

# Growth and Community

## A Few Thoughts on the Organics of Professional Communication

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This keynote was presented at the 2007 annual meeting at Eastern Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, on October 11, 2007. The meeting's theme for that year was "Sustainable Growth in Technical & Scientific Communication: Principles, Personal, and Programmatic."

It is a treat to be in Greenville, North Carolina, to see the beauty of the region, to hear local accents, to taste local foods. I want to thank Molly and Kathryn for inviting me to share my thoughts on scientific and technical communication program administration. This is a great honor for me, coming as it does 24 years after I first attended CPTSC in Lincoln, Nebraska (in 1983). At that time, I had had been teaching technical communication at a two-year college in Salina, Kansas, for two years and had dreams of developing an associate's degree in technical writing. That was my first encounter with the wonderfully supportive people in this organization. Down through the years, I have never found a more supporting and helpful professional organization despite my interests in a wide range of rhetorical studies represented by groups as diverse as the American Association of the Rhetoric of Science and Technology (AARST), the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the National Communication Association (NCA).

Let me say before I proceed that this paper is the result of many days' musings during my morning walks to school and an informal discussion at lunch one day a couple weeks ago, when Andrew Mara, Bruce Maylath, and I lingered in our department's seminar room after others had excused themselves to teach class or attend meetings. I shared an undeveloped

early outline of this talk, and they added much to the shaping of this paper. As I continued to work on the paper, I often thought of Tom Huckin's keynote address in 2002, when CPTSC met in Logan, Utah. In that talk, Tom drew our attention to rapidly expanding globalism and to our sociopolitical responsibilities. He focused on our "lack of attention to broader sociopolitical issues." He said, and I quote, "Social philosophers such as Andrew Feenberg and Langdon Winner have long argued that technology is not an autonomous force but invariably has sociopolitical underpinnings and sociopolitical consequences. Technical communication should strive to take this fact into account." My talk this evening returns to Tom's call for sociopolitical action, but I focus on the local rather than on the global. I believe what I have to say this evening has programmatic, pedagogical, and professional implications.

The first word in the conference theme this year—sustainable—has emerged as my theme. As I thought about this word, two narratives came to mind: the narrative of rhetoric programs in twentieth-century America and the narrative of the sustainable agriculture movement.

Consider rhetoric programs in the twentieth-century. In the early twentieth-century, shortly after speech teachers walked out of the MLA conference in 1914, several rhetoric scholars—Hoyt Hudson among them—joined the faculty at Cornell. As Edward P. J. Corbett (1985) has documented, the Cornell School of Rhetoric became the major center for rhetorical studies in the United States, drawing students from all over the country and sending them back out. The students were dispersed like seeds to many places. As that generation of scholars retired, a new center for rhetorical studies emerged at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, when people like Edwin Black joined the faculty. Students from Madison and other programs later formed a new leading program in rhetoric at Northwestern as the program at Wisconsin withered; and now many leading rhetoricians (John Angus Campbell, Michael Leff) are being drawn to the rhetoric program at Memphis. Rhetoric, it seems, sustains itself by moving. It survives today as an annual sprung up from seeds spread by the wind.

Is scientific and technical communication a parallel case or not? Is our field an annual or a perennial? Can we expect scientific and technical communication programs to survive longer than a single generation in a particular location?

The answer to these questions should influence our planning as program administrators. If scientific and technical communication programs are annuals, destined to grow rapidly, disperse seeds, and die; then we

should design our local programs so that they can draw as much nourishment from their local and temporal situations as possible without being overly concerned about what the next generation at our institutions will look like. Our commitment is to the seeds, not to our rootedness in the soil that supports us temporarily. On the other hand, if our programs are perennials, then we should design programs with the health of the local soil in mind.

Wes Jackson, founder of the Land Institute outside Salina, Kansas, has spent many years searching for ways to combine the robustness of an annual with the stability of a perennial. Annuals draw nutrients from the soil, investing their energy in seed production; perennials draw nutrients from the soil, but invest their energy in building root structures that protect and enrich the soil. The last time I heard an update on his project, which admittedly was several years ago, he was optimistic about buffalo grass—a short, hearty, and matted grass, almost sage in color—that covered much of the high plains before the sodbusters came in. It was no small task to break the sod where buffalo grass had created dense and deep root systems. This grass produces a seed head that rises only a few inches above the matted grass, but that seed head (or burr as it is called) is unusually full for a perennial. Somehow, buffalo grass combines the characteristics of perennials and annuals, investing energy in its root system and in its seed production.

Although my talk this evening focuses on root systems of perennials, I believe scientific and technical communication programs are perennials, or at least have the potential to be perennials, that not only build strong root systems, but also, like buffalo grass, produce abundant seeds. So, please, do not think I am against seed production or the strategies that have in the past been effective in producing abundant seed growth.

One way to assure that our genes are passed on is to adopt the annual model, concentrating on seed production, taking for granted that programs in scientific and technical communication will follow the pattern of rhetoric. If programs are destined to rise and fall in a generation or two, then we should concentrate on building conditions that will allow our faculty to publish profusely and concentrate on replicating themselves in graduate students who, by their growing numbers, will guarantee that our specialization will continue. It seems to me that, if STC programs are annuals, they would be well served to concentrate on building global connections, cultivating specializations in emerging technologies, and developing instrumental knowledge. The global is infinitely transferable, specialization guarantees a niche in the ecology of academic disciplines, and instrumental knowledge is adaptable to a myriad of work sites in the world of prac-

tioners. All of these efforts are only marginally concerned with the local environment: they draw what they need from it, but they concentrate on the transferable and specialized.

Under the perennial model, conversely, we should build conditions that encourage our faculty to become involved locally. In contrast to the annual paradigm that emphasizes globalization, specialization, and instrumentalism, the perennial paradigm emphasizes the local, the diverse, and the political.

In the remainder of this paper, I will explore what tactical scientific and technical communication might look like if we were to concentrate on the local, the diverse, and the political. I will do this by drawing an analogy between our field and sustainable agriculture.

When I left Michigan Tech nearly six years ago to go to the University of Minnesota, I decided that I needed to study something local, to turn my research toward topics relevant to my new position as head of the rhetoric department in the College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Studies. I was naïve. Little did I know that agriculture and food policy has become one of the most hotly contested battlefields in national and international politics. During the last five years—I left the University of Minnesota and moved to North Dakota State University four years ago—my focus on food and agriculture issues as they are played out in the upper Midwest has led me to become much more deeply informed about the struggles of the sustainable agriculture movement as local, usually small, farmers struggle to keep their crops free from genetic and chemical contamination, as they seek ways to build local food networks, as they hand on ancient practices of seed saving and diversity on the farm. From this local community of activists, who fight to survive against seemingly insurmountable obstacles thrown up by multinational companies who have taken control of distribution networks and research in our land grant universities, I have learned to appreciate the importance of the local, of the diverse, of the political.

Let us consider what it means to focus on the local. I first became sensitized to a focus on the local while at Michigan Tech. There I watched Craig Waddell get involved in local issues associated with water quality in the Great Lakes. There I watched Elizabeth Flynn's late husband, John, engage in pitched rhetorical battle with the public relations spokesperson for James River Paper Corporation, a corporation that wanted to build a paper mill on the shores of Lake Superior. There I began to see books like Jackson's *Becoming Native to This Place*, assigned by Jennifer Slack, in the bookstore and in students' hands.

Watching these people become engaged in the local, and beginning to read some of the books they assigned, I gradually came to understand

the importance of being committed to the local. Consider some of what critics of global industrialization have said. In *Becoming Native to This Place*, Jackson (1996) claims that the global village has turned out to be more of a playground than a village. He laments the decline of the oral tradition, the face-to-face engagement that comes from people being committed to one another in local settings. Because the global village/playground has displaced local engagement, we hardly notice that communities are being destroyed (p. 88). Stephen Doheny-Farina (1996) makes a similar argument about virtual communities in *The Wired Neighborhood*. He ends the book with these words: "The net... is a seductive electronic specter. Take part in it not to connect to the world but to connect to your city, your town, your neighborhood" (p. 188). And Gary Snyder (2004) says, "A place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics—the land is all small places" (p. 30).

These calls to return to the local have their roots in reaction against the industrial revolution. As Langdon Winner (1986) points out, Thomas Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" expressed alarm at the disruptions caused by industrialization to traditional life as early as 1829 (p. 67). William Morris and others in the arts and crafts movement continued the call for people to return to the local, to find alternative means of production outside the industrialized world. These calls for a return to the local, similar to the back-to-land movement of the early 1970s and reflected in the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, seem to become more abundant as spaces for alternative livelihoods are destroyed by the expanding global economy. Gustavo A. Terán (2005) says that single, universal solutions [here I read in "industrialized globalization"] foreclose "the possibility of finding alternative paths to the good life." All such universal solutions, he says, cannot avoid becoming "colonizing events" (p. 71). As an alternative to education designed to prepare students to enter the global economy, Terán advocates "vernacular education," which consists of passing on intergenerational knowledge through storytelling, permitting local communities to construct their own grassroots narrative and to determine what knowledge and practice they want to assimilate into their culture.

Although these calls to resist the dominant economic and industrial structure may seem idealistic, there is still opportunity to act. As the distributivist, G. K. Chesterton (2007) once put it, "I have finally decided to approach the social solution in this fashion: to point out first that the monopolist momentum is not irresistible; that even here and now much could be done to modify it, much by anybody, almost everything by everybody."

Just what that "much by anybody" or that "everything by everybody" might turn out to be depends on our localities. I can speak only of what I

see going on in my community. Fargo–Moorhead is a community with a rapidly growing population of approximately 180,000 people. This region was originally settled largely by Scandinavians, especially Norwegians. As we all know from Garrison Keilor's *Prairie Home Companion*, these people are part of an agrarian culture, mostly Lutheran and Catholic. Fargo–Moorhead is home to the two largest Lutheran churches in the world and dozens of smaller ones. Contrary to stereotypes, these Lutherans are not entirely self-absorbed, hot-dish enthusiasts. Lutheran Social Services has a regional headquarters in the city, and they sponsor refugees regularly, so that the metropolitan area has become home to people from around the world. Together with North Dakota State University's growing international student population, these displaced people are in need of literacy education and social services as they make Fargo–Moorhead their home. Several literacy initiatives have sprung up in the area to help in the work, but these groups are not yet integrated into a coalition. Two of our faculty members in English, Amy Rupiper Taggart and Andrew Mara, are working with these literacy groups, hosting summits and initiating cooperative educational programs that connect NDSU students with local elementary schools and service agencies in an attempt to promote literacy and to build a coalition of literacy projects. These projects and the interaction that come about because of them are part of what it means to be local in Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota. These people may be transplants in our garden, but they are rapidly becoming native to this place.

Next, let us consider what it means to be diverse. Diversity is, of course, one of the god terms in contemporary society, usually associated with issues of race, culture, and gender. I would like to think about the word in other contexts for a moment. Consider our lawn in south Fargo. Our front yard has somehow flourished as a monoculture. Although we have never applied chemicals to it, the grass holds sway—there is no room for an alien culture to invade. There are no dandelions, no crabgrass, no pigweed. The backyard, on the other hand, is a riot of diversity. Once again we have resisted the temptation to use chemicals to eradicate difference. As a result, in this environment, dandelions rejoice in their display of color and profusion of seed heads, snow on the mountain invades unoccupied territory, clovers of various kinds show up in colonies of their own, and other unidentified plants shoulder their way in. The backyard's ragged appearance is a source of embarrassment to my wife and me as we sit in the Adirondack chairs sipping our evening refreshment until we remember to view it through the appropriate terministic screen. When we adopt the terms of monoculture and diversity, the contrast between the profusion

and difference in the backyard and the monoculture in the front yard is no longer a problem.

The problem of monoculture versus diversity manifests itself on a much larger and more serious scale in the world of agriculture. In *Dinner at the New Gene Cafe*, Bill Lambrecht (2001) documents the disastrous effects of the popularly touted *green revolution* in India, where high-input farming techniques typical of the United States were introduced in the 1960s, markedly increasing production but also eradicating volunteer plants (we call them weeds) that were a source of vitamin A. These plants once flourished in and around the fields and were part of the daily diet. The new system, although it produced more food, encumbered farmers with unmanageable debt. The results of the green revolution are a mixed bag: an abundance of food, increased vitamin-A-deficiency-induced blindness, rapidly increasing suicide rates among farmers.

In the United States, where the effects of scientific agriculture have been less noticeable, there have been nonetheless dramatic changes in crops, food, and local agrarian culture. The wide adoption of Roundup™-ready crops has led to the eradication of plant diversity. Between 70 and 85% of cropland supporting soybeans, corn, and cotton is sprayed with Roundup™, a herbicide that kills plants not engineered to resist it, thus reducing genetic diversity and destroying habitat-friendly plants like milkweed that are the mainstay of monarch butterflies. The drive toward monoculture, toward highly specialized plant varieties, has led to large profits for companies like Monsanto and to large corporate farms, but it also threatens to eradicate family and organic farms. These are only a few of the stories that demonstrate the dangers of monoculture. Time does not permit me to recount Michael Pollan's (2002) history of the apple as humans tamed its wildness at the cost of its genetic diversity, nor to remember the disaster of monoculture that produced the potato famine in Ireland, reducing its population by half in the mid-1800s.

What might it mean if we think of resisting the drive toward monoculture and of cultivating diversity in the context of program and professional development? First, I think it is necessary for us to recognize that our diversity is being weeded out as we attempt to market ourselves as specialists who can fit niches in the technological society. Our desire to guarantee that we and students will not be irrelevant, or worse yet, unemployable, has produced a preoccupation with adding value to the corporate world's bottom line, and we increasingly do that by fashioning ourselves as specialists in emerging technology and user experience of emerging technology. Recognizing these developments as both useful and threatening, we

can begin to put limits on just how far we go in that direction and cultivate other areas integral to scientific and technical communication as a discipline in the humanities. Corporate culture does not pay our graduates because they know the history of technical and scientific discourses, or because they understand philosophical dimensions of science and technology, or because they have a commitment to ethical and political action related to technical and scientific issues. This kind of knowledge seldom contributes to the bottom line, but as Winner (1986) argues, we should not constrict our arguments to the *topoi* employed by the employers: there is more to science and technology than mere efficiency and profit.

A second factor that erodes diversity is our desire to reproduce ourselves, both in the hires we make and in the students we teach. As a rhetorical critic, I find myself wanting to hire more rhetorical critics. We want to gather about us like-minded people instead of learning to appreciate methods and perspectives that differ from our own, but that enrich our students. How many times have we quickly dismissed the work of others simply because we do not understand it? The temptation is to call their work shallow or uninformed. In matters of hiring and in educating graduate students, it would seem that diversity is achieved through cultivating generalists and by respecting our colleagues' interests even when they seem strange or perhaps insubstantial to us.

A couple months ago, I found myself in a conversation with a winemaker. I asked whether or not the soil and climate of North Dakota permits the growing of quality grapes. She explained that they do as long as you start with a local plant for root stock. Local wild grapes are adapted to the soils and the climate, but they do not produce the kinds of grapes we make wine from. Instead, she said, we graft in branches from the grapes that produce wine. It seems to me that there are lessons about hiring in the story.

Placing emphasis on the local and on diversity will lead us to political and ethical engagement. It is impossible to concentrate on the local, to make a difference in our home polis, unless we are willing to engage in political activism. Likewise, it is impossible to engage in ethical political activism, if we retreat from oral culture and from face-to-face involvement. Abandoning the oral and the face of others by retreating to written discourse and computer-mediated communication produces alienation, suspicion, desensitization. Indeed, it is impossible to recognize the ethical path unless we engage in face-to-face encounters. Philosophers and theologians of ethics in the first half of the twentieth century—Martin Buber, Immanuel Levinas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—taught us the need for this kind of encounter. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1996) put it, the ethical agent referred

to as “I” springs into being only in the presence of the face of the other (p. 51). Only by fully coming to recognize the humanity of others through face-to-face encounters are we able to respond to the situation ethically, to take political action responsibly. Only in the face of the other is responsibility, the ability to respond, possible.

Science and technology are perhaps the two strongest influences on our culture in the present world. The family, the church, the school, even the government are engaged in little more than interpreting changes brought about by science and technology and learning to adapt to these changes. As Winner (1986) demonstrates, the changes in these fields shape our culture, and yet, we do not engage in political deliberation about them. Decisions about science and technology are seldom public or political decisions. Most often decisions that change our culture indirectly through technical and scientific advancement are made in sequestered and private places: the laboratory, the research and development lab, the boardroom. We pride ourselves in being the people who shape the programs that teach scientific and technical communication. I would like to challenge us to widen our vision, to broaden our scope.

Michele de Certeau (1984) discusses the difference between strategic action of those who occupy territory and tactics of those subjected to that control. Through strategic action, the colonizers attempt to secure territory, protect boundaries, and establish order within the boundaries. Tactics are attempts used by those subjected to such authority to exploit opportunities diverting the system’s authority to their own ends.

We may occupy positions legitimized by strategic planning; that is, as teachers of technical communication, we occupy legitimized niches in the technological world. An important question remains unanswered for me: Do we occupy a position from which we can leverage tactical action? De Certeau (1984) describes the reaction of American indigenous people who accepted their subjection to Spanish colonization. Although they accepted colonization, these Indians, he says, “metamorphized the dominant order: they made it function in another register. They remained other within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally. They diverted it without leaving it” (p. 32). These indigenous peoples represent tactical action of the colonized resisting strategic planning of the colonizers.

What might it mean for us to be tactical rather than strategic? In Fargo, we live atop 120 feet of the world’s richest soil, the lakebed of prehistoric Lake Agassiz. Large scale agriculture is a dominant economic force in the region, dividing the territory into privatized land, gradually driving small farmers out

of business and eradicating diversified, small farms. In their place, large commodity farmers plant mile after mile of monoculture crops, modified genetically to kill their own pests and to withstand applications of Roundup™. There remains no commons, no commonly shared land, except for a few urban spaces set aside by the municipality for community garden projects and a few state parks set aside for recreational activities. There, in such rich agricultural land, it is extremely difficult to buy food that has not been contracted, processed, and transported through the commodities market. Some people informally share an abundance of private gardens; a few months of the year a couple farmers' markets are open a few days a week, a couple CSAs (community supported agriculture) exist, but most people do not know about them and never stumble onto invitations to join one. Simultaneously, a community garden program exists, again on the margins of mainline consumer culture, and a few specialized small grocers exist—a small green market, a Vietnamese market, and an African market. A few organic producers within 30 miles of the city market their food products through websites or a newly formed local food buying group named "My Sister's Farm." The local chapter of the Dakota Resource Council is participating in a local foods initiative, seeking ways to politicize food issues. As an interested observer and somewhat active participant in these efforts, I have come to recognize that the grass roots efforts have great promise, but they need to become more fully aware of each other. They need to join forces, forming a coalition, so that they can more readily take advantages of opportunities for tactical action within the colonized space of food production and distribution. What role might a technical communicator play if he or she were to define technical communication as political action? What opportunities are there for articulating tactical efforts of these diverse groups?

I hope you agree with me that what is called for is face-to-face engagement in local issues rather than retreat to theory. In our field, we have long lived by a governing metaphor: We bridge the gap between levels of knowledge by translating and simplifying technical language. Jennifer Daryl Slack and her co-authors (2004) revised that metaphor, suggesting that the technical communicator's task is not to translate, but to articulate. To articulate is to seek new relationships among existing forces, to participate in negotiating meaning rather than in transferring meaning. Articulation, in short, is a species of political action.

In a globalized economy consisting of discrete territories controlled by monocultures, where diversity is rapidly being eradicated, we believe in the survival of the fittest. This twist on the Darwinian perspective seems to demand that we fill a niche in the global economy by becoming specialists

who add value to products, specialists who suppress their natural inclination toward the political so that they can be good citizens of corporate culture in the technological society. This appears to be an expedient course of action, especially when we consider that those in positions of authority, the “Guard-eners,” consider wildness a threat. Weeds, defined as anything not conforming to the monoculture, need to be eradicated.

In my introduction, I said that I believed my comments today about the local, the diverse, and the political have programmatic, pedagogical, and professional implications. I hope you will be willing to play the believing game with me, exploring in your conversations what tactical scientific and technical communication might mean as we integrate our programs with local cultures. Let me describe a heuristic, or perhaps an invitation, to explore these implications in your own localities. Create a table consisting of four rows and four columns. Down the left column, list the words local, diverse, and political/ethical in the second, third, and fourth fields. Across the top row, list program planning, pedagogy, and professional development in the second, third and fourth fields. You will then have nine blank fields, waiting for your input.

	Program Planning	Pedagogy	Professional Development
How might an emphasis on the local affect...			
How might an emphasis on diversity affect...			
How might an emphasis on the political/ethical affect...			

The task of integrating our programs with local cultures and thereby growing strong root systems that will sustain our programs beyond a single generation is not a single-season project. I am not foolish enough to believe that this table can be filled out in one evening, one weekend, or even in one or two years, but we can make a start.

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