

The Middle of a Program's Lifespan: The Technical Writing Student as Lone Ranger

My presentation bridges Chalet's and Danielle's by examining the stories of students in multi-focus writing programs. Student narratives rarely appear in the program development literature. A survey of this critical work shows that researchers tend to use those easily determined student identity categories common in writing studies. For example, Catherine Quick's 2012 essay on non-traditional students and workplace experience in the writing classroom, Junhua Wang's framework for measuring and meeting ESL students' needs in cross-cultural business and technical writing, and a quickly developing body of literature on first-generation college students all demonstrate some of the current major trends in assessing the best pedagogical practices for teaching technical/professional writing. However, a fuller picture of student identity in multi-focus writing programs must cross these rather deterministic categories to show how students begin to see themselves as professional writers both within their future workplaces and within the larger discipline of English Studies. Given the diversity of writing programs that Chalet has described and the contentious history they share with our colleagues in literature, how can students leave our programs with a disciplinary identity that allows them to understand how they can best contribute to diverse communities, what they might adapt from these communities, and how that knowledge translates into the workplace?

This presentation presents some highlights of a pilot study that provides potential answers to this question using David Sapp's concept of the "Lone Ranger" writing program administrator. In his article "The Lone Ranger as Technical Writing Program Administrator," Sapp defines this moniker in terms of technical/professional writing administrators who may experience a marginalized position within literature-centric English departments that contain emphases, minors, or degree programs in Technical/Professional Writing. Sapp explains that

many universities have sought to hire qualified technical writing faculty to develop programs because these programs have become increasingly attractive to students and boast high postgraduate employment numbers (with equally high starting salaries allowing pay back of student loans). These candidates are usually the only one or one of few writing faculty members in the department, and their hiring administrators often promise the independence to develop new programs and administrate old ones in ways that would likely be impossible at other, typically larger, institutions. However, Sapp argues that these Lone Ranger program administrators often encounter major problems in their new positions. He then provides his personal Lone Ranger narrative, interviews with other Lone Rangers, and strategies to negotiate this difficult position. Through interviews with students and alumni from Pittsburg State's own multi-focus writing program, I seek to understand how administrators' positions as Lone Rangers may affect student and alumni perceptions of writing programs and their willingness to collaborate once they have entered industry. Are there Lone Ranger technical writing students, and, if so, how might this perception influence later job prospects and industry collaborations? This data offers glimpses of the Lone Ranger that extend from the classroom to the workroom, including a sense of intellectual loneliness and elitism, lack of community building, and co-workers who misunderstand the discipline.

A little about our program, which produced the participants in my pilot study and serves as a model of what I call a multi-focus writing program. PSU enrolls about 7000 students in four colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences, College of Technology, College of Business, and College of Education. The University primarily draws students from within the four-state region of Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, with a sizable international student population. The English Department has nineteen full-time faculty members and offers four emphases on the

undergraduate level (Literature, Creative Writing, Technical / Professional Writing, and Teaching) and the graduate level (Literature, Creative Writing, and until recently Technical / Professional Writing and Rhetoric / Composition). All faculty members teach in at least two of the emphases. In 1987, the English Department established an undergraduate technical / professional writing program as an emphasis within the B.A. in English. In 2005, the Department created the Professional Writing and Rhetoric graduate emphasis, which was then split into two emphases in 2009. Both were discontinued in 2014. Each semester, the English Department offers five or six sections of our technical writing service course for the College of Technology with course numbers capped at twenty-four students per section. Each year, on average, we have fifteen to twenty Technical / Professional Writing majors in the undergraduate emphasis.

One of the first problems for Lone Ranger administrators involves the accumulation of duties beyond the expectations for other tenure-track faculty, especially when schools consider program administration as part of service in the teaching-research-service triad. Our program expects technical writing students to take support courses outside the English Department—in graphic design and marketing, for example, in addition to a required internship. Yet, one respondent said, “I fear that others may think we are Editors or Proofreaders (not that there’s anything wrong with being an Editor or a Proofer) when Technical Writers encompass a more diverse and robust skill set.” The respondent worries that colleagues in both academic and industry contexts do not fully understand these additional duties and skills that technical writers must perform and cultivate. She fears being valued in a limited way through her perceived role as a “document fixer.”

Relatedly, Sapp describes how colleagues of Lone Rangers, particularly those working in multi-focus programs such as mine, misunderstand or disrespect the goals and methods of the technical writing discipline. In my role as a technical writing administrator, I make sure to highlight the practical skills and diverse approaches one must develop as a technical writer when I visit our first-year introduction to the major course. “You mean it’s not just about memos?” is a common refrain from these students when I mention document design and studies of accessibility, usability, and digital literacy. Another respondent suggests the need for this kind of epiphany by her coworkers, who describe “Becky’s skills” as “writing with the right words in the right way.” The respondent’s coworker deflates her professional role as Director of Research, Planning, and Grants Development for a non-profit organization into one concerned with writing as if writing is one monolithic process without multiple variables and vectors (just as our first-year majors demote technical/profession writing to memo writing only). Whereas Sapp describes a sense of almost malicious ignorance maintained by colleagues of Lone Ranger administrators, this former student locates the problem in the lack of appropriate language. Though her coworkers acknowledge the value of her contributions, in the end, they are literally left speechless.

However, even when respondents have attempted to explain the finer points of their disciplinary identity in order to clarify misconceptions about the field, they still have encountered a sense of “subtle fear” from literature professors. In the case of one respondent, she understands how the writing skills of “audience analysis, detailed observation, and general problem solving” can help complete a variety of writing tasks—including literary ones. Nonetheless, she has sensed that her “non-Tech Writing professors” feel that “Tech Writing knowledge must be ‘turned off’ in order for a Tech Writing student to succeed within the larger

English discipline.” The “switch” metaphor in this response indicates a reductionist approach to the formation of certain types of knowledge, almost to the point that students in writing are seen as automata.

As a whole, the respondents do not seem to experience the Lone Ranger’s next major problem: intellectual loneliness in a department without other technical writing faculty. I suspect the lack of this problem may have to do with the nature of our department. Because we are relatively small in number, many of my colleagues span disciplinary boundaries in their teaching and research. Though arising from necessity, this paradigm has led to a sense of camaraderie and an atmosphere of mutual respect in which I felt like I could share my research or teaching concerns with any colleague. Similarly, while another respondent has found it difficult to switch between writing in technical communication and literature classes, the respondent sees the value of core literature courses (British Literature I and II, American Literature, and World Literature) for a technical writer, namely “drafting to the expectations of any discourse community.” Though these courses take away time that students work on skills, they help make the students active critical thinkers ready to engage diverse discourse communities. While not an example of intellectual loneliness, the respondent’s comment about the “more verbose” language of literary analysis shows that mischaracterizations and stereotypes can arise from both sides of the literature/writing aisle.

The one example of intellectual loneliness in my responses derives itself from the size of our university and program. With more students, the respondent felt that she “would excel more quickly, which in turn would give [her] more time to focus on the next idea or project.” As a result of the size of our program, though, the student also values the additional individual

attention from writing faculty, and she takes advantage of this opportunity when she needs “to inquire about a project, brainstorm ideas, or simply discuss a complex article.”

The final problem that Lone Ranger administrators experience is a sense of elitism from colleagues in literary studies, which becomes apparent in one respondent’s characterization of the Technical/Professional Writing Emphasis as “The Dark Side.” Though the respondent qualifies the statement—presenting an apology of sorts for the comment by graduate students in other disciplines—the respondent expresses the marginalizing aspects of studying technical writing. However, many respondents also take stabs back at literature and creative writing majors by alluding to the job prospects technical writing offers. One student describes the “jealousy” of other emphases: “With graduate students who do know about Technical Writing, they usually respond with jealousy that their emphasis is not as “practical.” However, with those students who may be less familiar with the discipline, they often respond with open interest to learn more.” Despite the marginalization, these respondents understand the marketability of a writing degree. Elitism may also arise in programmatic ways, such as the weighting of sections on a comprehensive Masters exam that one respondent describes, as described in Quotation 9. Since this respondent took her comprehensive exams, the English Department has revised the exam process so that literature is not weighted more than technical/professional writing for students in this emphasis, and the exam represents both the practical and theoretical aspects of the program. Though the Department voted to discontinue the graduate program last year, writing faculty are currently working on revising the program to make a come back next year.

One of the major positive themes that ran throughout the interviews is the importance of community building: within classes, within the department, within the town through civic engagement, and within local industry through collaboration. Students must leave our program

with a sense of belonging to a departmental and disciplinary community and with the skills to integrate into and negotiate their new workplace communities. This ability to develop community is especially important at a medium-sized institution like my own in which many of our graduates get jobs within the four-state region of Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma and would be the primary sources of internships and industry collaboration for me as an administrator. One respondent thinks that theory classes have prepared her to explain “how writing and revising are recursive processes” to help “alleviate tensions when one author is displeased with and defensive of the changes others have suggested” in her workplace. This is particularly the case with legacy documents that an organization may have used for many years. The respondent describes this shift from the university to the workplace as “difficult...although not insurmountable.” Similarly, another respondent remarks on the stereotypes she has encountered from different academic communities: that writing majors will “actually grow up to make money,” that “Tech Writers write robotically and have no ‘flavor’ in their written voice,” and that they “generally struggle to write anything ‘creative.’” Even as an undergraduate, this respondent shows an awareness of the sometimes-contentious nature of her developing professional persona at the university. While not ideal, this challenge cultivates the ability to deal with well-meaning but perhaps uninformed communities in a lower-stakes atmosphere. Given the results of these initial interviews, I am currently working with two graduate students to construct a survey so that I can investigate beyond Pittsburg State’s program, and I hope to have IRB approval sometime this summer.