



Managing Digital Technologies in Writing Programs: Writing Program Technologists & Invisible Service

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Abstract

As institutions that include Writing Studies (Rhetoric and Composition, Business, Technical and Professional Writing) in their curriculum at various levels increasingly move to include more digital technology infrastructural support for classes, faculty who have scholarly expertise in various technologies are often being called upon, through either necessity to complete their own agendas or because of additional departmental and college needs, to do service work beyond required committee work. Oftentimes, this work is invisible.

This article reports the results on interviews collected from 23 faculty members regarding types of technologically-related service being done. It discusses the changing nature of the types of service done by faculty we term Writing Program Technologists (WPTs). It also discusses the connections between shifts in technology and infrastructure at various institutions and the varying ways that compensation of the WPT occurs depending upon personal as well as institutional needs, desires, and constraints. Making visible this often invisible labor can provide information for faculty who are trying to develop arguments for more equitable compensation for this work that in terms of time expended and intellectual labor involved goes beyond other forms of service expectations.

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With the advent of cheaper and more widely distributed digital technologies available for the production of writing over the past 30 years, it is inevitable that arguments have been made, and generally accepted, that students must be utilizing at least some of the basic tools like word processing for composition (Haas, 1996). Additional pushes from scholars like Cheryl E. Ball and James Kalmbach (2010), Anne Wysocki (2004), and Cynthia L. Selfe (2007) have contended that as multimodal communication that mixes linguistic, visual, audio, and interactive components occurs across industries and workplaces, the field should also prepare students for rhetorically sound composing using far more than just the linguistic mode. However, the infrastructure for doing all of this work from basic access to hardware capable of running word processing to more specialized applications such as image and video editing must be maintained. And frequently, arguments must be structured for their place in labs and virtual portals that students and Writing Studies Faculty can access. As institutions that include Writing Studies (Rhetoric and Composition, Business, Technical and Professional Writing) in their curriculum at various levels increasingly move to include more digital technology infrastructural support for classes, faculty who have scholarly expertise in various technologies are often being called upon, through either necessity to complete their own agendas or because of additional departmental and

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college needs, to do service work that goes beyond regular amounts of committee work. Oftentimes this work is invisible.

The labor of the faculty members that we in this article, lacking another descriptor, call Writing Program Technologist (WPT)² often goes unseen despite its appearance upon faculty activity sheets and vitas because those who do not perform such labor are frequently unaware of the time and intellectual work required to do it, the fact that such labor is often a moving target that is never truly done and requires continual learning, and because of the widely accepted rhetoric surrounding the technology discussed in the following section. The 1998 CCCC Promotion and Tenure Guidelines for Work with Technology explicitly discusses the value of technological work done by faculty who have expertise in that area that extends beyond the scholarly into the practical. Specifically the guidelines discuss the committee work that writing studies scholars with this expertise might be asked to do. The 2015 update to the CCCC Promotion and Tenure Guidelines for Work with Technology includes a few more examples of service, mostly focused on developing and maintaining digital spaces. Neither document, in either the teaching or service sections, explicitly articulate the large amount of service associated with teaching in digital spaces like running department instructional computer spaces, creating professional development workshops, or serving on department and/or institutional instructional technology committees. Although some scholars have identified and acknowledge the critical (Rice, 2007; Selfe, 2005) and time consuming work associated with supporting digital infrastructure in writing programs (McKee & DeVoss, 2013), Writing Studies is lacking in research about the specifics regarding the nature of this labor despite its growing presence in many departments.

The study reported upon here seeks to remedy this gap. It includes the technology labor of faculty including what duties are assigned and which are not but are products of unspoken expectations. As narratives are also often a way of understanding the way that such labor practices are framed and valued, we conducted interviews with various faculty members involved in doing this work that shed light on some of the underlying rationales for expectations and compensation at various institutions. The study focused on the following questions:

- What type of technology related service are “technologically knowledgeable” faculty in English or Writing Studies departments doing?
- How is this service valued and/or compensated?
- How is this work articulated by faculty and administration?

In this article, we report on the results on interviews collected from 23 faculty members from different institutions between the early summer and early fall of 2012. Through the course of this article, we will discuss how the data shaped our understanding both of questions regarding types of service being done as well as our discoveries of the changing nature of the types of service done by Writing Program Technologists (WPTs). We will also discuss the connections between shifts in technology and infrastructure at various institutions and the varying ways that compensation of the WPT occurs depending upon personal as well as institutional needs, desires, and constraints. It is our intent that by making visible this often invisible labor, we can provide information for faculty who are trying to develop arguments for more equitable compensation for this work that in terms of time expended and intellectual labor involved that often goes beyond the traditional expectations for time spent on service. We hope that they might use this descriptive data about service, labor, and compensation in such arguments.

1. Assumptions about Digital Technologies

Cultural beliefs and practices surrounding working technologies, especially digital technologies, greatly impact how individuals are acknowledged for such work.

1.1. Technologies are Desirable, Expedient, and Neutral

Some of the fundamental attitudes toward the work of WPTs correlates to widely held cultural beliefs regarding technology, especially digital technologies. Technology writ large, but particularly digital technology, creates an ethos of non-ethos (Miller, 2004). Expert systems create an ethos of expertise when work is “handed over” to the technology

² We considered a number of different terms, but given its similarity to Writing Program Administrator and the fact that we see so many alignments in the intellectual history of the work done by each, we settled on Writing Program Technologist.

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