Chapter XIV

Cut and Paste: Remixing Composition Pedagogy for Online Workspaces

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Abstract

This chapter posits a widening gap between workplace writing practices and traditional composition pedagogies. In particular, this chapter suggests that traditional composition pedagogies persist in foregrounding solitary, proprietary authors as model composers, despite the limited applicability of these models. The fields of technical and professional communication, by contrast, have long valued collaboration and modes of authorship that do not always imply the composer’s ownership of a given text. These fields’ biases are reinforced by the advent of digital media, and the Internet in particular. Digital technologies facilitate collaboration and promote a greater range of authorial stances than their print counterparts. The chapter concludes by offering pedagogical approaches directed at promoting composition pedagogies commensurate with the challenges faced by professional and technical writers working in digital composing spaces.
Introduction: Connections and Disconnections

The fields of professional and technical communication have never quite been reconciled with academia’s policing of plagiarism and attendant composition pedagogies. Communicators in professional workplaces often depend upon inherited document templates, collaborative composing strategies, and source texts in which authorship is unstated or diffuse. The traditional academic focus on the proper forms of citation when summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting does not always speak to the processes involved in generating a technical manual or an online help document. In such documents, questions of audience and content effectively trump questions of authorship and ownership.

Often professional and technical communicators are called upon to effectively “unlearn” the proprietary and individualistic approaches to writing that characterized much of 20th century composition pedagogy. This disjunction is exacerbated when the fluid intellectual property practices of many workplaces are linked to the similarly fluid understandings of intellectual property endemic to the Internet. For example, in an article documenting an early attempt at moving a technical communication class onto the World Wide Web, we find Robert Kramer and Stephen Bernhardt (1999) praising a student who “successfully copied a Web-based bitmapped image, pasted it into a Word document, cropped it into three separate images, made additions to those images, and then supplied contextual text to describe each phase of the solution” (p. 331). While this student clearly demonstrates a range of skills which most professors in any discipline would probably endorse, the foundational step in this student’s work is “successful copying,” a phrase that might well strike professors outside the fields of professional or technical communication as oxymoronic.

In the following pages, I illustrate the degree to which professional and technical communicators are routinely called upon to distance themselves from principles and practices maintained in traditional composition programs. Professional and technical communicators typically mobilize discursive strategies that both reject and critique traditional composition’s focus on the cultivation and celebration of solitary intending agents. This suggests that scholars and practitioners of professional and technical communication should ally with those scholars and critics of composition pedagogy who recognize the potential of Internet technologies in promoting collaboration and enabling more complex modes of discursive agency. Also, because the solitary intending agent is maintained not only by traditional composition pedagogy, but also by current copyright laws, I argue here that professional and technical communicators bear a special obligation to study, critique, and, ultimately, change copyright laws, especially as they apply to the Internet. If professional and technical communicators fail to engage with both
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