Solving Problems in Technical Communication

Editors
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Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber present an interesting collection of essays from an array of authors whose names will certainly be recognized by the informed reader. Unlike many introductory texts in most academic disciplines, Solving Problems in Technical Communication lacks the visual pyrotechnics and redundant ancillary support materials such as course management systems already supplied by university instructional fees. This plainer approach costs students much less than the typical introductory service course text and provides a richer theoretical approach to technical communication.

Such a collection is long overdue. In an academic field overcrowded with texts created for the service course, technical communication texts that focus on introducing the technical communicator to the field are somewhat limited to two of the major texts: Central Works in Technical Communication (2004)—another Johnson-Eilola and Selber collection—or Tim Peeples’ Professional Writing and Rhetoric: Readings from the Field (2003). A great deal has happened to technical communication over the past 10
years. For example, social media management emerged so suddenly that people currently working in the field could not have received a specific theoretical background; social media management did not exist when they were in their academic programs. Publishers are certainly to blame since they are all too ready to crank out another version of a best-selling service course text, but allow those for niche courses in technical communication to languish; the Allyn & Bacon series in technical communication has not released a new title since 2011. Lack of support for niche classes has caused some authors who wanted to revise to account for such a rapidly changing field, to seek other publishers. Because *Central Works in Technical Communication* is largely composed of work originally published elsewhere, it lends itself better to the graduate class. Though *Professional Writing and Rhetoric: Readings from the Field* works better, in my opinion, for undergraduates, some might not be comfortable with its grounding in Aristotelian rhetoric. A new text is certainly called for.

First, it is worthwhile to consider the level for which the text might be appropriate. Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2013) are not specific, recommending only that it is appropriate for “newcomers and people with some experience” (p. 1). The essays composing *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* were solicited, and each follows a parallel structure. Each chapter develops its topic with a seven-part plan (summary, introduction, literature review, heuristic, extended example, conclusion, and discussion questions), suggesting the text would work better for undergraduates who might benefit from a straightforward structure. Such organization may be better than the diversity of approaches found in texts such as *Central Works in Technical Communication* (2004) with its essays drawn largely from articles published in journals and essay collections.

In terms of who would be most comfortable teaching from *Solving Problems in Technical Communication*, graduate student instructors might have more trouble with the text than professors. There is not a teacher’s edition or other support materials, and organizationally, the book is broken broadly into these sections: “Mapping the Field,” “Situating the Field,” “Understanding Field Approaches,” and “Developing Field Knowledge.” Certainly a reader well versed in technical communication could develop among these essays other, more specific themes. A coordinator for graduate teaching, for example, could provide some direction for Teaching Assistants to develop an ethnographic theme that might include Richard Selfe and Cynthia Selfe’s “What Are the Boundaries, Artifacts, and Identities of Technical Communication?”; Jim Henry’s “How Can Technical Communicators Fit into Contemporary Organizations?”; Bernadette Longo and T. Kenny
Fountain’s “What Can History Teach Us about Technical Communication?”; and Clay Spinuzzi’s “How Can Technical Communicators Study Work Contexts?” These essays fall in three of *Solving Problems in Technical Communication*’s four sections, however. Graduate students could certainly be left to make decisions about supplemental materials for themselves, but graduate students are, more often than not, new teachers who are somewhat overwhelmed with the courses they are taking as well as with internships and other responsibilities.

*Solving Problems in Technical Communication* could be especially informative for department chairs whose background is in literature, or even rhetoric and composition, but who find themselves chairing a more contemporary Department of English Language Studies. When such a chair must evaluate a portfolio from a tenure-track faculty member in technical communication, this collection can provide background to better understand the issues currently important to the discipline.

In that regard, *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* can provide a technical communication program director with evidence for best practice in technical communication pedagogy as well as something to point to when a professor from another area in the typical English department has questions about the appropriateness of assignments, for example. It would allow a program director to assure a literature professor that assigning students to create a form is an appropriate assignment. Not only does *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* support creating a form as a frequent task for the technical communicator, but also that doing so is fraught with other implications worth discussing in a university classroom, such as how race or ethnicity might be indicated on a form. Indeed, in the “Introduction,” Johnson-Eilola and Selber tell us, “designing forms is a common workplace task for technical communicators” (p. 4). Brent Henze’s essay on genre provides theory to further support the form as a relevant workplace activity for the technical communicator. In this instance, hard work that should culminate in tenure or promotion might be awarded, rather than ruined; objections to such an assignment could indeed even emanate from the rhetoric and composition field.

For future editions, I suggest that the authors create an alternative index or table of contents, as they did for *Central Works in Technical Communication*, to provide more organization according to theory. In addition to ethnography, for example, usability is another theme evident in this collection. Kirk St. Amant provides an excellent introduction to international communication, but where does it fit with the themes? Would it work better with usability or with ethnography? Conceivably, it could work with both,
and such could be indicated. Doing so would make this collection a more readily useful text for students and graduate student instructors.

Because *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* is an introductory text, I was hoping for some readings that would explore the history of technical communication. Including a reading that contextualizes how to understand technical communication and its role in the liberal arts would be a useful tool for novices. I recall being mesmerized by such readings when I took a research methods course for my master’s program. The title of Bernadette Longo and T. Kenny Fountain’s essay seems to promise historical context of technical communication, but instead, the essay deals with the history of a company in an ethnographic context, a theoretical concept certainly worthy of exploration, but not exactly what I was hoping for. Indeed, in their introduction, Johnson-Eilola and Selber specify this collection will allow readers to “recognize ways in which the past can be leveraged to improve practices (the field does not operate in a temporal vacuum)” (p. 10), yet none of the essays address the history of technical communication as a discipline. Johnson-Eilola and Selber seem to think the section on “Situating the Field” and the literature reviews in each essay suffice for historical context, but how is the student to contextualize technical communication, as it has been practiced since the Ancient Romans? Richard Selfe and Cynthia Selfe approach the history of the field in their essay, but their concern is more with the definition of technical communication. The historical context is certainly valuable for various topics relevant to technical communication such as the past failure of Francis Bacon or, more recently, I.A. Richards, to create an International English. Why might more recent efforts to develop an International English be likely to succeed? How have failures of past attempts been accounted for? Chauvinistically depending on the Internet is not necessarily the path to success with such a project.

Overall, *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* is a worthwhile and much appreciated addition to the texts that introduce students to technical communication. Each essay generously provides direction for activities and discussion. It realistically portrays technical communication as a discipline for those interested in solving problems and in being engaged in lifelong learning in this rapidly evolving field.

**References**


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