefore, we followed our initial statement of difference with a complementary appeal to similarity, defining our course (in part) in terms of analogs both familiar and valued. We attempted to showcase the interesting features of the field of technical communication as we know it to be: both as a locus for interdisciplinary connections and as a distinctive area of study in its own right. In a bow to marketing, we also eschewed the term technical, instead choosing workplace as a less freighted alternative.

In addition, we attempted to further our marketing objective by directly addressing the issue of academic disengagement discussed previously. Our course summary included direct claims of relevance for students:

> As you gain a deeper understanding of the complex world of workplace writing, you will better see how the writing and analytical skills you develop as a student will be useful and important as you pursue your ambitions beyond college. As you learn to see workplace writing in its broader context, you will be better able to analyze the genres of workplace writing critically and use them effectively. And as you become skilled at sizing up the ethical issues linked to specific writing tasks in the workplace, you will increase your own capacity to make sound ethical decisions within organizations.
>
> In short, this course will provide you with new conceptual knowledge about writing for specific purposes, with more developed skills for analyzing and interpreting different types of written works, and with new information and writing samples that will be useful to you in your encounters with workplace writing beyond our classroom.

In this way, we tried to balance the reassurance of traditional humanism with the selling point of instrumental value added.

Finally, to address the third imperative of making our general education course material broadly accessible and interesting, we relied on the power of narrative, identifying for each weekly class topic multiple stories from a range of workplaces, professions, and publication venues that would both expose and elucidate the issues and ideas we hoped to teach. This narrative-based course design was critical to our vision of this new course, perhaps because this structure arose from our interests and excitement about our field. The two of us who designed and who now co-teach this course, "Writing Practices in Professional Contexts," were inspired by research in our field and wanted to share it with students. However, assigning scholarly research reports as readings would have been far too advanced and specialized for the class. So, instead we picked 35 or so journal articles and book chapters that contained narratives we could use to illustrate the concepts and ideas of the course. We agreed to summarize and present those in class in a way that would be accessible to the students, developing slide shows outlining the key events, contexts, and characters from every narrative presented and selecting key passages and documents to share.

This approach has a number of advantages: First, a narrative-based approach can make it easier to keep students engaged in a large class that needs to be based in part on lecturing to deliver summary information. The narratives that we chose to share with students in our new general education course included classics of technical communication studies, such as examining influences on decision-making in the run-up to the Challenger spacecraft disaster. We also included more current examples such as an exploration of the story limned in a series of emails exchanged by emergency aid officials at the time of Hurricane Katrina. We selected narratives about topics that addressed current social issues as well, such as stories focusing on public controversies such as those surrounding environmental action, sexual harassment policy, Asperger Syndrome, and the use of condoms. In addition, we chose stories that investigated the impact of contemporary technologies such as processes for website development and producing graphics such as maps. We also integrated stories concerning the history of technical communication by covering public communications concerning eugenics and the use of parliamentary style minutes. In this area, we did not shy away from narratives with political implications such as comparisons of texts produced by bureaucrats in different federal administrations. The fun of choosing these research-based narratives (and even including a few of our own publications as source documents for the course) was matched by our enthusiasm for how they could serve as vehicles for student learning.

In line with that intention, we deliberately chose narratives that provided platforms for both general discussion topics and small group activities. For example, narratives can encourage students to have opportunities in class to

project alternative story lines, role play communication acts such as genre and channel choices played by the principals, analyze associations between such features as intention and tone, and so on. Such class activities support students because it is easy for students to feel comfortable talking about people and events encountered in narratives. An approach that allows students to develop their understanding of concepts through memorable exchanges and encounters with narrative features can be more effective than asking students to try to work on their own with more abstract material.

Adapting narratives from professional communication research literature also provides opportunities to choose examples from a broad range of professions, which can make it easier to make the course material appealing and relevant to students from many different majors. We deliberately selected stories based on research conducted in nonprofits, government agencies, the military, and universities as well as in business, industrial, and research and development settings. Our goal was that all students, whether they intended to pursue careers in pre-nursing, journalism, accounting, computer science, graphic design, education, social work, or any of a host of other fields, could recognize their future selves as participants in workplace writing stories similar to the ones that we told. We even designed exams that specifically encouraged such identifications by asking students to hypothesize realistic situations in which they might face communication challenges similar to those recounted in class.

Of course, we did not exclude narratives that students could relate to even though they might not be pursuing professional preparation degrees in college. We wanted such students to recognize that they nevertheless might find themselves facing important technical communication challenges in, for example, careers as artists or academics. We chose stories with features to which we hoped that students majoring in disciplines ranging from creative writing and dance performance to ethnic studies and comparative literature could relate.

In addition to appealing to students, narratives can also work effectively with a conceptually focused course such as the one we designed for general education. Over the course of a semester, we built a list consisting of several dozen key concepts that we and students could use for investigating and interpreting technical communication narratives. These concepts encompassed venerable terms such as *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*, more postmodern notions such as the uncertainty of knowledge, instrumental methods such as the use of personas and repurposing, practical modes of analysis such as close reading, cultural perspectives such as corporate mythmaking, and organizational and psychological concerns such as team writing and collective mind. Early on, we used narratives to introduce concepts that later could be referred back to and

applied later to research-based stories. The richness of carefully chosen narratives can give students ample opportunities to analyze and apply concepts as they are introduced or reviewed.

Another benefit of narratives is that they lend themselves easily to the work our new course design required from students. Again, with a goal of limiting feedback and grading on writing skills, while still encouraging reflective writing practice, we designed frequent, informal writing assignments that respond directly to memorable narrative material. We also designed exams that ask students to refer back to narratives when they demonstrate their understanding of class concepts. The stories told in our course also could prepare students for the more formal writing assignments required (a persuasive memo and an analytical report based on quantitative information) because we designed these assignments to be based on realistic technical communication scenarios.

Of course, we could not articulate all of these details within the constraints of the written proposal documents for our proposed new general education. However, having committed significant time up front envisioning how this course would be taught proved exceptionally helpful for the next stage of the process at our institution, which was defending our proposal before the campus general education committee that would need to approve it.

Outcomes and Implications

The meeting with our general education committee at San Francisco State University, which includes representatives from all eight colleges across campus, was civil, but not warm. Although some members of the committee asked questions and offered apparently positive comments, others explicitly disagreed with the premise that technical communication deserved even consideration as an offering within Humanities and Creative Arts. One such individual was among the first to speak in the discussion that followed the initial oral summary of our documents that one of us, representing our program, was invited to make. Because he was the former director of a recently defunct interdisciplinary arts program that had been highly regarded across campus and also was a long-time and active member of the general education committee, we recognized that this individual's voice might well carry significant weight. We also were taken a bit off guard by his vociferousness and fixed ideas based on allegiances formed in previous work together on another campus committee.

Also, although we were grateful for the support advanced by another individual who backed our proposal most strongly, we realized that as being a representative of the business college, he might have made some members inclined to purist views even more suspicious of our proposal. Overall, we felt

that the interdisciplinary connections we had formed across campus over the year created some good will for our proposal in the review process, but that openness was balanced by discomfort with innovation.

In the back and forth conversations that took place concerning the details of our proposal, we acceded to several suggestions for improvement put forward by members of the committee. One suggestion was to change the title of our proposed offering to "Writing in Professional Contexts," rather than "Writing in Workplace Contexts," as initially proposed. This request was suggested on grounds both of improving appeal to students and for removing a perceived taint that our courses might have an objective of servicing corporate purposes and presumed ideologies. We also were asked to modify our ideas for possible assignments to exclude any that might have a job search agenda (such as developing a resume) or be too technological (such as developing a computerized slide show). In these negotiations, we demonstrated our willingness not only to accept but to suggest compromise positions (even in response to suggestions based on what seemed to us rather dubious assumptions).

This conciliatory attitude appeared to help us to get a fair hearing for our more foundational argument, the key points of which we repeated and attempted to explain with examples that spoke to the potential value of our course for students from all the colleges represented on the committee. To their credit, some members of the committee noted that their concerns were less for students who might enroll in our course than for other students, particularly those enrolled in technical courses of study that required high unit counts in major course work, making the choice of distribution requirement options particularly sensitive. We responded by affirming that such students would receive in our course meaningful exposure to humanistic ways of knowing. We also acknowledged the importance of their concerns, noting, as Veronica D. DiConti (2004) has stated, that "the quest of higher education . . . becomes one of finding the golden mean between the preparation of careers and cultivation of values" (p. 181).

After we left the meeting, with no certainty about how the subsequent vote on our proposal might go, we were pleased to learn that the committee had approved it, although by a narrow margin. Any other technical communication program interested in proposing a general education course might do well to expect similar skepticism and controversy, but also may find in our experience grounds for a reasonable hope of success.

Of course, our hopes were not just for success in being able to offer our new general education course, but also for it to meet the goals that we intended for it, providing the hoped for benefits for our program, faculty, students, and institution. Fortunately, based on several offerings of the course to date, we already can report progress toward those very outcomes.

First, every section we have offered of the courses has led directly to new students taking additional technical communication classes as electives and, in a number of cases, to students changing or adding technical communication as a major or minor. Even those students who may never take another technical communication class often express their appreciation for how our general education offering helped them to understand the importance of writing for their professional futures. Their enthusiasm and interest are invigorating, and we have heard that positive word of mouth about the class has led others to enroll in subsequent sections of it or in some of our other courses.

Probably as a result, every time we have offered this course it increased in size until it reached the enrollment cap set for it. This, in turn, improved the student-faculty ratio for our small program, so that it exceeded previously established enrollment targets. Although it remains true that our small classes always will be subject to possible cancellation, especially in times of extreme budget pressure, it has been helpful to be able to point to how our new general education course offsets the expense of our under-enrolled classes.

As faculty who teach the course, we also have been pleased by the variation it has provided both in our workload and in the types of students we encountered. Although having twice the number of students per class as was usual for us to teach was an adjustment, we have appreciated being able to spend more time reading and reacting in class to their informal writing, rather than providing extensive written comments on papers that they would revise. It was helpful in this class to maximize our use of an online course management system, which made informal writing assignments easy for us to review and for students to share. We also were glad to see how such sharing helped to bring a sense of community and an enthusiasm for small group work and discussion even to a large-size class.

Another benefit that surprised us somewhat was experiencing the difference among students in a lower division course in contrast with the students enrolled in other courses that we taught (mostly juniors, seniors, and graduate students pursuing a certificate). These students' relative inexperience with even much academic writing gave freshness to their engagement with the material we introduced. Having a mix of majors and interests among the students in the course also added variety to students' responses in class. We were gratified to hear from students from a variety of majors about the ways that they related the topics we raised in our technical communication course with topics they were studying for other courses. Often, students would enthusiastically contribute information about such connections in class discussions, increasing all students' awareness of how technical communication draws upon and reflects other disciplines. We also heard from students about workplace experiences

that validated concepts introduced in our course. The result from all these benefits was to enhance our credibility as faculty and to make teaching our general education offering a welcome and interesting teaching break.

The effect of the new course on our institution and how our colleagues see our field, of course, is something that will unfold and that we will need to evaluate over time. Ours is an experiment with no controls and only subjective measurements. Despite that qualifier, it is clear that the general education approval process alone did much to open understandings and enhance the reputation of our program as innovative and interdisciplinary with serious intellectual concerns—rather than just the narrow approaches of training, as might have been assumed. Having our program name on the list of distribution requirements automatically improves our reach.

We would not claim that the popularity and effectiveness of our general education course could eliminate the "fragility factor" that Johnson (2009) has identified as endemic to technical communication programs (p. 50). However, a technical communication course that is a humanities elective within general education can contribute to the program diversity Dale L. Sullivan (2009) identifies as healthy for long-term sustainability, avoiding the dangers inherent when we as technical communication academics instead "market ourselves as specialists" (pp. 65–66). His analysis suggests that our viability may flourish when we contribute to the process of "reinvigorating liberal education" that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) has identified as critical for the "new academy" that "celebrates practical knowledge" (pp. 15, 44).

There is something to be said for any technical communication program that introduces a humanities course such as our general education offering at San Francisco State University. Moreover, we believe that many programs could become stronger should the inclusion of technical communication become one of the trends associated with the current wave of undergraduate curriculum reform in general education.

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