

A Call for a Coordinated, Inter-organizational Exploration of Current Arrangements

Stuart Blythe

Michigan State University

Our field has evolved since the founding of the Council of Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) in 1974. Significant changes have occurred in communication technology, workplace structures, the roles of scientific and technical communicators, academic programs designed to develop such professionals, and the nature of academic scholarship. How well has CPTSC evolved with these changes? This is a question for which I have no answer, but I am willing to raise the question because many of the conditions that prompted the creation of CPTSC and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) no longer exist or at least look very different today.

CPTSC and ATTW began within a year of each other, at a time when the teaching of technical writing had migrated from “engineering and the sciences into disciplines traditionally allied with the classical liberal arts” (Longo, 2000, p. 144). Although the teaching of technical writing had been taken up by many English departments by the 1970s, the practice still lacked most hallmarks of a discipline—for example, journals, majors, and professional organizations. Instructors had to search nationally for colleagues with similar interests. The task was so demanding that Thomas Pearsall undertook it with the help of a grant from the Society for Technical Communication (STC) (Pearsall & Warren, 1996, p. 40). Similarly, the founders of ATTW relied on their connections with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)—a relationship that continues. The initial purpose of ATTW, according to Donald Cunningham (2004), was to encourage NCTE and its constituent organization the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) to make more room at annual conferences for panels on business and technical writing (p. 127).

The overwhelming significance of CPTSC and ATTW is indicated by the roles each played in fostering the changes that followed their founding. Most obviously, both organizations have fostered professional development through their annual meetings, program reviews, and grant support. They created, or fostered the further development of, journals such as *Technical Communication Quarterly*, the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, and the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* (the last of which existed previously). The journal in which this editorial appears is yet another indication of that work. In addition to journals and book series, we now have a significant number of academic programs. In 1974, Pearsall and Thomas L. Warren (1996) identified 20 programs in technical and scientific communication. By 1994, there were 190 programs—a number that seems to have held steady recently (Maylath & Grabill, 2009, p. 31). Thanks to changes such as these, the sense of isolation that prompted people such as Pearsall, Warren, and Cunningham to reach out nationally has created a field that looks very different. Many PhD graduates in our field, although admittedly not all, can expect to join academic departments with at least a couple of like-minded faculty already in place.

Another obvious change over the past 40 years is in the number of professional organizations. By the end of 1972, there were two professional organizations, the STC and the Professional Communication Society of the IEEE. Both were geared more toward practitioners than academics. By 1974, two new organizations had developed. ATTW had “nearly 200 members” that year, which grew to 1200 by 1980 (Cunningham, 2004, p. 126). For the past 10 years, membership at CPTSC has usually hovered somewhere between 100 and 150.

Granted, some issues today look strikingly similar to those faced almost 40 years ago. The position of scientific and technical writing in the academy and workplace remains in flux. Rachel Spilka’s (2002) comment that “the field of technical communication is suffering an identity and credibility problem” (p. 97) is as true today as it was in 1970 and in 2002. This identity problem continues in part because of changes in technologies and workplaces (see, for instance, Johnson-Eilola, 1996). Similarly, and perhaps for many of the same reasons, the status of scientific and technical writing within the academy remains tenuous. One might think the growth of academic programs would be a good sign, and it is in many ways. But, as the document, “Writing Majors at a Glance” (CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric, 2009) illustrates, it’s possible that our field could lose recognition amidst the growth of professional writing programs. One thing to notice in that document is the number of programs that

call themselves “professional writing” and that offer technical writing as a specialization within them. (This is the situation at my institution.) A recent message to the CPTSC listserv cites 187 undergraduate majors, 65 of which have “technical communication” in the title (Meloncon, Feb. 10, 2012). It’s possible, as institutions re-arrange, that scientific and technical writing could get subsumed. (Consider also the case of Miami University of Ohio.) Whether this is a good or bad thing for the field ought to be debated.

To this point, I have been posing questions of conjecture and quality. The task I’d like our field to undertake, somehow, involves questions of both quality and policy. What should CPTSC and ATTW be doing today? Are they configured in ways best suited for addressing the needs of practitioners and students? What would be appropriate economies of scale for each need?

Before I proceed, I should say that my question about CPTSC is prompted also by my own experience. I have served on the executive committee of CPTSC and currently serve on its ATTW counterpart. I have also served as local arrangements chair for ATTW and as conference chair for CPTSC. People inclined to serve these professional organizations often work with both, over time. I have seen that it can be difficult to staff leadership positions. Not everyone has the freedom or inclination to perform such service. This has made me wonder sometimes whether our field should be trying to staff two professional organizations. Do we stretch ourselves too thin by supporting two organizations? Or is it time to expand our scope beyond them?

Enough conjecture. Let’s talk policy. What I offer here is a set of questions and related ideas designed to prompt discussion.

Who Should Be Involved in Discussions?

Perhaps we should begin an exploration of policy by widening the scope beyond CPTSC and ATTW. We now have the CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric. NCTE may still have its Scientific and Technical Communication Committee. And what about the Association of Writing Programs (AWP) and CCCC? Given the growth in writing majors, I think the discussion should include at least the first three or four groups.

Where Might Discussion Start?

Perhaps discussion could start first at the executive committee level. ATTW and CPTSC each hold at least one annual face-to-face meeting of their respective executive committees. Perhaps the presidents of each group could prompt such a discussion. Also, the Committee on the Major in Writ-

ing and Rhetoric could be prompted to do the same. Once the leadership of each group has discussed pertinent questions, perhaps a summit might be held. From there, proposals, if any are made, might flow back to the respective organizations.

What Might Each Group Discuss?

I believe each group should ask some fundamental questions about their organizations. We could rely on insights from Pearsall and Warren (1996) and Spilka (2002) to develop a framework for such an exploration. Those three authors define the essential functions of a professional organization:

- How well does each organization promote and support the development of individual academic units? In what ways does each organization help members do their work at their home institutions? In what ways might this support be strengthened or weakened if existing arrangements within and between professional organizations were changed?
- How well does each organization promote research in the field of technical and scientific communication? (By research, I refer to multiple sites of inquiry, including programmatic, pedagogical, workplace, and civic.) If existing arrangements were changed, in what ways might scholarship be fostered more or less effectively? For example, would fewer scholarships and grants with larger dollar amounts have a greater or lesser impact than more of them with smaller dollar amounts?
- How well does each organization create opportunities for the exchange of ideas? Do the organizations, taken as a whole, offer an effective set of conference formats, locations, and dates? Do current online resources (<cptsc.org>, <attw.org>, <tc.eserver.org/>, and various listservs) offer complementary resources? Could such resources be strengthened if efforts were combined? What combinations might be possible? What would be lost in any scenario?
- How well does each organization identify and reward what the field values? As Spilka (2002) mentioned, one goal of a professional organization is to “provide recognition and awards” (p. 104). As Maylath and Grabill (2009) wrote, another goal is to influence the development of membership in desirable ways, for example, by increasing diversity in the field. Would a different arrangement of organizations enable our field to adopt strategies

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that may have a greater influence on bringing about the conditions we value?

- Finally, how well do our organizations represent the field of technical and scientific communication to others beyond our discipline? How well do our organizations raise awareness with colleagues in other fields? How well do they raise awareness with members of the general public? How well do we represent our needs and expectations to the media and those in power? Would a larger organization (however configured) have more influence than two or three smaller organizations?

In posing these questions, I have deliberately avoided a word like “combine.” I think it would be a mistake to begin any discussion with “Should CPTSC and ATTW combine?” That question unnecessarily limits the scope of inquiry. I have tried instead to write about the need for several related organizations to re-evaluate in some coordinated way. I think any discussion along the lines I’ve suggested ought to address economies of scale at every point. At what points would combining or coordinating efforts result in more significant outcomes? At what points would such a combination weaken what already happens? On some points, we may conclude that smaller is better; on others, we may conclude the opposite.

As I close this editorial, I am aware of Spilka’s (2002) call for “a new organizational consortium, consisting of members who represent diverse aspects of the field” (p. 98). Although I am making a similar kind of call, I am not calling for a long-term consortium. I urge the leadership of CPTSC, ATTW, and the CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric, at the very least, to work together to define a strategy for discussing current conditions. Each group may well decide, ultimately, that no changes are necessary. We should not decide that, though, without serious, coordinated explorations at several levels.

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Author Information

Stuart Blythe is an associate professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University. He was a member-at-large of the executive committee of Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) for 2009–2010, and he currently serves in the same capacity with the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW). His work has appeared in such journals as *College Composition & Communication*, *Computers and Composition*, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *Works & Days*, and various edited collections.