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# Engineering Communication as an Area of Specialization and a Fundamentally Interdisciplinary Domain: What We Can Learn from Fred Newton Scott

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*Dr. Scott's conception of rhetoric was catholic in the extreme; it was limited only by the range of his own personal interests, which really means that it was not limited at all.*

--Lewis Strauss, *Michigan Alumnus* (1930)

## Introduction: The Communication Conundrum in Engineering Education

The importance of communication in engineering practice and the communication deficits of engineering graduates are enduring themes in engineering education. Perhaps more significantly, communication is the only domain in which engineering experts are consistently (if grudgingly) willing to yield space in the curriculum. Although there are ample intellectual resources available for designing and delivering communication instruction to engineering students, these resources have yet to be deployed in a systematic way—and most engineering faculty and administrators (the people who usually make decisions about communication instruction for engineers) appear to be unaware of the existence of those resources.

The vacuum produced by this knowledge gap has been filled by principles derived by implication from the educational experiences of administrators and communication instructors and by conventional wisdom including ideas like these:

- writing is a linear process in which ideas are transcribed into words;
- style and content are distinct from each other;
- academic writing is a transferable skill that can be developed in the freshman year and need not be taught again;
- teaching grammar and mechanics and correcting errors in student papers are effective pedagogical strategies;
- performance (having students write or speak in a course) is the same thing as communication instruction;
- courses in composition for engineers, sometimes referred to as Engineering English, offer remedial, watered-down forms of instruction; and
- instructors who teach writing to engineering students view their work as drudgery to be endured until better opportunities (i.e., opportunities to teach literature) come along.

Some of these misconceptions are rooted in the competition between literary studies and composition-rhetoric as English established itself as a university subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Others originated in the processes by which technical writing evolved as a component of engineering education. In any case, getting past these conceptual

roadblocks is essential if we are to deepen and broaden the conception of communication instruction for engineering students. To achieve this goal, we need a view of communication that is both humanistic and functional— humanistic because it is grounded in fundamental notions about human beings, their mental activities, and their social interactions, functional in the sense of being used for specific purposes. This paper argues that the scholarship of Fred Newton Scott (1860-1931), professor of English and rhetoric at the University of Michigan, provides such a view.

## A Biographical Sketch of Fred Newton Scott

Scott received his PhD in English from the University of Michigan, joined the faculty of the Department of English in 1889 after a two-year stint as a newspaper editor, and established a separate Department of Rhetoric in 1903. That department offered innovative instruction in composition for undergraduates, journalism courses, and graduate courses in the teaching of composition and rhetoric. To my knowledge, his was the first graduate program in what we today would call rhetoric and composition studies. In any case, the theoretical and pedagogical approaches imparted through his graduate program bear remarkable resemblance to those used in rhetoric and composition studies today.

Although Scott would not have described himself as an engineering educator, he was the driving force behind the establishment of the Department of English in the School of Engineering at the University of Michigan and trained many of the early faculty, including Lewis Strauss, who served as the department's first chair. Although its utility is not limited to engineering, Scott's approach to composition pedagogy is well-suited to engineering education and holds promise for getting beyond narrow and superficial conceptions of communication. The organizing idea behind his approach is a *functional* conception of language based on the various ways language functions in human experience and the social, physiological, and psychological process underlying those functions. In other words, it emphasizes what language *does* and *how* it does those things. At the individual level, those functions are self-exploration, self-expression, and discovery. For groups, language functions as a means for establishing the shared understanding required for collaborating to define and achieve shared goals.

The next two sections of the paper provide a brief history of English instruction in higher education generally and in engineering in particular. This historical background provides a context for understanding the problems Scott responded to, reveals the factors that contributed to his success, and helps explain why he is an obscure figure today. The final section of the paper draws on a few publications in which Scott's persona comes through most clearly to sketch a preliminary portrait of his approach articulated in terms that make sense today.

## A Historical Perspective on the Development of English as a University Subject

Given the omnipresence of English in American universities, it is surprising that English did not become a university subject until the latter part of the nineteenth century. After the passing of the Morrill Act of 1862 and the establishment of land grant colleges during and after the Civil War, college enrollments dramatically increased in the United States. The traditional models of

developing communication capability embraced by the earliest American universities could not be easily scaled for larger numbers of students who varied widely in their preparation for communication instruction in college. Freshman composition (also called Freshman English) emerged as the dominant model for developing transferable writing skills students could use throughout their college careers. This model had two weaknesses whose consequences became clear over time. First, it was established in a remedial mode, that is, based on the assumption that students had not been prepared adequately by the secondary schools from which they had graduated. Second, it responded to a poorly defined set of problems and had no established pedagogical strategies. The strategies used to teach Latin, which emphasized grammar and abstract principles of usage, seemed the most suitable of the available models. Many of the complaints of composition teachers and students can be traced back to these early decisions. It was not until about 100 years later (the 1970s) that composition studies began developing research that could inform instruction.

In a parallel process that created tensions, English departments distanced themselves from the teaching of composition and claimed literature, including literary history, criticism, and philology, as the distinctive intellectual territory of their discipline. In the meantime, the problems posed by teaching composition in college were experienced particularly acutely in engineering schools and colleges. As Teresa Kynell (1996) notes in *Writing in a Mileu of Utility: The Move to Technical Communication in American Engineering Programs 1850-1950,* awareness of the communication deficits of graduating engineers and attempts to remedy them have existed since preparation for engineering moved from an apprenticeship model to a fouryear university curriculum in the 1850s. Kynell's work, like much scholarship on the history of technical communication, seeks to establish technical and professional communication as an academic *discipline.* It also provides a better understanding of the problems teachers of engineering communication face today.

The Department of English established in the School of Engineering at Michigan was part of a nationwide movement to offer communication instruction adapted to the needs and interests of engineers but is of particular interest because of the role Scott and the graduate students he trained played in what came to be known as Engineering English. In its original form, English for engineers was a capacious enterprise that encompassed but went far beyond developing the ability to communicate. It was also designed to impart an understanding of the role of engineers in society and provide insight into enduring themes in human experience as reflected in the humanities and social sciences. Over time, that broad conception evolved into the narrowly conceived, vaguely defined, negatively perceived but widely accepted concept of technical writing, typically outsourced from engineering to teachers in Departments of English who were "poorly trained to teach it and textbooks struggling to fill in the gaps" (Kynell, p. 88).

The negative consequences of this reductive approach emerge in the historical narrative offered by Adams in *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges* (1996). Her assessment is that courses in "technical and business writing, offered through journalism and English departments. . . .were not viewed as preparation for an [academic career in English] and. . . were not staffed by specialists, [so] these courses did not obtain the academic standing given to the new offerings in journalism and creative writing" (pp. 124-125). She also charts the

process by which communication instruction in engineering was reduced to "practical writing [because] many [engineering] professionals and teachers were willing to accept the concept of practical writing instruction for advanced students, *even if they were not willing to make room for more liberal arts courses"* [emphasis added] (p. 129). In other words, focusing on technical writing was a way of ostensibly meeting the need to develop communication skills without connecting communication to humanistic learning or devoting additional curricular space to nontechnical subjects. This separation meant that technical writing was treated as (and typically was) a skills-developing rather than a humanistic subject. Scott's approach reveals that this need not be the case.

## It Helps to Be Interested in Everything: Scott as a Polymath

Scott exercised influence partly because of personal qualities he possessed, but also via his numerous publications (see the appendix for a complete list), extensive collaborations with current and former graduate students, and engagement with a wide range of professional organizations. He also exerted influence in the professional societies that emerged as English was becoming a university subject. Specifically, Scott was a founding member of the National Council of Teachers of English and elected as its first and third presidents. He also served as the third president of the Modern Language Association.

As the quotation that begins this paper suggests, Scott was a curious person who possessed many different kinds of academic expertise and was viewed by his students as a heroic figure. To many observers, he would likely appear an anomaly in academia generally as well as in the academic domains he drew on and contributed to. He is more appropriately described as a polymath, following the definition established in Peter Burke's *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag* (2020): "an individual who has mastered several disciplines" (p. 2). As Burke sees it, polymaths'

> distinctive contribution to the history of knowledge is to see connections between fields that have been separated and to notice what specialists in a given discipline, the insiders, have failed to see. In this respect their role resembles that of scholars who leave their native country, whether as exiles or expatriates, for a place with a different culture of knowledge. (p. 5)

The characterizations of Scott in Donald and Patricia's Stewart's *The Life and Legacy of Fred Newton Scott* (1997) align closely with Burke's descriptions of polymaths. They describe Scott as a Renaissance man and frame their biography as: "the story of a man whose vision of education extended beyond the confines of his own professional career in rhetoric. He saw a world that integrated all areas of human knowledge. . . .[and] owned a conceptual scheme that embraced the whole of rhetoric, giving meaning to all the bits and pieces upon which his contemporaries focused" (pp. 1-2). Their comprehensive biography reveals many of the experiences that contributed to the breadth and depth of his knowledge, for example, his work as an assistant librarian tasked with cataloguing the items in a large library on political economy. Those experiences put him in a position to meet one of the most important tasks polymaths take

on, incorporating "new information into intellectual systems, old and new, without those systems breaking apart" (Burke, p. 78).

Burke's account of the rising and falling fortunes of polymaths helps us understand why the Department of Rhetoric that Scott founded was merged into the Department of English only thirteen years after it was established: the growing specialization of the discipline of English in comparison with the rhetoric. Burke also offers an explanation for Scott's obscurity as a historical figure*:* "History. . .is unkind to polymaths. Some are forgotten while many are squashed into a category we can recognize" (p. 1).

Scott's Approach to the Teaching of Composition as Reflected in His Publications

Like polymaths generally, Scott is a difficult subject because of the diversity and volume (over 120) of his publications. Many of them are opinion pieces that address issues in the teaching of composition, often with a humorous approach, for example "The Missing Pronoun" (1885), "The Most Fundamental Differentia of Poetry and Prose" (1904), "A Brief Catechism on Textbooks in English" (1911), and "Hatred of Inoffensive Words" (1912). There are eight edited volumes of *Contributions to Rhetorical Theory*, more than ten brochures and leaflets of inspiration and practical advice to teachers of English, textbooks designed to be used in composition courses (often co-authored with former students), book reviews (approximately 20 in number), and six editions of works that are resources for teaching and research in composition but not easily recognized as resources for teachers of English. The evidence presented below is drawn from two publications that provide insight into his persona and intellectual approach: (1) *Aphorisms for Teachers of English* and *The Class Hour in English* (1905), a brochure directed to practicing teachers of English, and (2) the preface and introduction to a reissued edition of *Principles of Success in Literature* by George Lewes (1891). Both reflect what might be called a success orientation to the teaching of composition: by virtue of being human, students have the capacity and motivation to develop the ability to use language. Moreover, there are identifiable principles of successful composition, and the teacher's role is to call attention to those principles and guide students in using them.

*Aphorisms*, as the title suggests, is a collection of pithy statements in which Scott expresses his convictions about the teaching of composition with particular emphasis on the damage that can be done by misguided approaches and the empowerment and satisfaction that can result from good teaching. For example, English badly taught results in "feelings of abnormality. . .exhaustion, powerlessness, and failure," whereas English properly taught generates "feelings of health, power, sanity and hope" (pp. 3-4). One consistent, implicit theme is that teachers should critically examine traditional practices in the teaching of composition, continue to use strategies that worked well, and expand our notions of our options. In other words, we have choices and should make them intentionally. We can choose "enthusiasm for what is commendable" and offer specific suggestions for improving writing rather than scolding or preaching. We can approach the grading of student work as sawing "wood with a rusty saw," "riding a bicycle in a strong head-wind," or "carrying a hod of brick up an endless ladder on a broiling hot day" (p. 14), or we can "look for signs of growing taste" (p. 15) and the development of a distinctive voice.

The three aphorisms discussed below capture some—though certainly not all—of those convictions.

1. "The test of all good teaching is growth of pupils' characters."

   In other words, the goal of all teaching is human development, but the teaching of composition is distinctively conducive to development. It involves both the development of innate abilities, such as the ability to use language, and the development of character, understood as habitual behaviors. The qualities of sound composition have correlates in virtues: unity-integrity; accuracy-honesty; method-respect for the law and principles that maintain social order; selection-wisdom and judgement, restraint and temperance. The virtues don't need to be taught explicitly. They will develop as "constructive tendencies" through guided practice in a collaborative setting. The teacher's reward is watching pupils develop "a growing sense for the power of the mother tongue" (p. 4).

2. "The English teacher's best asset is sympathy."

   Sympathy manifests in different ways, but authentic interest in and personal knowledge of students are probably the most important because "There is no more powerful stimulus to good composition than the feeling that some one sympathizes and comprehends and wants to see" (p. 7). Other important qualities in teachers of English include "openness of mind and sensitiveness of intelligence," tolerance, patience, energy, enthusiasm, a "happy disposition, [and] a warm heart and a capacity for humor" (p. 6). These qualities plus breadth of experience and knowledge increase the teacher's capacity for being genuinely interested in topics that pique students' curiosity.

   Considered together, these aphorisms capture one of the most important implicit themes in Scott's publications: to become a better communicator (or teacher) is to become a better person, in terms of both individual traits and power to act effectively in the world.

3. "Composition is no exceptional, spasmodic act confined to festivals and solemn days."

   Children are fascinated by the acquisition and use of language, have apparently unlimited energy for practicing it, and find both "amusement and joy" (p. 12) in it. Unless they are repressed by bad teaching, such as drills and the correction of errors, these instincts are still possessed by older students. When Scott asserts that composition "is a natural function going on incessantly in all normally constituted minds" (p. 13), he is in essence saying that the ability to compose is not reserved for a talented few. Students have been engaged in the mental processes involved in composition all along, though they didn't recognize them as such.

The edition of George Henry Lewes' *Principles of Success in Literature* that Scott published in 1894 was an early example of Scott's practice of reissuing works that are resources for teaching and research in composition but not well known or easily recognized as resources for teachers of English. The preface and introduction that Scott authored explain how and why he found this and

books like it useful in teaching composition. He also provides biographical and historical context that make the text more meaningful and accessible to readers than it would be otherwise. It provides a sketch of his teaching method and insight into the kinds of scholarship Scott found particularly valuable. The traits he describes as he traces Lewes' development as a scholar and thinker are those often ascribed to him by his students. He casts himself "as a teacher of composition and literary criticism" who supplements the texts that would typically be used in courses on these subjects with "various sources of information upon psychology, logic, language, and aesthetics." His criteria for selecting such works are they should be "suggestive and inspiring" without exposing students to "sentimentalizing about the glories of literature" (p. 3).

What he calls a "seminary method" and we today would call a "seminar" is presented as a superior alternative to recitations in which students demonstrate their knowledge of the content of a reading. The structure he follows is familiar, but the underlying rationale and the ultimate goal distinguish his approach. He sees reading and discussion as food for independent thought. In this method the students

- carefully read a work or portion of a work
- discuss important points with their instructor and classmates to the extent that time allows
- in the process, discover their own interests as they relate to the reading
- receive guidance from the instructor for "other lines of reading. . . .In this way the student will be led to undertake original research, and ultimately, perhaps, to do a little independent thinking for himself" (pp. 3-4)

In other words, the method is designed to draw students' attention to new ideas and information. Careful reading and discussion with others help students deepen their comprehension of the material and discover things that pique their curiosity. An instructor who has broad interests and knowledge ("is interested in everything") makes connections to additional readings that will allow the student to pursue the topic independently, with the eventual goal of capturing what they discover in writing or conveying it orally in class. Although he does not explicitly describe it as such, the seminary method is a strategy for developing the capacity and the motivation to do research.

The introduction to *Principles of Success* also illustrates the complementarity of the humanistic and functional approaches. Based on his reading of Lewes, Scott describes the function of literature (broadly defined to include non-fiction and scientific writing) as "the record of all that is worthiest in human thought, the expression in language of those feelings and speculations which men hold the dearest and the truest" (p. 13). Scott accepts Lewes' argument that there are "laws that give literary power its efficiency, which govern, that is to say, the relation of the successful author to his public" (p. 13). Scott admires the ways Lewes insists "the mind be studied not only as an individual but as a unit in the social organism" (p. 11) and the fact that Lewes looks at "literature successively from three points of view, the intellectual, the ethical, and the aesthetic" (p. 13). In "literature in the true sense," all three must be addressed simultaneously and in relation to each other (p. 13). Scott sees in Lewes' work an approach to literary criticism. . .based on "the eternal principles of the human mind" (p. 15). Once these principles have been

articulated, they provide a rational basis for both instruction and assessing the effectiveness of texts.

## Conclusion and Further Work

From the perspective that Scott takes, teaching composition to engineering students (or any other students not majoring in English) ceases to be a conundrum or drudgery and is instead an area of specialization that draws on knowledge from many disciplines. This perspective corrects for misperceptions of communication instruction and instructors, particularly the notions that anyone who can write well can teach writing and that writing is a simple process of transcription based on rigid rules and abstract principles. He also portrays the deep satisfactions that come from both learning and teaching composition. The humanistic-functional view of language makes way for the teaching of composition to be a humanistic subject in additional to providing instruction of obvious practical value.

The analysis presented in this paper only scratches the surface of the philosophes of composition and of teaching that emerge from Scott's scholarship. The conclusions I have drawn are necessarily interpretive and provisional because the principles that make up those philosophies are rarely stated explicitly and must be inferred from publications that have a variety of purposes and topics. The eclectic nature of his approach means that no single publication can be considered truly representative of his thinking. For example, publications not discussed here such as "The Genesis of Speech" (address to the Modern Language Association in 1907) and *Paragraph Writing* (co-authored with Joseph Denney in 1891) reflect Scott's knowledge of the deep structure and physical, psychological, and social processes underlying the development and use of language. Nonetheless, the approach and principles unearthed so far suggest that the effort required to further articulate them will be well spent.

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Appendix: "Works by Fred Newton Scott"

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