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# After the Great War: Utility, Humanities, and Tracings From a Technical Writing Class in the 1920s

Journal of Business and Technical

Communication

000(00) 1-27

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DOI: 10.1177/1050651911430626

<http://jbtcc.sagepub.com>



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## **Abstract**

Using tracings from a 1924 technical writing class, this article follows some normally unmarked processes of teaching and learning in order to highlight the humanities-utility binary from the perspective of the shadows of instructional practice. First, the article situates the humanities-utility debate as it is being addressed in postwar America, and second, it offers evidence of how far-reaching the resolution might have been, evidence taken from the margins of a copy of Watt's (1917) *The Composition of Technical Papers*. Both the professional discussions and this textbook's philosophy are reflected in jottings made by a technical writing student. This article suggests that tracing these issues through this underside of pedagogical history offers a type of evidence that is difficult to recover but worth seeking.

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**Keywords**

history of technical communication, Progressive Era, marginalia, humanistic approach, utility, technical writing pedagogy, historiography

When I began the serious study of technical communication, my teachers urged me not to turn away from rhetoric (and humanities) in order to embrace writing, which was seen as a mere utility in the 1970s. After all, the positioning of that course in English departments, as Sullivan and Porter (1993) have argued, was at best a lowly one and at worst that of a turncoat purveying the values of engineering, science, or business administration. In the common parlance of the day, technical writing was devoid of rhetoric and humanity, serving engineering's values instead. Across that decade a definitional war sought to position technical writing institutionally in English or in engineering, and that war was waged with little overt consideration of rhetoric (though the conflict was rhetorical in nature). So Miller's (1979) attempt to clarify a humanistic rationale and argue—among other things—that technical writing belonged in English, where it would be taught with humanistic values, became useful to those who sought arguments that might open a space for rhetoric. But, while Miller demonstrated utility in aligning technical writing with English and humanities, her alignment did not jive with early accounts of technical writing's instructional history. Or did it? Indeed, the knot of binaries that ties technical writing and English (often constructed as humanism) has sometimes seemed quite Gordian.

In this article, I worry that knot historically, reviewing the utility-humanities (or the utility-culture) binary using evidence from a post-World War I class held at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). I examine, first, whether or how the prewar binary debate had been resolved and, second, the extent to which in situ evidence from a class confirms or contests a position on the dispute. Of particular interest to this discussion is the construction of rhetoric at a time of postwar consolidation and growth. The 20th century educators had crystallized the utility-humanities debate, pitting Rickard's (1908) "spurious coin" utility against Aydelotte's (1917b) "culture as belletristic" view as they formulated concerns about how engineers should be educated. Both positions downplayed an earlier rhetorically grounded view of utility found in Valentine's (1899) construction of first-year composition for engineers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and through this sharp construction of these binaries in the pre-World War I colleges, rhetoric was lost—or perhaps backgrounded—in