

**Techniques of Textual Coordination: An Activity-Based Study of a
Mediated Techne of Technical Writing**

by

Shaun P. Slattery, Jr.

An Abstract of a Thesis Submitted to the Graduate

Faculty of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major Subject: Communication and Rhetoric

The original of the complete thesis is on file
In the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Library

Examining Committee:

Dr. Cheryl Geisler, Thesis Adviser

Dr. Carolyn R. Miller, Member

Dr. C. Lee Odell, Member

Dr. James Zappen, Member

Dr. William Hart-Davidson, Member

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Troy, New York

November, 2006
(For Graduation December, 2006)

ABSTRACT

Writing in the modern workplace occurs in complex information environments, shaped by an information-based economy, distributed labor practices, and the ubiquity of the electronic documents and computer-mediated communication. Recent work in the related fields of composition studies, professional and technical writing, and human-computer interaction has begun to examine the nature of such mediated writing. In such environments, writers' composition processes involve a significant material component acknowledged by few studies of writing to date. Writers in these environments must coordinate a multitude of mediating artifacts – numerous related texts and the information technologies necessary to produce, use, and distribute them – toward the production of new documents. To learn how writers manage this compound mediation (Spinuzzi, 2001) while composing, I interviewed and observed a small group of technical writers. Recorded observations were analyzed to identify techniques of mediation they employ to control local conditions. This control is important because, according to Clay Spinuzzi's (2003) description of "systematic destabilization," problems at the level of operation disrupt higher-order goals. These composing processes, dubbed "textual coordination," both shape and are shaped by local material conditions and are complicated by the nature and number of texts used. Understanding how writers manage numerous mediating artifacts begins to account for and describe the role of materiality in a way that responds to the changed nature of workplace writing. This study examines these writers' processes from using cultural-historical activity theory because of its usefulness in examining mediation at multiple levels of activity, from simple manual operations to the larger, situated activity of the workplace. The rhetorical concept of *techne* is also used to analyze writers' processes because of its concept of controlling chance and its focus on articulateable, and thus teachable, skill. The result of this study is a theory of "mediated *techne*" – an art of managing artifacts in the act of composing.