Introduction to Effective Teaching of Technical Communication

Michael J. Klein
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

Exigency for a New Collection

Katherine Staples and Cezar M. Ornatowski's *Foundations for Teaching Technical Communication* (1997) has served and still serves as an entry point into the discipline for many students. Because of its influence, *Foundations* also serves as a conceptual starting point for this collection. However, much has changed in the past 24 years: the institutional structures that support and house technical communication programs, the social and technical contexts in which technical communicators do their work, and the discourse communities technical communicators engage with. These new dynamics have manifested in a number of ways and provided us with the impetus to develop a new collection to reflect these changes.

Over the past two decades, the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) has continued to flourish, with degree programs of all types in TPC at four-year institutions experiencing a 17 percent growth rate in the last five years (Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018). Given this growth, it is important that we reflect upon what and how we are teaching students who will become the next generation of technical communicators. This collection brings together diverse scholarly voices and perspectives in both freestanding technical communication programs and as part of larger departments. By doing so, the collection endeavors to broaden our understanding of current effective teaching and pedagogical methods by facilitating a discussion of important and innovative theories, concepts, and practices related to the teaching of technical communication.

Thus, in this new collection, we seek to address the similar overarching themes of theory, practice, and application that Staples and Ornatowski's foundational work grappled with over 20 years ago in light of the changes that have accompanied the growth of the field. Three primary changes guide the structure and makeup of this work.

First, there has been a need for more attention to issues of accessibility and inclusivity as the audiences we communicate with are more varied and are more globally and culturally diverse (Melonçon, 2013/2017; Thatcher & St. Amant, 2011). For example, one way this is evidenced in the technical communication (TC) literature is by the field's social justice turn. Writing in their 2019 monograph *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn*, authors Rebecca Wal-

ton, Kristen Moore, and Natasha N. Jones explain that "[a] turn comprises not only a wave of scholarship engaging with a particular concept, theory, or topic but also a more substantial shift, a transformation in thinking and meaning making" (6). While acknowledging that "[t]he precise beginning point of such a turn is debatable" (7), they trace the turn back to the work of Carolyn Rude (2009) mapping the field of technical communication. Selections in the first part of this collection—Expanding Pedagogy—address these and other issues related to expanding our curriculum to be more inclusive and comprehensive.

Second, as previously mentioned, we have seen the growth of technical communication programs, especially as stand-alone units in universities and colleges. This, in turn, has allowed us to change the way we teach. For example, we now have more freedom to design our curricula without having to accede to the constraints/directives of other disciplines such as English literature, composition, or engineering (Melonçon & Henschel, 2013). Selections in the second part of the collection—Shaping Curriculum—grapple with the advantages and added responsibilities we encounter as our field maintains its independence and grows.

Third, there has been a significant rise in the use of communication technologies, especially the use of social media by professional organizations, governmental organizations, and universities. This greater variety of technologies means designing for different platforms and writing for more varied audiences in specialized contexts (Hea, 2013; Vie, 2017). Furthermore, as online and electronic collaboration across cultures and national borders have become more commonplace, the way organizations communicate internally and with their constituents/clients has also changed, thus increasing specialization of both program foci and employment positions (Andersen, 2013; Virtaluoto et al. , 2016). Selections in the third—Incorporating Technology—and the fourth—Engaging Communities—parts of the collection provide readers with examples of how these technologies can be leveraged both in the traditional academic classroom as well as when working with external communities.

These changes have altered the tools that technical communicators use and the situations and contexts in which the tools are used (Hovde & Renguette, 2017; Wilson & Wolford, 2017). We have also seen changes expand the organizational need for those proficient in the latest technical communication best practices (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015). Additionally, the workplace itself has changed: no longer relegated to a physical space and set hours, the traditional office has expanded its confines as telecommuting and virtual interaction become more commonplace (Ferro & Zachry, 2013; Frith, 2017; Wilson & Wolford, 2017). This has especially been evident in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to move our teaching into a virtual environment with little to no warning and required us to confront assumptions about teaching that guide our pedagogy (Williamson et al., 2020).

◼ About This Collection

The 16 chapters collected here coalesce around four topics: expanding pedagogy, shaping curriculum, incorporating technology, and engaging communities. Through a diverse collection of methods and perspectives, the authors provide readers with concrete suggestions and examples of how to reconceptualize, revise, and reimplement their teaching in technical communication courses that grow beyond the traditional four walls of the college classroom. Readers are invited to use any or all of these writings to aid them in teaching the next generation of technical writers, editors, and communicators.

◼ Part One: Expanding Pedagogy

The selections in the first part of this collection address the need to follow the social justice turn in TC as we reflect and revise our pedagogical curriculum. They examine ways in which we can broaden the types of pedagogy we employ in the classroom through a focus on social justice, among other topics (Jones, 2016).

In her chapter on situated learning, Jennifer L. Bay retheorizes internships as rhetorical opportunities for students to learn soft skills. She argues that the internship course and experience typically employed by the programs allow students to learn these skills so they can be competitive and successful in the global workplace.

Liz Lane's discussion of interstitial design processes—the blending of several design theories into one for use in the TC classroom—posits that such an approach is appropriate for teaching issues of social justice, which have been recently shaping our field's research and pedagogy. She does so by offering an example of how an assignment based in interstitial design can be combined with genre-based assignments with a social justice focus.

In her examination of plain language, Kira Dreher encourages instructors to use plain language strategies in TC courses, as plain language strategies overlap with aims of technical communication. By offering specific in-class applications on the use of plain language, she demonstrates how expertise in TC lends itself well to engaging with the plain language movement.

Finally, Derek G. Ross suggests that the incorporation of instruction on ethical decision-making into our classrooms helps us better teach students how understanding how we make decisions allows us to better communicate our decisions to others. A rich version of ethics decision-making, which he proposes, would consider multiple ethical models, including feminist ethics and ethics of care, when seeking to creatively solve problems.

◼ Part Two: Shaping Curriculum

The chapters found in this part of the collection deal with curricular development, both at the course and program level, for new approaches to TC instruction. They

also demonstrate the practical application of using reimagined TC theories—like layered literacies (Cargile Cook, 2002)—in the classroom and learning environments (e.g., Bourelle et al., 2015; Sapp & Crabtree, 2002) that technical communicators use to train the next generation of practitioners.

In the first chapter in part two, Halcyon Lawrence and Liz Hutter call on instructors to critically engage with how the field develops and uses pedagogical literacy frameworks. Rather, they argue that because of our field's growth, there needs to be an inclusion of other qualities, including responsiveness, multidimensionality, and sustainability.

Next, Chen Chen examines her experiences in developing an introductory course in technical communication for a university without a technical communication degree program. Chen discusses how a class with a problem-solving perspective and social justice orientation helps students develop the core conceptual skills of TC.

Adrienne Lamberti and David Grant discuss how TC pedagogy often privileges application at the expense of theory. In participating in their program's curricular revision, the two found that a balance of theory and practice helped faculty develop a theoretical framework that embodied ecologies of practice and civility.

In the final chapter of this section, Julianne Newmark and Joseph Bartolotta recount the development of new student learning outcomes (SLOs) for a sophomore-level TC course. Their work provides insights into developing SLOs through the engagement of industry standards and practices.

■ Part Three: Incorporating Technology

The four chapters in part three provide guidance for effectively using technology in the TC classroom. In their chapter, Ann Hill Duin, Jason Tham, and Isabel Pedersen focus on the need for collaboration and the open-access tools instructors can use for this. They argue that this preparation for students is essential to their future success as practitioners in the field as collaboration is critical in working with clients and customers in a global context.

Julie Watts argues that community of inquiry (COI), a theoretical framework for online learning, helps instructors and learners determine the best way to achieve deep learning in a community. Additionally, she demonstrates that when paired with an outcomes learning approach, COI provides a key component to successful program assessment of both the online learning environment and what outcomes students achieve.

Luke Thominet's chapter also examines online learning, advocating for a team-based learning (TBL) approach for group projects. In his chapter, Thominet shows that TBL affords learners effective collaborative learning experiences in courses with units with repeated cycles of evaluation and analysis.

Lastly, Elisabet Arnó-Macià and Tatjana Schell present their evaluation of the educational practices of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP),

a multinational collaborative network. Based upon their findings, the authors maintain that including telecollaboration can help instructors design more internationalization-focused college curricula and support students in strengthening their skills beyond oral and written communication.

■ Part Four: Engaging Communities

The final section of the collection provides exemplars of students and instructors engaging with communities outside the academy by outlining cases for utilizing pedagogical training in workplaces (e.g., Kohn, 2015; Pickering, 2017; Zachry & Thralls, 2007) while contending with various organizational dynamics.

Elise Verzosa Hurley uses visual communication in her course as a means of facilitating the creation of community-based projects. These critical appraisals of the visual help learners understand the larger social and cultural contexts of which communication documents are a part.

Lisa DeTora's chapter focuses on the norms of the science community and the responsibilities for technical communicators to successfully engage with that field. She advocates for those in TC to improve their literacy of the scientific materials and their modes of production as a means of improving their pedagogical practices.

In her examination of the workplace training classroom for paramedics and firefighters, Elizabeth L. Angeli explores the role layered literacies play in better understanding how workplace communicators learn outside the traditional TC classroom. Her findings in the workplace training classroom suggest that literacies are more than just layered and may sometimes be in tension with one another.

Lastly, Jessica McCaughey and Brian Fitzpatrick provide the results from a case study of three professionals who perform technical writing daily. Their findings suggest that the types of persuasion our students encounter in the workplace are complex and potentially implicit.

■ Acknowledgments

■ References

Andersen, R. (2013). Rhetorical work in the age of content management: Implications for the field of technical communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Writing*, *28*(2), 115-57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651913513904

Bourelle, A., Bourelle, T., & Jones, N. (2015). Multimodality in the technical communication classroom: Viewing classical rhetoric through a 21st century lens. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 24*(4), 306-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2015.1078847

Brumberger, E., & Lauer, C. (2015). The evolution of technical communication: An analysis of industry job postings. *Technical Communication, 62*, 224-243.

Cargile Cook, K. (2002). Layered literacies: A theoretical frame for technical communication pedagogy. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 11*(1), 5-29. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1101_1

Ferro, T., & Zachry, M. (2013). Technical communication unbound: Knowledge work, social media, and emergent communicative practices. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 23*(1), 6-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2014.850843

Frith, J. (2017). Forum design and the changing landscape of crowd-sourced help information. *Communication Design Quarterly Review, 4*(2), 12-22. https://doi.org/10.1145/3068698.3068700

Hea, A. C. K. (2013). Social media in technical communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 23*(1), 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2014.850841

Hovde, M. R., & Renguette, C. C. (2017). Technological literacy: A framework for teaching technical communication software tools. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 26*(4), 395-411. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2017.1385998

Jones, N. N. (2016). The technical communicator as advocate: Integrating a social justice approach in technical communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 46*(3), 342-361. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281616639472

Kohn, L. (2015). How professional writing pedagogy and university-workplace partnerships can shape the mentoring of workplace writing. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 45*(2), 166-188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281615569484

Melonçon, L. (Ed.). (2017). *Rhetorical accessibility: At the intersection of technical communication and disability studies*. Routledge. (Original work published 2013).

Melonçon, L., & Henschel, S. (2013). Current state of U.S. undergraduate degree programs in technical and professional communication. *Technical Communication, 60*, 45-64.

Melonçon L., & Schreiber, J. (2018). Advocating for sustainability: A report on and critique of the undergraduate capstone course. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 27*(4), 322-335. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2018.1515407

Pickering, K. (2017). Navigating discourses of power through relationships: A professional and technical communication intern negotiates a meaningful identity within a state legislature. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 48*(4), 441-470. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281617732019

Rude, C. D. (2009). Mapping the research questions in technical communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 23*(2), 174-215. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651908329562

Sapp, D. A., & Crabtree, R. D. (2002). A laboratory in citizenship: Service learning in the technical communication classroom. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 11*(4), 411-432. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1104_3

Staples, K., & Ornatowski, C. M. (Eds.). (1997). *Foundations for teaching technical communication: Theory, practice, and program design*. Ablex.

Thatcher, B., & St.Amant, K. (Eds.). (2011). *Teaching intercultural rhetoric and technical communication: Theories, curriculum, pedagogies, and practices*. Routledge.

Vie, S. (2017). Training online technical communication educators to teach with social media: Best practices and professional recommendations. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 26*(3), 344-359. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2017.1339487

Virtaluoto, J., Sannino, A., & Engeström, Y. (2016). Surviving outsourcing and offshoring: Technical communication professionals in search of a future. *Journal of Business and Technical Writing, 30*(4), 495-532. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651916651908

Walton, R., Moore, K., & Jones, N. (2019). *Technical communication after the social justice turn*. Routledge.

Williamson, B., Eynon, R., & Potter, J. (2020). Pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices: Digital technologies and distance education during the coronavirus emergency. *Learning, Media and Technology, 45(*2), 107-114. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2020.1761641

Wilson, G., & Wolford, R. (2017). The technical communicator as (post-postmodern) discourse worker. *Journal of Business and Technical Writing, 31*(1), 3-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651916667531

Zachry, M., & Thralls, C. (Eds.). (2007). *Communicative practices in workplaces and the professions: Cultural perspectives on the regulation of discourse and organizations*. Baywood.