

Some Thoughts on Emerging Programmatic Phenomena

Professional Certification and Online Technical and Scientific Communication Programs

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Discussions of programmatic and professional standards and certifications have been a recurring element of the CPTSC conversation. My position on such matters has always been to move with what I perceived as the prevailing perspective of the organization's leading voices—that protecting local values and programmatic diversity is more important than identifying and codifying universal standards. In light of our programmatic variety and struggles even for consistent nomenclature, certification seems on first glance to be potentially limiting of possibility, even exclusionary. I do not mean to equate certification of individual professionals with the assessment of whole programs; I do recognize the linkages between them, however.

Recent events inspire a return for me to such topics. Although the thoughts gathered here remain exploratory, they are steps along a more carefully considered path than I have walked before. If there is a call to action here, it is this: the general membership of the CPTSC must join this discussion, rather than leave it for consideration by the few who have so far lead the way, or by other organizations entirely.

Several events converge for me on this professional moment, but three events are key: my participation in the launch of a new academic department and subsequent election to the position of Chair for that unit; the emerging coherence of the long-developing Body of Knowledge project fostered by the Society for Technical Communication; and my consultation with a student seeking an appropriate online program at which she might complete her professional and technical writing degree. The first of these is significant, of course, given that the new department—Rhetoric and Professional Writing—is anchored by an undergraduate PTW program. As the coordinator for that program, I must be

proactive in building and maintaining the program's integrity for the good of its faculty, students, and graduates. But the other two events provide focus for this discussion.

Steven Jong's June article in *Intercom*—"A Monumental Day Dawns for Technical Communicators: Certification!"—reported that the Society for Technical Communication will implement during the next year a portfolio-driven certification system for the profession. Professionals will be evaluated in six areas: user analysis, document design, project management, authoring, delivery, and quality assurance (6). Although these competencies will be used to assess individual professionals, program coordinators ought to think strategically about certification.

The program I coordinate builds knowledge in all six areas of competency. However, we will highlight these areas during our upcoming assessments to determine where (if anywhere) we need to place greater emphasis. Regardless of the long-term effectiveness of this STC project, I can acknowledge the value of a proposed standard that has been developed by a representative element of my greater professional community. The framework for certification is broad enough that I do not fear it alone will demand that I sacrifice any local values to remain aligned with the core competencies. Of course, I need to see the specific criteria by which professionals will be evaluated within those broad knowledge areas before I can determine real impact with any confidence. Nevertheless, this is the kind of standard my local university administrators prefer to use as a baseline for judging the merit of academic programs at my home institution.

The difference between the first two events I have considered here and the third is that my student consultation yielded surprises for me. Perhaps it should not have, but nonetheless, I was not prepared for the results of researching online programs. This moment is straightforward enough. A student from the undergraduate program I coordinate needed to move before she could complete her degree. Because she cannot predict how long she will be in residence for any program in which she might enroll for the short term, she asked me to review three online programs with her. None of the three are tied to established on-ground curricula; all three are online only. All three are promoted as technical writing or technical communication programs. All offered courses with appropriate titles, but with course descriptions that suggest little emphasis on writing, and significant emphasis on production software. (Further research would clearly be required to determine actual course content. I merely note that the courses and programs were advertised as technical rather than writing experiences, suggesting that such knowledge is not only appropriate but also very marketable.) The surprise, however, was that none of the three programs

listed a single faculty member with any obvious credential or professional experience of core relevance to the world of professional and technical writing. I acknowledge that this may be no more than a problem stemming from poorly executed program promotion, but I remain skeptical of the quality of these programs.

My review of online professional and technical writing programs reinforces the possibilities for professional legitimacy offered by the Body of Knowledge project and by professional certification. Graduates of well-designed programs would, we hope, be able to distinguish themselves from graduates of poorly designed programs. Such changes of professional culture take time to become integrated in daily practice, so only time will determine the level of success of this move by the Society for Technical Communication. My review of online programs perhaps has deeper implications as well for administrative work in general. I will note that each of the three online programs I reviewed only communicated emphasis in three areas of competence framed by the Body of Knowledge project—the same for all—document design, authoring, and delivery. None of the three explicitly identified emphasis on user analysis, project management, or quality assurance.

I am cautiously optimistic for the potentially positive long-term impact of the STC's proposed framework for evaluating professional and technical communicators. However, I feel compelled as well to propose a complementary stance for the professional community at large. Some who express doubt about the ethics and effectiveness of certification emphasize the policing function such processes can take on. Certification can be viewed as (and used as) a mechanism for exclusion. However, if the professional community and the professional cultures within which our graduates pursue their careers ultimately embrace certification, then that cultural transformation demands that the CPTSC consider how it might navigate this new reality. More specifically, what projects might the CPTSC promote to further elevate the overall quality of academic programs, and thus respond programmatically to this shift in professional culture?

The CPTSC has sponsored several initiatives to bolster the resources available to program administrators. The organization's support of programmatic research (through Research Grants), its building of administrative resources (through the Research Assessment Project), its expanding emphasis on participating in international discourse on program administration, and its backing of *Programmatic Perspectives* are but four such projects aimed at enriching the intellectual exchange about academic programs, their development, and their sustainability. Although the program assessment process remains underutilized by the community, it too offers local administrators the means by which they

might examine their efforts through the eyes of colleagues who represent the administrative culture in TSC. I hope we see continued growth and maturation of these initiatives in coming years. Any or all might provide appropriate fora for examining issues such as those I identify here.

However, such resources cannot replace face-to-face dialog. It is perhaps time for the CPTSC once more to reach out to programs who have not been recently represented or who have never been represented at meetings of the Council. With the steady creation of new programs, especially new online programs that do not grow out of established undergraduate programs, it seems there is a generation of program administrators emerging that likely has little sense of our community history, values, or intellectual engagements. The convergence of events I have explored here may provide appropriate exigence and opportunity for the community itself to grow, and if necessary, to evolve.

Author Information

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