

Crossing the Not-So-Great Divide

Academics as Technical-Communication Practitioners

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Abstract. This keynote was presented at the 2011 annual meeting on October 6–8, 2011, at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, North Carolina. The meeting’s theme for that year was “Academy-Industry Relationships and Partnerships.”

As the current president of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), I am in the unenviable position of working to strengthen the relationship between academic members and the Society’s core efforts, which focus mainly on education for so-called industry practitioners of technical communication. The relationship between the academy and industry has been a subject of debate for decades: How much should the demands of the workplace influence education? What do educators do that training courses do not?

To address this perceived dichotomy, I considered three questions that might help us frame the debate a bit differently:

1. How have academic perspectives on the relationship between technical communication education and the technical communication workplace changed over the years, mainly as reflected in the journal *Technical Communication (TC)*?
2. Where does the new Technical Communication Certification program fit into the education versus training debate?
3. How should STC engage with academic practitioners?

Academic Perspectives

Using several special issues of the *Technical Communication (TC)* journal as touch-points, I looked at language used to describe those who teach in institutions of higher learning and those who practice technical communication in industry, government, and nonprofits. This informal survey is in no way systematic or proof of anything, but it seems indicative of some

shift in academics' sense of themselves. Until recently, *practitioner* referred only to technical communicators working in industry, government, or non-profits—never to academics. In the 1995 special issue of TC, "Toward 2000: Education, the Society, and the Profession," Saul Carliner used the standard parlance of the day in referring to "practicing professionals and academic faculty" finding "common ground."

By late 2007, the dichotomy of practitioner versus educator still held, but less firmly. In the journal's 2007 special issue on program assessment, guest editors Kirk St. Amant and Cindy Nahrwold referred to the two *branches* of "industry/practitioner" and "academic/educator." Most of that issue's articles, however, avoided the dichotomy by not using the word "practitioner" at all. By November 2011, in the special issue on professionalization, issue editor Nancy Coppola solved the terminology problem by referring to "academic stakeholders of our field" and "professional stakeholders," though wondering how to align the "core competencies" valued by each group (p. 280).

It seems indisputable that technical communication practitioners are in multiple workplaces: the academy, private industry, government, non-profits, and other contexts. Technical communication educators are in fact practitioners. The biggest differences between practitioners in the academy and those in industry, government, and nonprofits are these: the *reward system* (based on publication of research) and the need and ability to look for funding outside the organization. Those differences are not true for all. Some technical communicators in companies or agencies do research and seek funding. But by-and-large, educators spend a greater amount of their time developing programs or lines of research rather than products or work processes or communication delivery systems. They are entrepreneurs in a somewhat different sense. Nonetheless, it beats me why technical communication educators are characterized as in some way *nonpractitioners*. In any case, we have not yet studied what this difference in reward structure means for education-industry partnerships and for what educators need from their professional societies. We need research on the cultural and socioprofessional differences for technical communication practitioners embedded in these various organizational structures.

The educator/practitioner dichotomy has its origins in another one: education/theory versus training/practical skills. Many technical communicators in the field believe that educators focus too much on theory to the detriment of learning skills that will get students jobs. In 2007, St. Amant and Nahwold called for developing an "educational system that provides students with the practical skills ('knowing how') and theoretical knowl-

edge (“knowing that/why’).” Nancy Coppola conceives of “core competencies” as bridging this gulf. In a recent email message to me, she said, “In professional and technical communication, core competencies are those integrated combinations of knowledge and skills that allow evidence-based demonstration of professional accomplishment to stakeholders of our field” (October 2011). Indeed, some of the smartest and most thoughtful academics have spent a lot of time thinking about the core of the discipline—the qualities, modes of thought, and awarenesses that the discipline requires of its successful practitioners (Cargile Cook, 2002; Selber, Johnson-Eilola, & Selfe, 1995; Wilson, 2001).

Technical-Communication Certification Program

First of all, the Certification Commission accepts applicants on the basis of both education *and* professional experience. The evaluators look for a combination of experience and education in a sliding scale. The scale is definitely tipped toward experience because this certification is not an exam and is not geared toward assessing student outcomes. Successful applicants earn a Certified Professional in Technical Communication certification.

Secondly, although STC developed the program, it is administered by a certification commission that is legally separate from STC: the Society for Technical Communication Certification Commission (STCC). Thus, one does *not* have to be an STC member to be certified. Evaluation is based on five top-level areas of practice: user, task, and experience analysis; information design; process management; information production; and information delivery.

If academics think about their work in the light of the five areas, most of what we produce and make happen—research proposals, teaching materials, articles, books, surveys—can be evaluated according to those five areas. The academic workplace is indeed a technical communication workplace. Furthermore, the evaluation is portfolio-based and not just about “products.” Applicants demonstrate competence in the five areas of practice via a packet of materials they produce. Applicants answer questions about their work practice, processes, and production. Even with little nonacademic work experience, applicants with degrees should do well on this *reflexive practice* part.

The fact is that technical communication work is increasingly about becoming part of the business enterprise rather than writing information products. James Conklin and I discovered in our 2004–2006 qualitative research into what the technical communicators we interviewed actually do that at least 83% of technical communicators spend at least 20% of their

work time on teams, and 38% spend at least 80% of their time on teams. (I should note that these survey results are based on a sample of 37 experienced technical communicators.) Basing the STCC certification program on written narratives by the applicant, rather than an exam or a static portfolio of products is, in my opinion, a brilliant move. But the question remains of whether the technical communication certification can evaluate all of what technical communicators do, or even what they mostly do. What about business systems analysts, internal communications managers, community advocacy communicators—all those who do things that don't generally result in any kind of information product? In fact, other disciplinary values are not captured in this professional certification, at least not yet. How, for instance, would the Technical Communication Certification evaluate these educational goals:

- As teachers, academics value “dissent, conflict, and critical failure” for their pedagogical usefulness (Coppola & Eliot, 2007).
- Many academics value *technology criticism* as an important part of the ethical and social component of technical communication courses: “the need to examine the particular forms of power and authority that [computer technologies] embody” (Selber, Johnson-Eilola, & Selfe, 1995).
- Educators wish to imbue students with *agency*—“the ability to act in one’s own interest” and to see oneself in relationship to the organization, the technological enterprise, and the global economy (Wilson, 2001).

From my service on the STC Board of Directors for the past four years, I can tell you that this certification is not intended to be a substitute for an academic degree. Certification is an additional credential. Training for certification should become part of continuing professional development, not a substitute for gaining the education offered by academic degree programs. The certification program will, of course, evolve, just as the field is evolving. Right now it is probably not prepared to evaluate abilities such as systems thinking or flexibility. So, the technical communication certification should help educators think about what is needed for program accreditation. In other words, to prepare students for work as technical communicators, we are challenged to submit our programs to this increasingly broad, complex, and layered evaluation.

How should STC engage with academic practitioners?

I have long heard calls for STC to better support academic members. Let me suggest that STC should better support academic *programs* and the

students in those programs. STC's mission is to support students, as a statement on the STC Academic Database website makes clear. One of the incorporating principles of the Society is to "guide and inform students and to aid colleges and universities in the establishment of curricula for training in the arts and sciences of technical communication." That is a two-pronged charge: to guide students and to aid universities in developing curricula. I would say that STC has always attempted to do the first, but has experienced problems in its relationships with universities.

Recently, STC has in fact developed some initiatives for students. STC membership has a new dues category for postgraduates entering the workforce: New Professional member. The price is the mean of student and regular dues: \$150. You don't have to have been an STC student member to get the rate; it's available to *all* who have been students within the last three years. This is STC's response to efforts of their Community Advisory Committee members, especially Dan Voss and Sara Baca. Secondly, student members can now vote in Society-wide elections.

As for aiding university programs, that effort is complicated by local university politics, the sometimes-negative experience of faculty members with STC, and misunderstandings about STC as a professional association. STC has actually been remaking itself under CEO Kathryn Burton's leadership for the past few years. As it has lost members (as have all professional associations), it has had to become leaner and more innovative in developing new services for members and new sources of revenue. If the certification program is a success, STC will be in a much better position to support all its communities, including the academic one. In the meantime, we can all help the profession and ourselves by contributing to developing the Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBoK) project. And by involving students in this project to vet, organize, and make accessible information relevant to the field. For ideas on how to use the BoK development wiki¹ listen to the recorded webinar presented last November by Stephen Bernhardt and Thomas Barker.²

In the end, all of us in the technical communication field need STC to do what nonprofits should do: vet information relevant to the field and provide it in accessible forms as cheaply as possible to all technical communicators, whether members or not. As some may have noticed, *Intercom* is now open to all on the website. If STC can stick with that mission and not go broke, all technical communication practitioners can benefit.

¹ See <<http://stcbok.editme.com/>>.

² See <<http://stc.adobeconnect.com/p6vt7jj3xn6/>>.

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