GUEST EDITORIAL

An Editorial Introduction:
A New Curriculum Showcase Section for Programmatic Perspectives

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As Karla Saari Kitalong (2009) pointed out in a previous editorial from this journal:

Everyone reading this editorial today knows that Programmatic Perspectives publishes scholarship that theorizes and thereby promotes sustained attention to the disciplinary knowledge-making dimensions of technical communication program administration. The idea of mutual mentoring underlies the work that this journal does to help shape a new scholarly space. (p. 211)

It seems as though it was only a matter of time before space was created in this journal to promote our curriculums as well, and the range of activities and approaches we’ve developed through years in the classroom and as administrators. Building on aspects articulated in the vision for this journal—collaboration, theory development, relationships with authors, and the online venue—this editorial introduces a new section of the journal called Curriculum Showcase (CS). This section aims to provide a peer-reviewed venue for teachers and administrators to publish work that discusses and acknowledges the intellectual aspects of designing, theorizing, implementing and applying the goals, structure, and approaches for technical communication courses.

In other words, this new section focused on curriculum addresses a concrete need for us to “[publish] scholarship that theorizes and thereby promotes sustained attention to the disciplinary knowledge-making dimensions of technical communication program administration,” which includes curriculum development (Kitalong, p. 211). As technical communication teachers and administrators, most of us are, as a colleague of mine says, proficient BBSs (beggars, borrowers, and stealers) of activities, approaches,

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and materials that assist and sustain us in our administrative work as well as in our teaching. However, too many of these efforts tend to happen in professionally unacknowledged ways—on listservs, over email, and at conferences in hallways, often after or between panels or informally over drinks and dinners; indeed, at our most recent CPTSC conference in Virginia that is exactly what happened. In the process of one such conversation, I complained to Tracy Bridgeford that we lack opportunities to exchange the successful (and yes, unsuccessful) activities and approaches we’ve developed. I think this is especially true in technical communication, since most of us are still “lone rangers,” as David Sapp (2006) called us in “The Lone Ranger as Technical Writing Program Administrator.” Moreover, because our field is so broad, it is no easy task to individually sustain the breadth of knowledge needed to stay up-to-date on how the diverse areas that are linked to our field—such as human-computer interaction, business information systems, and management—change and impact the teaching of technical communication. And so, I harped on and on about how we lack a professional venue for sharing, theorizing, and acknowledging the intellectual rigor and difficulty that also comes with developing interdisciplinary courses in our field, and with “transplanting” a specific design, theory, structure and approach for a course from one context into another. In response to my complaining, Tracy and Bill invited me to write this editorial introducing the new section of the journal and to join the editorial team as CS editor. I am excited to be part of this process and this journal.

Before getting to the details of what the CS will entail, however, I’d like to discuss how this new section furthers the vision established by the editors of Programmatic Perspectives. As Karla explained in her 2009 editorial, “the idea of mutual mentoring underlies the work that this journal does to help shape a new scholarly space” (p. 211). The aspects of mutual mentoring that support this idea include a commitment to the nuances of collaboration and creating relationships with authors. These aspects are evident from the way the editors work together to the philosophy they apply as they work with authors, putting into practice the notion that as we mentor we also learn from each other. Given these aspects, the CS section will have a complementary fit in the journal. Sharing the intellectual work we do as teachers—in particular, the theoretical frames we choose, the institutional needs and desires we try to address, and reflective practices we engage in before, during, and after a course—provides opportunities for us to learn from each other and to create relationships. Publishing pedagogical work in an academic journal such as Programmatic Perspectives, which supports the theoretical development of technical communication as a field in gen-
eral, and administrative work in particular, affords us “another opportunity to engage in mutual mentorship as we articulate...what is meant by the scholarship of program administration” (Kitalong, 2009, p. 212). Lastly, the online venue, which allows in very real and practical ways for this journal to exist, is also a space that seems most applicable for helping facilitate the kinds of activities the editors envisioned—creating a community and encouraging follow-up interaction.

The goals, then, of curriculum showcases are to address the need for a professional venue in which to showcase the intellectual work and research involved in developing a course and also to acknowledge the difficult work of transplanting a specific curriculum into another instructor’s classroom, another administrator’s program, given the range of experience, teaching personae, pedagogies, material circumstances, and other affordances. I offer the following broad purpose for this section: to self-critically describe a specific pedagogy that engages in the larger discourse of the field and that reflects the diversity and innovation of our curricular goals, content, structures, or approaches. The intention is that each issue of Programmatic Perspectives includes at least one CS article. And rather than supply a package of materials for readers to simply reproduce, each CS article would present a complete technical communication course—from how it aims to meet the needs of institutional contexts, to its theoretical assumptions and historical roots, to the syllabus, and to a post-course analysis of strengths and limitations. Consequently, a CS article would serve as both an analysis and a record of a complete technical communication course.

One example that provides some additional guidelines for authors, particularly in how to include the historical roots of an issue, and how to reflect specific pedagogy and practices in technical communication, is Bruce Maylath’s (1997) “Writing Globally: Teaching the Technical Writing Student to Prepare Documents for Translation.” In his article, Maylath argued that technical communication courses, “particularly introductory courses in technical writing, must include a translation component if they are to prepare students for the kind of work they are now likely to encounter as technical communicators” (p. 339). He began the article by situating the exigency of translation work in an increasingly global marketplace. He provides some context about the American reliance on English “in North America and the world at large” and the linguistic isolation that has influenced technical communication programs, including the textbooks we have used, which make little mention of translation and cultural issues as they relate to “accurate analysis of audience and to the making of appro-
appropriate effective choices in writing strategies” (as quoted in Thrush, 1993, p. 272). This contextualizing of our field in the first part of Maylath’s article is important. As James Dubinsky (2004) explained:

We have a rich history, one that has roots in both classic rhetoric and in the very pragmatic concern of teaching engineers how to communicate their disciplinary knowledge effectively. Knowing about our history helps us to recognize the character of our discipline and its roots. Understanding, for instance, what happened in technical writing classrooms in the past and why can enable us to make informed pedagogical decisions about the present and future. (p. vi)

In other words, such discussions help us to recognize how deeply our field is and has been embedded in the history of teaching language use. This embeddedness is an important aspect we’d like to have authors address in their work. In his article, Maylath (1997) provided a framework and examples of assignments for developing international language awareness in an introductory technical writing course. He discussed briefly the two models that many technical communication courses have followed in integrating such material—having a full course in translation preparation or fitting the topic into existing courses. He offered a framework for the latter. His examples detail aspects of translation work to focus on—clarity, terminology management, space and signposts, and cultural and rhetorical differences. In the appendix, examples of assignments and student activities are also provided. For the purposes of the new section of Programmatic Perspectives, Maylath’s article demonstrates two important elements we hope to see in future articles—it moves beyond the “what I did in my class last semester,” and it connects to a larger concern in the field of technical communication.

In addition, though, given the purpose of CS, authors should also engage in the following:

- Examining what the students and teacher learned, and why.
- Theorizing the content of the course as well as the pedagogical approach.
- Adding to/complicating/calling into question commonly held ideas about and/or practices in technical communication.

Although we hope to represent the field’s tremendous pedagogical range and collection of practical and theoretical interests, we also intend to sustain some uniformity across CS submissions. The guidelines below are
An Editorial Introduction for a Curriculum Showcase Section

intended to make CS a recognizable feature and allow readers to make comparative judgments among multiple curriculums. At the same time, we aim to make the guidelines flexible enough to allow authors the room to effectively represent their course.

Having said that, a published curriculum showcase should include the following, in this suggested order:

1. A historical context or exigency in which the author briefly explains the ideas, practices, technologies, and/or events that have shaped/influenced/necessitated these pedagogical decisions.

2. A course description that provides the official course title and the institution at which the course is taught and in which the author briefly outlines the course’s subject matter, underlying assumptions, major goals, and/or pedagogical approach.

3. A description of the institutional context in which the author briefly explains the relationship between the course and/or its specific curriculum and the needs, desires, or focus of the program, department, institution, or communities in which the course is offered.

4. A theoretical rationale, written specifically for journal readers, that explains the course’s theoretical frame. Critical to this section is an explicit discussion of the purpose(s) of the course and its perceived goals and outcomes, both in general and in relation to its particular pedagogical design: What is the course for? Why has it been designed the way it has? What might result if it is effectively taught?

5. A critical reflection on the curriculum in which the author assesses strengths and acknowledges weaknesses, reflecting on what s/he and the students learned and why, a proposal for adjustments or modifications based on outcomes, and a discussion of implications for the field at large. Together with the theoretical rationale, these sections would be the heart of the article.

6. A references list that include works cited in the above five sections. This list would typically not include works referenced in the syllabus.

Readers familiar with the Course Designs section in Composition Studies Journal (CSJ), <http://www.compositionstudies.uwinnipeg.ca/coursedesigns.html>, will notice similarities here in terms of structure and content suggested for Curriculum Showcase. CSJ’s example was useful as a resource because that made it unnecessary to “re-invent the wheel” so to speak, with regard to creating a similar section focused on curriculum for technical communication.
A syllabus, preferably the same document distributed to students. This final section allows journal readers to see precisely how the course is presented to students. Readers will want to see: a course description, statement of goals, or expectations; a brief explanation of the assignment sequence (perhaps including evaluation criteria); a bibliography of required readings; and a calendar. Although the syllabus submitted should be as close as possible to the document actually distributed to student, if any section is not critical to an understanding of the course and its context (for instance, an attendance policy) it may be removed. We encourage authors to keep syllabi under six single-spaced manuscript pages, including the calendar.

Given that our field does have a broad range in both pedagogical practices and theoretical approaches, I hope that the CS section becomes both an online space for publishing these intellectual, research-rich efforts and a medium that encourages contributors and readers to collaboratively reflect on this work after it is published. As Dubinsky (2004) pointed out with regard to Dewey’s notion of forethought, reflective thought does not occur naturally, it involves an attitude and a method consisting of steps, which usually begin with “perplexity, confusion, or doubt,” moves through “conjunctural anticipation” into “examination…exploration, [and] analysis,” and, after clarifying the problem and tentative suggestions, concludes with “a plan of action” (Selective Writings, 1973, pp. 494–506, as quoted in Teaching Technical Communication, 2004, p. 4).

Through dialogue, observation, and practice with those who share their knowledge and practices, we, as a community, can sustain the notion of forethought, and further refigure the teaching of technical communication as an “art,” a techne. As such, we can recognize better how theory becomes practice, and teaching becomes research. Dubinsky continued by stating that by so doing, we can recognize not only the complexity of our discipline but also the knowledge-generating element of teaching and the fact that because what we do is so intimately tied up with how we do it, we benefit from studying and reflecting on our teaching.

(p. 3)

As administrators and as teachers, we occupy a unique position that helps us recognize the complexity of our discipline, not only from the instrumental and practical approaches of developing programs and teaching courses but also in theoretical terms. Both serve to inform each other, and both are
often challenging and rewarding. We hope that the Curriculum Showcase section will offer both administrators and teachers ways of organizing, framing, and/or of reshaping various issues in the field through the framework of teaching.

References

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