HU 5003: Spring 2003

Technical Communication and Technology Studies

Anne Frances Wysocki
awysocki@mtu.edu
137 Walker
498-3271
Office hours: Th 1-4pm

Official course description, from the RTC Grad manual

“This course considers key historical, pedagogical, practical, and theoretical issues in technical communication, scientific communication, and technology studies. Considerable attention is paid to practice and to technical communication and technology in academic and non-academic settings.”

Short particular description

The relations we build with each other through the technologies we design, construct, and communicate with and about — those relations are the focus of this class. That, and how we might (if we have reasons) change those relations, first, by understanding their temporally-based articulations and, second, through practical actions in technical communication.

The general shape of the course

This course is one of the three “core” courses in the RTC program. These courses are to give you an introduction to the background and broad concerns of each of the three particular areas in the program so that you then find an appropriate jumping off point for your own deeper and thicker researches, interests, and projects.

To those ends, this course begins with a somewhat chronologically arranged introduction to technology studies, to how technology became an issue of theoretic as well as practical concern to book-type people, and to the questions that have shaped academic discourses around technology.

Following the chronologic introduction, we will look at how technical communication got started, the concerns that shape it as a field, and the tensions that exist between the on-the-ground approaches of technical communication and the often-less-practically-grounded concerns of technology studies. In those tensions exist many openings for provocative and intriguing research and production projects.

The questions of the course

Well, what is technology? What counts as technology, and why does it matter to have such a category for thought and action? What happens when we say that some thing or action or assemblage is a technology — while another isn’t?

What relations do we — can we — establish with others when we communicate with different technologies? What relationships do we — can we — establish with others when we communicate about our various technologies?

Your questions here, please:

How this course ends

You will articulate a research project out of our semester’s work. Our 15 weeks should give you sufficient grounding in the areas of technology studies and technical communication that you will have a sense of what sort of topics allow you to enter these ongoing discussions; our 15 weeks should also give you a sense of how to shape those topics to your own ends and concerns. What I want you to do then is not write a research paper, but rather to compose (again, using whatever technologies of communication make sense to you) a plan: were you to have to develop a master’s project or a comprehensive exam research question tomorrow, how would you proceed? What question would guide your research? What hypotheses or openings in the current field do you see your research filling or thickening or helping? Where would you look for academic support (that is, what theorists and what journals would most encourage your work)? What sorts of (non-academically academic) actions and practices would help you research your question in unexpected but fruitful ways? How would you enact your project so that it had the strongest possible effects?
## 5003 Calendar, Spring 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>To Read</th>
<th>To Create</th>
<th>To Produce</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>January 18</td>
<td>Introduction to class</td>
<td>Pollan, &quot;Desire: Control: Plant: The Potato&quot;</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>January 23</td>
<td>one possible starting place, in the late 19th century</td>
<td>William Morris, &quot;Art under Plutocracy&quot;</td>
<td>selections: Karl Marx's Capital [Carolyn Miller's &quot;Technology as a Form of Consciousness&quot;]</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>January 30</td>
<td>technology as an explicit concern, mid-20th century</td>
<td>selections: Jacques Ellul's The Technological Society</td>
<td>Martin Heidegger’s &quot;The Question concerning Technology&quot;</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>February 6</td>
<td>responding to Marx, Heidegger, Ellul, and others</td>
<td>selections: Andrew Feenberg’s Critical Theory of Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>February 13</td>
<td>other takes on technologies: gender, race, class, and embodiment / fear</td>
<td>Donna Jean Haraway’s &quot;The Cyborg Manifesto&quot;</td>
<td>Bill Joy’s &quot;Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us&quot;</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>February 20</td>
<td>other takes on technologies: economic-political articulations / assemblage</td>
<td>selections: Manuel Castells’s The Rise of the Network Society</td>
<td>selections: J. Macgregor Wise’s Exploring Technology and Social Space</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>February 27</td>
<td>other takes on technologies: embodiment</td>
<td>Don Ihde’s Bodies in Technology</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>March 6</td>
<td>NO CLASS — SPRING BREAK</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>March 13</td>
<td>a turn to the concrete considerations of designing technologies: architecture and chairs and televisions and...</td>
<td>selections: Le Corbusier's &quot;Towards a New Architecture&quot;</td>
<td>selections: Reyner Banham’s &quot;Theories and Design in the First Machine Age&quot;</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>March 20</td>
<td>NO CLASS — CODE</td>
<td></td>
<td>analysis of a technology of your choosing...</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>March 27</td>
<td>concretely &amp; rhetorically designed technologies...</td>
<td>Robert Johnson’s User-Centered Technology</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>April 3</td>
<td>concretely &amp; rhetorically designed communication about technologies: the beginnings of technical communication</td>
<td>James P. Zappen’s &quot;Francis Bacon and the Historiography of Scientific Rhetoric&quot;</td>
<td>Robert J. Connor’s &quot;The Rise of Technical Writing Instruction in America&quot;</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>April 10</td>
<td>situating yourself in technical communication</td>
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<td>technical communication journal mapping</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>April 17</td>
<td>concretely &amp; rhetorically designed communication about technologies: questioning how people learn &amp; understand technologies—and are shaped by what we write...</td>
<td>David Dobrin’s &quot;Do Not Grind Armadillo Armor in this Mill&quot;</td>
<td>Marilyn Cooper’s &quot;The Postmodern Operator’s Manual&quot;</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>April 24</td>
<td>melding theory and practice</td>
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<td>critique of instructions for writing instructions: your own instructions</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>May 1</td>
<td>potential trajectories</td>
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<td>where are you headed?</td>
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projects/products

summary/demonstration of readings
I take it as part of my responsibility in this core class that the readings are grounding you for further studies and actions (whether or not you pursue them) in technology studies and technical communication. I want to be sure, then, that you are able to see the readings as ground, as a map of possibilities and interests and concerns... and maps require a view-from-a-distance.

Twice in the semester I am going to ask you, then, to compose approximately 3-5 pages that demonstrate to me your understanding of our readings. In these compositions (which can be on paper or online, and do not have to be strict academic narratives if there is another structure for demonstration that satisfies both your ways of working and my requests) I want you to layout what you consider to be the main concerns (and reasons behind the concerns) of the theorists we read. I want you to show how you think the concerns and reasons of different theorists overlap or shun each other - and why.

We'll talk about this more as we approach the due dates for these compositions, but I want you to be thinking about structures and strategies in your past experience that have most helped you see that you are building solid (and interesting-to-understandings of and connections among ideas.

analysis of a technology... and a theorist
Choose a technology that interests you: photography, contemporary US approaches to childbirth, robotics, peer-to-peer computing, nanotechnologies, cows and milk... anything that you can justify naming as a technology given the definitions we consider in class.

Choose one or two of the technology theorists we read, theorists whose approaches intrigue or disturb you.
Consider your chosen technology through the categories of analysis used by your chosen theorist. What does the theorist's approaches allow you to say about the technology? What is left out?
Use those last two questions to develop (and defend) a position regarding the usefulness-to-you of the perspectives of the theorist.

Present your analysis through a stand-alone communication technology that will help your audience best understand your arguments. You do not necessarily have to use words. but I do expect that you will shape your arguments so that others in class will fairly easily be able to glom on them.

journal mapping
Choose one of the following journals of which are in the MTU library) - Technical Communication Quarterly (TCQ) Journal of Business and Technical Communication (JBTC) Journal of Technical Writing and Communication IEEE PCC (IEEE Proceedings from the International Professional Communication Conference, IEEE-Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) Technical Communication (put out by the national STC organization) Journal of Computer Documentation

and read through the journal issues from 1995 to the present. For each article, write a one-sentence description of the article's main concern or question. (You do not have to read in depth to do this: instead, read the introduction and concluding paragraph of an article only read more if you find yourself drawn in...)
After you have read and summarized, look back over your summaries for the topics, concerns, and questions that repeat.
In class, you will work with someone else who read the same journal to build together a map of the concerns that have shaped the technical communication field in the last 7 years.
The purpose of this exercise is to help you gain an overview of the field, and to see how you might situate yourself within this field.

critique of instructions for writing instructions; your own instructions
From a list I will provide, choose a manual that gives instructions for writing instructions or documentation. Choose a technology theorist from earlier in the semester, and use that theorist's ideas about technology and relations between people to critique the instructions for writing instructions. That is, what sorts of relations does the theorists think we should have with the different technologies we use — and do the instructions for writing instructions encourage one to write instructions that shape those relations?

Then, write instructions for performing any short procedure with any technology you choose — but write the instructions so that they encourage the kind of relations that you (and your theorist) think we should have with the technologies we use.
This is a surprisingly hard challenge, but an important one for any work in technical communication.
When you have built your instructions, write a short justification for why you shaped the instructions as you did.
We will also be testing each other's instructions.