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## Writing and Rhetoric Majors, Disciplinarity, and *Techne*



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**Abstract:** How we argue for, create, and mobilize around writing and rhetoric majors will continue to shape our field's disciplinarity in crucial ways, including our recognition, resources, and relationships. The range of such majors and their institutional contexts, and the disparate field-level efforts to track and build consensus around them, generate more questions than answers, leaving the turn to disciplinarity an open question. This article proposes *techne*—rhetoric as the productive art of enacting knowledge—as a conceptual tool for identifying connections across writing and rhetoric majors. Such points of connection can, in turn, serve to guide efforts for supporting and building shared resources for majors, and to enable a contingent and adaptive understanding of our field's identity and (potential) disciplinarity.

The field of Rhetoric and Composition's (RC's) persisting struggle over defining a disciplinary identity has increasingly shaped calls for and forms of writing and rhetoric majors of various types. At the same time, how we argue for, create, categorize, support, build consensus around, and produce scholarship about writing and rhetoric majors will continue to shape our disciplinary identity (or identities) in crucial ways. It is this latter direction of influence that this article will explore. The ongoing growth of the major has brought the field more recognition at the institutional level and beyond, and such majors have also shaped our resources and relationships. Further, all of these influences have increasingly shaped our identities, including how we understand our institutional, academic, and societal roles.

In what follows, we review the growth of writing majors and field-level efforts to support them, foregrounding how these developments have raised questions about disciplinarity and how we understand this term. In addition to the burgeoning scholarship about writing and rhetoric majors, some of which explicitly takes up disciplinary concerns and influences, we draw on our experiential knowledge as faculty who have built and revised, directed, and consulted with colleagues around the field about writing and rhetoric majors.

Although we recognize the influence of writing and rhetoric majors, we want to keep open the question of whether our majors should advance a consensus-driven notion of disciplinarity that, in turn, can delimit what our majors look like. In *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*, Gary A. Olson and others compellingly argue that Rhetoric and Composition has already established itself as a vibrant and diverse intellectual discipline with strands of scholarship that extend beyond the teaching of writing (Olson, "Preface" xii); at the same time, Olson argues that RC has not yet "come to terms with our intellectual diversity" and remains engaged in a "hegemonic struggle" over its scope, direction, and identity ("Death" 24, 30-31). Given this struggle, and insofar as some notions of disciplinarity imply consensus and even standardization, the range and diversity of writing and rhetoric majors alone might complicate a new type of disciplinary turn for the field.

To further contribute to this discussion about the major's influence, we follow our history with a proposal for using *techne*—rhetoric as the productive art of enacting knowledge—as a conceptual tool for identifying connections across writing and rhetoric majors. These points of connection can, in turn, serve to guide field-level efforts for supporting and building shared resources for majors, and to enable a contingent and adaptive understanding of our field's identity and (potential) disciplinarity. Collectively understanding our majors around the teaching of *techne* has the advantages, we argue, of honoring our field's history and diversity while also giving us a unique way to articulate our institutional and broader value and contributions.

We should note here that we are using the term RC broadly to describe a field with a number of subfields and some

interdisciplinary and extradisciplinary (e.g., industry, civic) influences and inflections. We should also note that we are using the term “writing and rhetoric major” as shorthand to refer to an inclusive range of majors and emphases grounded (at least partly) in RC, including technical and professional communication (TPC). Further, following the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee on the Major, we do not use the term writing and rhetoric major to refer only to separate majors but also include full-fledged tracks of degree programs (e.g., English). We sometimes call out TPC majors because of their somewhat separate historical trajectory and developments.

## Majors and Disciplinarity

### ***Emergence and Growth of Majors: A Movement of Diversity***

As a field, we have made a number of moves toward disciplinarity over time (e.g., the creation of intellectual conversations, professional organizations, journals, conferences, professional organizations; representation in information networks such as federal CIP codes). We might relate the more recent growth of writing and rhetoric majors to heightened discussions about disciplinarity and new efforts that attempt to move us from a loose field to a more defined and consensus-driven discipline.

Generally speaking, we might track the historical development of writing majors as moving from the development of more specialized courses and areas to minors and emphases within existing degree programs to full-fledged degree programs—a movement from multi-major service curricula to more specialized, program-specific ones. Not all efforts followed this developmental progression, however, and by and large TPC programs moved through it earlier than other types. In addition, the development of writing and rhetoric majors has not always coincided with a move toward disciplinarity, as we will explain.

In their 1992 survey of writing concentrations and majors in English departments, David Chapman, Jeanett Harris, and Christine Hult found that most programs created in the 50s and 60s were creative writing, most created in the 70s were TPC, and most created in the 80s took more general approaches to writing and rhetoric (423; see also Katherine Adams’ excellent history of professional writing instruction). Fueled by what Robert Connors (347) documents as an established academic field of study with a “solid core” of specialists by the late 1960s, a number of TPC programs were formed by the mid 1970s, with the publication *Academic Programs in Technical Communication* detailing the curricula of 18 such programs in 1976. Other types of majors also began to appear as early as the 1980s, and currently there are 562 (Meloncon, “Rise”).

Most of the growth of writing and rhetoric majors—accompanied by scholarship about them and field-level organizing around them—has occurred over the past fifteen years or so. Around the turn of the century, the *Coming of Age* collection advanced a number of curricular models (some of which directly extended first-year composition); Yancey delivered her CCCC Chair’s Address calling for a new kind of major (one that attends to circulation, media, and transfer); and a number of new majors were launched (see Giberson, *Writing*).

In their 2010 article on the CCCC Committee on the Major’s documenting work, Deborah Balzhiser and Susan H. McLeod note the growth in “writing majors” and tracks (if the latter have a distinct focus in RC) from 45 in 2005 to 68 in 2008 (416). Based on the committee’s official spreadsheet last updated in 2009, McLeod bumps this number up to 72 (287). In her forward to the *Writing Majors* collection, Sandra Jamieson suggests the committee has now documented more than 150 writing majors, although the list on the committee’s web page does not yet reflect this (viii). Lisa Meloncon and Sally Henschel’s research documents a corresponding growth of TPC programs—to 67 undergraduate degrees and another 125 tracks or emphases, some of which overlap with the list of programs compiled by the CCCC Committee. Given such growth, Christian Weisser and Laurie Grobman’s observation of the “decade of the writing major” seems appropriate (39).

The growth we’ve been tracking has generated a wide range of majors. Categorizing them by curricular emphasis alone, we could identify the following types, which we do not claim to be exhaustive:

- TPC majors and degrees with TPC tracks or emphases. TPC degrees typically require core and elective courses focused on editing, document/information design, and production in technical/professional environments. Whereas TPC degrees typically require over 30 hours of specialized TPC coursework, tracks or emphases typically require approximately half that number supplemented by literature, creative writing, or other types of writing courses (e.g., journalism). (e.g., Mercer’s B.S. in Technical Communication or Metropolitan State’s B.A. in Technical Communication and Professional Writing, or University of Cincinnati’s English degree with a track in Rhetoric and Professional Writing)

- Broad based writing and rhetoric majors that merge rhetorical theory/history, civic and professional writing, and language/literacy studies (e.g., Central Florida's B.A. in Writing and Rhetoric; DePaul's B.A. in Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse; Arizona State's B.A. in Writing, Rhetorics and Literacies);
- Majors comprised of two or more merged areas or distinct tracks that focus on writing in some form. These areas or tracks often include some combination of new media, creative writing (especially nonfiction), technical or professional writing, linguistics, journalism, public relations, and digital humanities (e.g., Wisconsin-Stout's B.S. in Professional Communication and Emerging Media; Penn State Berks' B.A. in Professional Writing; Georgia Southern's B.A. in Writing and Linguistics). Some could be considered broad based Writing Arts majors (e.g., Rowan's B.A. in Writing Arts).
- Various types of non-TPC writing tracks of English B.A.s that require at least 12 hours of courses in the track with the remainder of coursework either in the track or in other areas of English studies (e.g., Wisconsin-La Crosse's Rhetoric and Writing emphasis; Texas A&M's Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture track; Florida State's Editing, Writing, and Media track).

Other curricular differences across program types include the designation of B.A. or B.S., inclusion of internship and capstone courses, the degree of scaffolding and flexibility in the curricular structure (including gateway versus core courses), the emphasis on public or civic rhetoric, the emphasis on particular industries or graduate/professional programs, the relationship to first-year writing (e.g., vertical extension of or extra-academic departure from), and the incorporation of such elements as an e-portfolio, undergraduate research, and service-learning or client-based assignments. Non-curricular means of distinguishing programs include their institutional location (considerably fewer TPC programs are in English departments; a growing number of general RC majors are part of writing and rhetoric departments) and faculty specializations and number.

Despite this range of distinguishing factors, scholarship about the growth and types of writing and rhetoric majors has also pointed to some commonalities that have the potential to impact any turn toward disciplinarity. First, as Nugent, Giberson, and others explain, all programs respond to similar types of (different) local histories and exigencies, such as institutional mission, resources (budget, space, technology), faculty expertise, and existing programs and curricula. This commonality of "local-ness" is especially important given that majors shape disciplinary recognition most concretely on the local level, at which institutional position, status, resources, and relationships are determined. Second, as Nugent observes, most majors "situate themselves somewhere between the binary extremes of liberal arts education and vocational training, analysis and production, and theory and practice" (4). Most programs attempt to balance pre-professional and liberal arts or civic elements, and some (e.g., those at York College and Elon) attempt to merge them across the curriculum. This commonality indicates that writing and rhetoric majors are shaped by multiple educational aims, some more grounded in disciplinary knowledge than others. Third, in line with Yancey's chair's address, nearly all programs incorporate writing with/for new media, signaling a field-level responsiveness to changing patterns in communication and literacy.

## **Majors' Influence on (Disciplinary) Recognition, Resources, and Relationships**

The proliferation of scholarship about writing and rhetoric majors can generate recognition, resources, and relationships for our work and disciplinary expertise at multiple levels. We focus primarily on the local level, as our collective organizing around majors (at least non-TPC ones) is emergent and therefore has only begun to manifest impactful field-level efforts.

### ***Affordances of Local, Institutional Efforts***

At the local level, a writing and rhetoric major, particularly if it is a separate degree program, can be a means of gaining a more widely recognized and respected disciplinary status for RC across the institution and even with external stakeholders. In terms of visibility and representation, the students in a major can market its mission and connection to a larger field to other students and stakeholders. In the afterword to his co-edited collection *Writing Majors: Eighteen Program Profiles*, Giberson observes that "the programs we create become reflections of the discipline itself," in part because the students graduating from these programs will "define the discipline [explicitly and operationally] for their employers, family, and friends" (242; see also Newman).

Universities organize a range of activities—including marketing, advising, curriculum approval, and assessment—and sometimes funding models around majors. At many universities, for example, majors (as opposed to emphases, minors, and certificates) are the primary programs that are marketed to students at partnering institutions, orientation, majors fairs, and other sites. Students' primary academic advising typically occurs at the level of the major at orientation and beyond. Curricula governance committees are often comprised of faculty representatives from degree programs. Majors can also influence our institutions' perceived *value* of what we do; many universities look to majors

as a primary way to measure productivity and success through, among other things, numbers of declared and graduated students, assessment of student learning, student retention and graduation rates, and student placement. Moreover, writing and rhetoric majors require specialized faculty, and therefore can lead to additional hires (including tenure-line); as Jennifer Clary-Lemon argues, writing and rhetoric majors can also be effective recruitment tools for hiring faculty.

The unit-specific student credit hours generated by writing and rhetoric majors can secure stable funding for departments and other home units, and the staffing demands of majors—often more predictable than those of first-year composition programs—can provide additional security for faculty positions. In other words, the creation of a major has real material effects for faculty and departments.

Writing and rhetoric majors promise to shape how a range of stakeholders within and beyond our institutions understand and value what we do. Within our programs and other home units, majors that bring together different (sub)disciplinary specialists, such as creative writers, journalists, technical communicators, and rhetoricians, can shape participants' understandings of their relationships and the boundaries (or porousness) of their discipline. Undergraduate majors or tracks in English departments, for example, can encourage colleagues in other areas to better value the disciplinary expertise of RC faculty (see Chapman, Harris, and Hult; Delli Carpini; Rentz, Debs, and Meloncon). Even majors in stand-alone departments can influence relationships between faculty trained as RC specialists and those who are not; as Wardle and Scott explain, the growth of the major and upper-division courses in their department prompted the need to determine and provide additional ways to develop faculty expertise. Developing faculty expertise also enables the sustainability of programs in that faculty who may have different disciplinary orientations staff many new programs. As Stephen North has argued, faculty “should develop instructional programs that grow out of their collective research, have curricular developmental continuity, and invite writing majors to join the enterprise” (208).

Majors can influence how students, faculty, and colleagues across the university understand and value other related programs. Connecting majors with first-year composition programs can help us reimagine the latter as grounded in a body of knowledge that students will later extend along a vertical curriculum (see Ostergaard, Giberson, and Nugent). Connecting majors with RC graduate programs can boost graduate recruiting and perhaps re-infuse our graduate programs with the teaching of *techne* (along with history, theory, and academic criticism) (see Giberson et al. “Changing”). Rebecca Moore Howard attests that writing and rhetoric majors can fuel new understandings of other programs through “curricular activism” (e.g., through committee work, program resource sharing, etc.) that changes institutional understandings of writing and writing instruction to be viewed as an “intellectual discipline” rather than service (42-43).

Given their emphasis on preparing students to enter and succeed in professional and civic contexts, writing and rhetoric majors have the potential to enhance the recognition and status of their departments and the field with external stakeholders, too. When one of us led the effort to propose a new major, we had to articulate and argue for the value of our field to university administrators but also to leaders of area businesses and organizations, who wrote letters of support. Through proposal efforts, program advisory boards, affiliations with national organizations (e.g., student chapters of RSA and FTC/STC), and other means, our majors can help us form a number of external relationships that bring new opportunities for students (e.g., internships/externships, scholarships, service-learning opportunities<sup>(1)</sup>) and help others value our expertise and unique contributions.

All of these affordances of majors—recognition, resources, and relationships—have the potential to advance our professional and disciplinary standing at our institutions, but they can also complicate disciplinarity on the local level. Majors are often configured as much from institutional and other local exigencies as from disciplinary visions.

### **Affordances of Field-Organizing Efforts**

Citing Margaret Strain, David Beard reminds us that one marker of a discipline is a body of histories and other scholarship about it, and we have certainly seen an uptick in scholarship about writing and rhetoric majors since the turn of the century (233). Some of these publications, like Giberson's chapter in *Writing Majors*, emphasize the inherent local-ness of majors, avoiding “macro-level questions about the ways our discipline is or should be reflected in this emerging thing called ‘the writing major’” (241). In his review of Giberson and Moriarty's *What We Are Becoming* collection, Hesse observes that a number of the chapters “are interesting at the levels of particle and even wave, but ultimately unfinished at the level of field. One sees cases made for specific elements or orientations but little over-arching analysis” (“Writing” 188). Despite its limited reach, such scholarship seems at least partly aimed at providing lessons, principles, and models that other programs and the larger field could learn from, however. The *Writing Majors* collection, for example, includes institutional data (e.g., number of students, rate of growth, and number of full time faculty) and curricular models that could be used to inform program proposals or revisions. Other

examples offer resources or principles for assessment (Meloncon), course design (*Coming of Age* CD-ROM), instructor preparation (Giberson et al. "Changing"), and other aspects of developing or enhancing writing and rhetoric majors of various types.

Perhaps foretelling a shift toward more collective, field-level visions of writing and rhetoric majors, other scholarship has more explicit consensus-building purposes, including calls for particular types of programs and emphases (e.g., Fleming; Yancey 2004; Jackson; Giberson and Moriarty) and calls for determining common defining characteristics (e.g., Tweedie, Courtney, and Self; McLeod; Balzhiser and McLeod). Echoing McLeod's afterword to *What We Are Becoming*, Balzhiser and McLeod propose "coming to consensus" around a common program name, gateway or core courses, a capstone course, and curricular balance (of history, theory, and research). Along with Balzhiser and McLeod, Weisser and Grobman wonder whether we should use more consistent naming conventions for writing and rhetoric majors (56). Sanford Tweedie, Jennifer Courtney, and William Self argue that a common introductory course for the major would provide "a locus for defining our discipline" (260). The CCCC Committee on the Writing Major was given a formal charge to among other things, develop a common set of learning outcomes for writing majors. The Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) is working on an initiative to develop an inventory and common language for learning outcomes for TPC programs, and curricular research has identified "core courses" found in different types of programs. Some programs and administrators in the field have begun to explore the possibility of commonly recognized credentials for teaching in upper-division programs, including majors.

### **Questioning Disciplinary Consensus**

Common frameworks for imaging what writing and rhetoric majors could aim for, emphasize, and look like have the potential to move them and the larger field farther along a pathway to consensus-driven disciplinarity. Beyond enabling us to identify and build on shared beliefs and approaches regarding our majors, moves toward consensus could enable us to represent what we know and how we prepare students with this knowledge in more unified ways to various constituencies, including students, administrators, policymakers, employers, and larger publics. Although Scott and Wardle's chapter does not advocate for a common set of threshold concepts for majors, the recently published *Naming What We Know* collection suggests one direction for articulating a shared commitment (at least for some in the field) to core disciplinary knowledge. Other academic disciplines have identified this through industry-based accreditation standards and the Degree Qualifications Profile and Tuning process. One potential danger of not "naming what we know" is having it named for us; another is the devaluing of our field-specific knowledge and expertise in favor of corporate-driven values and workforce preparation goals.

If they end up creating pressure for new and existing programs to align with broader commonalities, consensus-building efforts also have the potential to promote certain forms of majors and disciplinarity at the expense of others. We experienced this pressure when the editors of a collection rejected our argument for *techné*-connected majors because, as they explained, it did not share their evolving aim to advocate for a particular version of disciplinarity. Our equivocation about consensus building moves stems from several worries. First, we think that in some ways the field is still very much experimenting with its multiple identities through varied writing and rhetoric majors, identities informed by diverse intellectual threads and institutional contexts; consequently, we are inclined to agree with Giberson about suspending macro-level questions about how our majors should reflect disciplinarity in favor of "micro-level questions about how a version of the discipline could be constructed within the confines and constraints of their home institutions through the development of a unique, locally situated writing major" (241). Second, we think it is important to understand and honor differences among types of majors, and the reasons these differences exist. For example, as our earlier discussion of majors' growth suggested, TPC majors have followed a somewhat unique historical trajectory and have emerged from somewhat unique (sub)disciplinary visions and extra-disciplinary exigencies. Third, given that all program frameworks and structures have "blind spots" about the field's traditions and knowledge, we worry that frameworks and structures viewed as national models run the risk of exacerbating such blind spots, constraining diverse perspectives, and limiting the "available means of persuasion" (including means of intellectual identification) for the field. At the same time it has been gaining more disciplinary recognition, the field of RC has perhaps become even more diverse and interdisciplinary, adapting theories and methodologies from such traditions and areas as indigenous cultural rhetorics, disability studies, critical race theory, and critical geography to reimagine our knowledge building and teaching practices. Relatedly, we worry that some types of common frameworks based on declarative knowledge, such as learning outcomes and threshold concepts, might have the effect, however temporary, of fixing our visions of the major and field along particular disciplinary horizons. We share Chris Gallagher's concern that outcomes are typically fixed and disconnected from students' prior and present learning contexts and experiences ("Trouble" 50). In his observations about the prospect of a shared outcomes statement for writing majors, Hesse cautions that "Codifying the writing major or, even tracks within it, may have a colonizing function that effaces local features" and diverse configurations, though he also points out that the visibility of outcomes statements does not ensure that they are universally or monolithically used ("Writing," 183, 189). Finally,

we note that the professional and civic spheres that graduates of our majors enter do not follow the boundaries and features of academic disciplines, which is one reason some writing and rhetoric programs collaborate with other majors in preparing students for a diverse array of writing- and communication-intensive jobs.<sup>[2]</sup>

As our discussion of *techne* will elaborate, we favor mechanisms for identifying shared approaches to majors that enable a nimble responsiveness to local and broader exigencies, including institutional configurations and constraints (which might not make particular curricular structures or staffing models possible), trends in higher education (including the move toward inter/trans/multi disciplinary units), employer preferences (for the demonstration of cross-cutting competencies rather than a specific kind of degree), and a changing job market (in which some of the jobs for which we are preparing students do not yet exist). Following Giberson, we also agree that is useful to understand the reciprocal relationship of the major and field, *and* that is also useful to leave open the nature of this relationship given the varied ways majors are “becoming” (247).

In the next section, we explain and argue for adapting the classical rhetorical notion of *techne* as a way to understand our majors as incubators of knowledge-making capacity; to identify, learn from, and build around connections and distinctions across our majors; and to define our identity and contributions as a field. In addition to contextualizing our call in some of the field’s scholarship about *techne*, we unpack this concept and explain and illustrate its usefulness. Among other benefits, using *techne* as a framing mechanism for our understanding of the majors and the major-field relationship could enable us to identify shared values and approaches, build resources, articulate our expertise, and otherwise increase our agency while still honoring our field’s long and diverse history of knowledge-making and maintaining a flexible and responsive stance.

## **Techne as a Framework for Imagining Majors and the Major-Field Relationship**

### ***Dimensions and Examples of Techne***

*Techne* has been defined most commonly as productive knowledge, with Atwill distinguishing between knowledge-as-production and product and clarifying that this knowledge “is enacted through invention and intervention in contingent contexts (7, 48). In his praise of *techne* as craft knowledge, Robert Johnson similarly describes *techne* as knowledge enabling a capacity to act and the act of producing knowledge (“Craft” 678-679). Ryan Moeller and Ken McAllister explain that *techne* “is productive, but not of things. Its purview extends from conception to skill, from idea to articulation” (185)—a range of productivity that resonates with Atwill’s characterization of a system for both making and doing (53). Rejecting Carolyn Miller’s dichotomizing of *techne* and *praxis*, Moeller and McAllister instead turn to Aristotle as conceptualizing *techne* as enacted through *praxis* and governed by *phronesis*, or the practical wisdom that guides action or conduct rather than production (193). Johnson similarly merges *techne*, *praxis*, and *phronesis* in observing that “the telos of making also invokes action, the human activities that render things useful (or not) and, by virtue of action, invoke...practical wisdom and ethical action” (“Craft” 678).

These associations speak to the way *techne* merges theory and practice while being something different, too. The theoretical dimension of *techne* manifests in guiding principles, strategies, or tactics that “cannot be taught by explicit precepts or rules” (Atwill 58; see also Papillion). Because *techne* and the situations through which it is enacted are highly contingent, such principles are not fixed or normative. At the same time, however, they are general enough to be transferrable, leading Atwill to characterize *techne*’s productive knowledge as “stable enough to be taught and transferred but flexible enough to be adapted to particular situations and purposes” (48). These qualities connect but also distinguish *techne* from purely theoretical knowledge (*episteme*), and purely practical knowledge (knack).

In defining *techne* as a contingent art, Atwill further connects the term to cunning intelligence and timing, writing that “If *metis* is the intelligence identified with *techne*, then *kairos* is the time associated with *techne*” (57). As contingent and adaptable knowledge, *techne* is tactical and performance specific, drawing on *metis*, or the attunement to, preparation for, and resourceful negotiation of contingencies. As Debra Hawhee discusses, *metis* involves preparation and forethought, vigilant attentiveness, and opportunistic, resourceful responsiveness (47-49). In its *kairotic* dimension, *techne* involves knowing when as well as knowing how (Atwill 59). Along the same line, Atwill relates *techne* to *tyche*, or an unstable, uncertain point: “In the art of navigation [whether physical or rhetorical], *tyche* marks...both a limit of knowledge and an indeterminacy that may be exploited,” in part through *metis*-driven foresight (95).

In addition to the contingent enactment of guiding principles and cunning intelligence, *techne* has been characterized as a power or capacity (*dynamis*) (Atwill 48). Drawing on Aristotle, Johnson discusses this quality in seeking to shift the “focus of epistemology away from the artifact or system” and towards the “making” in which both rhetors and audience (or users) participate (*User-Centered* 52). Although *techne* doesn’t produce *things*, it does, if facilitated,

cultivate a transferrable, adaptable capacity for knowledge-making, as apposed to stable, declarative knowledge.

Instead of an end-point, *techne* is emergent, concerned with “coming into being,” as Atwill highlights from Aristotle (172). It comes into being through processes of invention and intervention. Atwill extends this last point to emphasize *techne*'s non-normative nature and transformative goal and function. At the same time that it must adapt to the boundaries and constraints of contingent situations, *techne*'s “power to discover” can “invent new paths” and “transgress and redefine” the boundaries of knowledge-making (48). In his discussion of Isocratean *techne*, Jeffrey Walker similarly points out its function to explore possibilities and open up “alternative positions” (134). In this way, *techne* enacts a provisional agency that resists determinate ends (Atwill 172).

As a learnable and transferable capacity, *techne* must be habituated through repeated mindful practice over time and across contexts. Such habituation involves learning how to prepare for, engage others in, and adjust acts of knowledge-making, and it also involves learning when to do so. Isocrates' education program of *logon techne* involved the interwoven habituation of theoretical study, “careful inculcation and imitation,” experimentation and practice, situated and creative performance, and deliberation with oneself and others (see Atwill 58) and the importance of repeated practice for such *techne* as remixing and arranging concepts and perceiving the “right time” (Papillion 150).

### ***Techne and Writing and Rhetoric Majors***

We are hardly the first to discuss vertical undergraduate writing and rhetoric curricula (including majors) in terms of *techne*, and many of our predecessors use this notion to call for specific visions for pedagogy, curricula, and majors—not our primary aim in this article. In their 1975 CCC article, George Tade, Gary Tate, and Jim Corder called for a decidedly interdisciplinary undergraduate major in rhetoric, one drawing from speech communication, psychology, journalism, and other fields that study and teach human discourse (20, 23). Alluding to *techne*, they describe their curricular model as helping students learn to “both *know that* and *know how*, acquiring information and the skills and arts of others...and generating [their] own capacities to use them” (21).

Over two decades later, David Fleming, in his *College English* article “Rhetoric as Course of Study,” called for reviving a vertical rhetoric curriculum “combining wide learning, practical experience, and flexible art, and devoted to the inculcation of discursive virtue” (172, 173, emphasis in original).<sup>[3]</sup> Brian Jackson similarly advocated for “endowing students with a capacity” that entails “*phronesis* (judgment), *dunamis* (power or ability), *techne* (art)” (185) rather than content domain knowledge or skills instruction.

Other scholars have invoked the notion of *techne* in arguing for specific capacities, including those involving new media. In *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies*, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes called on the field to redirect analytic and “how-to” approaches to new media and multimodality to approaches that account for multimodality's rich histories and develop a *techne* or productive knowledge about its unique logics and capabilities.

In technical communication, some scholars have turned to *techne* to frame arguments about curricula and pedagogy, in particular. Johnson's *User-Centered Technology* advanced a theory and pedagogy of user-centered design (as distinct from system-centered and user-friendly design) grounded in a notion of *techne* that re-centers its epistemic power in users' understanding and uptake (46, 57). Most the articles in the 2002 *Technical Communication Quarterly* (TCQ) special issue of “*Techne* and Technical Communication” explored a rehabilitated and robust notion of *techne* as an art rather than the a-contextual, instrumental enactment of a knack or skill. In asserting that *techne* is an epistemology that involves ingenuity, cunning or trickery, and unpredictability, for example, Moeller and McAllister encouraged a technical communication pedagogy of *techne* that positions students not as employees but as artisans and that makes room for “learning and playing with basic concepts, experimenting with them, and using one's imagination to form increasingly complex understandings of what is being practiced” (186).

Scholarship on *techne* lays the groundwork for additional uses in imagining writing and rhetoric majors and their relationship to the field and disciplinarity. Johnson, in particular, created a *techne*-centered heuristic for identifying a “recognizable disciplinary knowledge base” for writing studies that could inform our conceptions of writing majors, even as he argued that we are an interdisciplinary (683). We could adapt his heuristic to locate commonalities and differences across the aims and activities of knowledge-making in our majors, including the making of products, processes, selves, and cultures; such an enriched accounting, Johnson explains, would also entail greater attention to ethics—“what we are and what we value” (684). This approach would entail a careful, detailed accounting of what we teach. Because many TPC majors do not include rhetoric courses (Meloncon and Henschel), and because many other writing and rhetoric majors appear to relegate rhetoric to courses in history, theory, and criticism (Scott), identifying rhetorical *techne* will require us to examine course and assignment descriptions and, ideally,

demonstrations of students flexibly adapting their knowledge-making strategies across situations. In her exhaustive studies of TPC programs, Meloncon has begun this level of work by collaboratively coding syllabi and assignments and interviewing faculty for contextualized explanations.

We could postulate a number of *techne* recognizable, at least on a basic level, across the curricula of specific majors and similar types of them. In the broad-based Writing & Rhetoric B.A. in which one of us teaches, the three core courses introduce students to types of *techne* that subsequent learning experiences extend. In the core course Rhetoric & Civic Engagement, for example, we introduce students to and ask them to engage in civic engagement *techne*, such as rhetorical listening. Beyond merely declarative or procedural knowledge, these *techne* are types of productive knowledge guided by rhetorical principles, adapted in specific contexts, and building knowledge making capacity. Krista Ratcliffe explains rhetorical listening as a capacity, willing stance or disposition, and contextualized performance of “interpretative invention” that can, among other things, “locate identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*” (26). While it involves key principles, such as listening *with* rather than *for* intent, and a sequence of rhetorical moves, rhetorical listening’s more specific exigencies, tactics, functions, and effects are shaped out of its contextualized enactments, and students develop a capacity for adapting these and building new understandings through experiences across multiple contexts. Other, more advanced courses that take up and extend civic engagement *techne* in a somewhat scaffolded way include Writing across Difference and Writing for Social Change, in which students adapt rhetorical listening to new civic contexts and also build on it in rhetorical interactions with others through such related *techne* as intercultural inquiry (Flower, Long, and Higgins) and “interruptive invention” and “uncomfortable communion” (Fernheimer). Because the civic engagement *techne* embedded in this major can shape knowledge-making across a range of contexts, students are encouraged to develop them in co-curricular experiences (e.g., community-based research, student organization activities) and to explore how they might be useful in workplaces.

We could connect the *techne* we’ve been discussing to program-level learning outcomes, such as the ability to “flexibly and ethically adapt rhetorical and writing knowledge to the changing dynamics of civic environments” (from one co-author’s program) and “analyze rhetorical contexts to identify the relationships among language, information, and knowledge and their connection to social, cultural, historical, and economic issues” (from the other’s co-author’s program). Emphasizing *techne* rather than outcomes, however, enables a less end-focused, less fixed, and less linear way to collectively understand and explain our major’s distinguishing foci, and to connect learning experiences and build resources around these foci. *Techne*, Atwill reminds us, resist determinate end points and entail transferrable inventive capacities.

We could turn to *techne* in curriculum mapping of where and how students are introduced to, further engage, and demonstrate specific knowledge-making capacities, such as rhetorical listening or adapting to organizational contexts with multiple stakeholders as audiences. In order to define the relationships among related courses and coordinate augmenting learning experiences across the major, the faculty in one co-author’s major have shared some pedagogical resources on an online site and through teaching groups; this could be expanded and more usefully organized through a focus on *techne*.

Relatedly, a focus on *techne* could help us revise how we guide and assess student learning. Program e-portfolios, required by both co-authors’ majors, can afford students the opportunity to actively reflect on the growth of their knowledge-making abilities and describe how they have transferred and adapted knowledge in new contexts. Just the act of portfolio creation provides students the demonstrable means to illustrate their adeptness with *techne* by choosing specific examples of their work-in-context and how to present and explain them.

Defining our programs around *techne* could help us both distinguish them from and build relationships with other majors, enacting the type of institutional “curricular activism” Howard describes. Describing our courses and curriculum in terms of *techne* can give prospective students a more concrete picture of what to expect from learning activities in one major versus another; in its emphasis on navigating power dynamics and working toward social justice in everyday civic and professional interactions, the intercultural communication *techne* taught in one co-author’s Writing & Rhetoric major looks different from other programs’ approaches that focus on nation-centric cultural heuristics (see Ding and Savage for more on this distinction).

Identifying key *techne* shaping a major can also help us find points of pedagogical congruence with other programs and units in our universities, which can lead to such shared resources as webinars, symposia, and advising materials. In order to build program advising resources around what we might call the “meta-*techne*” of integrative learning—which involves developing the capacity to plan and connect learning experiences to and adapt knowledge across varied contexts—we have both built partnerships with university units that support students with experiential learning, undergraduate research, campus involvement, and career services. Finally, a program-level emphasis on *techne* can help us frame shared understandings of student learning with external partners, such as service-learning partners and external advisory boards. For instance, the Writing for Social Change course previously mentioned



works with area nonprofit organizations and grassroots networks to teach students *techne* of community organizing, such as Marshall Ganz's *techne* around "telling your public story." Many TPC majors have strong working relationships with local chapters of the Society for Technical Communication, which provides students with opportunities to learn about usability, content management, and other relevant *techne*, in part through the consistent integration of service-learning and client-based projects across the curriculum.

Beyond their usefulness for our individual programs in specific institutional contexts, *techne* can also provide the larger field an alternative way to categorize, create or revise, share resources around, and advocate for our majors. Efforts to define and align using common outcomes or threshold concepts, types of writing, career tracks, curricular structures (e.g., gateway and/or core courses), and course titles might be missing key elements that can distinguish and connect what and how students are learning and who they are becoming in our majors. To illustrate, a number of TPC majors (along with other types) include courses that focus on digital writing. Such courses take a number of names, such as Digital Writing, Digital Rhetoric, Multimedia Writing, and Writing across Media. Focusing on *techne* in course and assignment descriptions could enable us to identify common foci—such as using digital media and technologies to create texts for networked environments. Take for example, the following three course descriptions, the first for a Digital Writing course and other two for Digital Rhetoric courses:

1. "This course introduces students to the history of digital culture and examines current scholarship on technology and rhetoric. Students will use a variety of tools and platforms to explore what it means to write 'digitally,' including the composition of image, sound, motion, video, as well as text. The application of these tools will require writers to develop a rhetorical awareness to choose those best suited for different projects and audiences." (York College of Pennsylvania)
2. "This course focuses on the social, political, economic, and ethical dimensions in which people participate in digital spaces. We explore various genres, including social medial tools, websites, mobile apps, and applications, and learn about participatory culture. Students will create professional identities, learn how to assess digital genres, and trace activity across the social web." (Michigan State University)
3. "[This course] introduces the rhetoric of digital design in a variety of contexts. Students learn what makes for effective static and interactive digital designs and practice analyzing and creating digital designs. Students will compose technical documents within diverse traditions, which include digital rhetoric, mixed media, and visual rhetoric." (James Madison University)

Although we are looking at descriptions of courses rather than specific assignments and learning activities, we can still begin to discern connected and distinguishing *techne*, which in these cases move beyond the mastery of skills associated with tools or technologies of the "digital." As part of learning to digitally compose for online environments, the three courses share emphases on rhetorical analysis, theory, and practice. This *techne*-based merging of theory and practice enables students to learn and adapt rhetorical notions and principles (e.g., related to audience, contextual constraints, *kairos*) to new knowledge-making enterprises. Moreover, the courses' explicit connection to larger contextual issues of production would encourage students to extend their consideration of how to transfer and adapt knowledge. Although such course descriptions are limited lenses into pedagogies, it is clear that these courses are enacting a common *techne*, albeit from slightly different angles.

Based on each program's distinctive mission, institutional positioning, faculty expertise, student needs, and other contextual features and exigencies, however, the three courses also differ in their approaches to digital writing/rhetoric *techne*. The first two courses, for example, emphasize historical and cultural awareness of digital composing, with the second course also including an emphasis on how digital texts shape professional identities. The first and third courses further emphasize the hands-on creation of multimedia texts, with the third course further delineating a focus on the design of technical documents. In mentioning the tracking of digital texts and activities across the Web, the second course also suggests an emphasis on planning for what happens to texts through their circulation and uptake.

The differences in the course descriptions, though slight, point to important distinctions and nuances of courses within different types of majors. For example, the third course description, from James Madison University, is more specifically focused on production and includes a reference to technical documents. That is because their degree—Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication—is more technically oriented (in both production and specialized content courses). On the other hand, both Michigan State and York College of Pennsylvania offer degrees titled Professional Writing. Thus, the *techne* emphasis in the Professional Writing programs entails a broader, critique orientation than James Madison's course. It is also interesting to note that the Michigan State course is a required course within the curriculum, signifying that the program views "digital rhetoric" as a required skill for students to have. Since *techne* are dynamic and adaptable, the fact that the courses share similarities and differences provides us the opportunity to address our local level concerns, while still keeping an eye on field-level trends.

In addition to better understanding the range of our majors and their field-shaping characteristics, identifying differences in *techne* as seen in courses and majors can help us value and learn from our differences, giving us a fuller appreciation of how RC is enacted in undergraduate education. This kind of attention to *techne* can help identify field-level trends and distinctions, as well as possibilities for shared resources for creating, revising, delivering, and assessing majors. In contrast to aligning and normalizing our field's majors around fixed outcomes or narrow competencies, however, the approach we are calling for would allow for more context-specific, dynamic, and capacious forms of knowledge-making, that is, invoking our own sense of *techne*.

We already have a rich history of the field's knowledge-making efforts around the creation of majors, but we might supplement our shared historical lessons, program-building principles, and curricular designs with more specific resource building and sharing efforts grounded in students' knowledge making activities. *Techne* are contingent, adaptive, and non-normative, and so might be our field-level resource building, avoiding models or "best practices" that encourage alignment over adaptation. Identifying and documenting common *techne* but also different combinations and inflections of them could also enable us as a field to explain to those outside of the field the distinctive but also contextually tailored and diverse contributions of our majors.

In place of competencies, at least the narrow articulations of them by competency-based education (CBE) efforts (Gallagher, "Disrupting" 20-21), we might frame the goals and unique approaches and contributions of our programs and discipline in terms of *techne*. As we suggested earlier, using *techne* as a framework for understanding and articulating what we know, value, and develop in students can help our field and discipline navigate uncertain and potentially problematic exigencies facing higher education, such as renewed and deep-pocketed support for CBE and technology-driven forms of adaptive learning. In discussing the field's visions of writing majors, Tony Scott cautions us to not look past and replicate the managerial values, institutional working conditions, labor hierarchies, and apolitical modes of production that "already characterize writing education" in other types of programs (82).

Although *techne* might at first glance appear to be the same as competencies, they are also transferrable capacities, emergent enactments of knowledge, and guides for ethical action. As such, *techne* are not fixed levels of mastery that can be easily a-contextually learned and demonstrated but are developed through carefully guided habituation that involves social, situated learning (Gallagher, "Disrupting" 21).

As a framework for imaging and valuing what our majors inculcate and how this relates to the identity, recognition, and valuing of our field or discipline, *techne* have the following advantages:

- They can enable us to identify and build resources (for designing programs, articulating our value, etc.) around new points of connection across writing and rhetoric majors; this could, in turn, inform how we see the field's distinctiveness and boundaries, but in a way that encourages local variations and adaptations of what we share;
- They can similarly enable us to identify points of connection with those outside our discipline, both in the academy and beyond, but in a way that highlights the field's expertise and unique contributions;
- They can help us nimbly and persuasively respond to outside pressures to encapsulate and measure student learning in particular ways;
- They can help us maintain a stance of becoming, a sense of openness and contingency in who we are as a field and/or discipline and who we help students become;
- They can provide a point of reference for students to better describe the work they do, the work they want to do, and what they gained from our programs in a language easier to access than the academic language of learning outcomes.

## Conclusion: Moving forward with *Techne*

As context-dependent, contingent, non-normative, emergent, and adaptive forms of knowledge-making, *techne* offer us a unique lens through which to consider our majors and their mutually influential relationship with the larger field. Whether or not *techne*-informed efforts to enhance our field's recognition, resources, and relationships through our majors end up *advancing* disciplinarity in particular ways, they certainly raise valuable questions about it. Such questions include "How do, and how might, our majors reflect our larger disciplinary identities and self-understandings?" "To what extent should we strategically build consensus around our majors and disciplinary identities in order to ensure our security and agency as RC specialists?" and "How can the *techne* embedded in our majors inform our epistemological participation in local and national, internal and external conversations about writing and rhetoric in a way that recognizes our disciplinary *arête* or unique excellence?" Charles Bazerman has encouraged the field to take a more active role in telling the "large, important, and multi-dimensional story of writing," and the *techne* that scaffold our writing majors provide us with concrete and robust examples of what we value,

teach, and produce.

While they can inform efforts to advance disciplinarity, *techné*, Walker explains, do not constitute a discipline, but a “disciplined ‘art’ or methodology” (Walker 26). Although we see a contingent utility in pointing to our majors as markers of disciplinary vision and status, we think the range of writing and rhetoric majors should continue to reflect and shape a *field* with overlapping, somewhat porous, and moving boundaries rather than a *discipline* with more defined ones (though this field could include a number of discernable but also overlapping subfields). To adapt Hesse’s consideration, we hope the field will “live a good while with multiplicity and diversity in configuring departments and majors” (189), and we also hope the field will leverage this diversity in remaining open about whether and how we advance a turn to disciplinarity around our writing and rhetoric majors.

## Notes

1. Some such opportunities lend themselves to more inter- or extra-disciplinary understandings of what we teach students. ([Return to text.](#))
2. In surveying alumni of their professional writing major, Weisser and Grobman found that although these graduates shared a strong sense of professionalism and the centrality of writing to their professional lives, they did not see themselves as part of a “profession of writing” (54-55). ([Return to text.](#))
3. Although Fleming’s vision was critiqued by some as being impractical (O’Neill et al.), subsequently formed majors (e.g., at Texas, DePaul) have embedded pre-professional preparation within a rhetorically oriented curriculum. ([Return to text.](#))

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