

## ACADEMIC AND PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON ESSENTIAL WORKS IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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George Hayhoe, editor of the Society for Technical Communication's journal *Technical Communication* recently asked me to prepare an article that listed and described the current "essential works on technical communication." As I began to create categories for a list collected from many academics and practitioners, I discovered a dramatic difference in the works valued by the two groups. While some works were valued by both practitioners and academics, I also found a clear dividing line between works recommended by academics and those recommended by practitioners.

This dividing line reminded me of a recent observation by Stanley Dicks who has spent over 13 years in academia and 16 years as a practicing technical communicator in industry. Dicks argues that the "cultural differences" between academic and workplace professionals are so pronounced that "operating in these two worlds can be like traveling between countries" (p. 23).

For example, at a recent conference, an academic colleague asked me what works I had included in my list on the subject of "design." I mentioned Edward R. Tufte, a professor from Yale who is well known for several books on graphic design, and I can still recall the look of distaste on her face. She even made a gesture of sticking her index finger in her mouth, as if to say "how disgusting!" However, I had no choice but to include his works if I were honest and consistent with my method of collecting data from both academics and practitioners. In fact, Tufte's works were recommended by as many sources as those by any author on my list! Specifically, Tufte had 17 recommendations. However, only one of those recommendations was from an academic source. All the rest were from practitioners.

I became curious to know why Tufte's works are valued by practitioners but apparently viewed differently by academics. A common academic view of Tufte is reflected in a brief section from a review of his book *Visual Explanations* that was published in the academic journal *Technical Communication Quarterly* (Brasseur). In my "translation" of the reviewer's academic language, it seems clear that in the reviewer's view, Tufte's book is a clever mix of pretty pictures and simplistic ideas that only fanatics and practitioners who do not think too deeply will appreciate! In addition, according to this reviewer, the book might be good for brainstorming and Tufte means well, but his simple-minded and simplistic advice can get you into trouble. What I find remarkable about this review is that it never quotes at length or takes seriously Tufte's Preface, which might give readers insight into Tufte's goals. For example, Tufte states,

The idea is to make designs that enhance richness, complexity, resolution, dimensionality, and clarity of the content... to extend the depth of our own knowledge and experience. (10)

I do not intend to take the time here to defend Tufte, but much of the review appears to be condescending and suggests that, to be academically respectable, Tufte's work should offer something quite different from what the author himself had in mind for the book.

However, despite such academic criticisms and despite the reaction of my academic colleague at the conference, practitioners somehow find Tufte's work valuable. I have looked more closely at Tufte's book to try to understand why practitioners find his works valuable. And I think I have found at least a partial answer to this question.

I can imagine that if I were a practitioner writing a manual or creating a Web page, Tufte's books could serve to inspire me to think creatively and develop useful ways to communicate with my readers—or as Tufte would say "help enhance the ... clarity of the content." Tufte's clear-cut advice and sharp opinions might help me solve everyday technical communication problems.

However, as an academic, I can understand why Tufte's books contrast with academic writing. For example, in an academic article on design the authors describe how maps illustrate that visuals are not simply neutral representations, but are "complicit with social-control mechanisms inextricably linked to power and authority...Rules of inclusion determine whether something is mapped, what aspects of a thing are mapped, and what representational strategies and devices are used to map those aspects." (Barton and Barton, 137) This article reflects the practice of many academics to complicate issues beyond what is readily apparent or straightforward. However, few practitioners would find this article helpful to their immediate needs.

I have come to understand the practitioner perspective a bit better from nearly 30 years of work with a practitioner as one of my coauthors of the *Handbook of Technical Writing*. Charles "Ted" Brusaw has never been a college educator. During his career, he has been a professional writer of fiction, a technical writer, and a trainer. Brusaw was for many years the manager of technical publications at NCR Corporation, which was the world's largest manufacturer of cash registers and a major producer of mainframe computers.

I respect my coauthor as both a writer and thinker. However, I can also tell you that we have struggled because of "cultural differences" between practitioners and academics. As we were developing the first editions of the *Handbook*, that Brusaw often

said about a topic, "well, that never happens in the real world" or "you always write [something] in this way" and then he suggested that we provide a simple, quick, and absolute rule.

However, because of my academic perspective, I often saw such answers as simplistic and even troubling. At the same time, I knew he was a successful writer and manager of technical communicators. It took me *years* to realize that in his environment at NCR Corporation, Brusaw and others had worked hard to construct "shortcuts" or practical techniques to solve complex problems so they could produce documentation within tight deadlines. These shortcuts were often built into their ways of thinking. I realized he had contextual constraints at NCR Corporation that were a part of his workplace and that required a short-hand based on a complex historical process of examining rhetorical variables.

In the process of working with my coauthor, I learned that those of us in the academy can too quickly reject the seemingly easy and apparently superficial comments of practitioners. Brusaw has told me that his relationship with me has also helped him appreciate the academic perspective as well. We have both discovered that we have different perspectives because we have had different goals in our work.

- Brusaw's goal as a technical communicator was to produce usable documentation for very specific products and within tight deadlines.
- My goal as an academic has been to prepare students for life-long careers in technical communication that may involve them with tasks that none of us could imagine.

Brusaw has had to think in very practical and immediately applicable ways, while I have had to think in more abstract and conceptual and long-term ways.

For years, I have taught a class entitled "Advanced Technical Writing," intended for students who wish to become professional technical writers. As I look back, I realize that I could have not imagined what my students 25 years ago would produce today as technical communicators. So today, I am glad that I taught students conceptual ways to think about document problems, to develop a writing process for documentation, and to understand general principles of clarity and organization that have transcended time.

Although my perspective has been different than that of my practitioner coauthor, we have learned that our different perspectives are most valuable in making the *Handbook of Technical Writing* useful for students both in the classroom and later on the job. It is important for academics and practitioners to understand and appreciate each other's perspectives because we need to cooperate in our work because:

- Academics need the advice of practitioners to help us educate students who can succeed in the workplace today as well as 25 years from now.
- Practitioners need academics because we can develop a base of knowledge that will help working technical communicators do their jobs well and at the same time gain respect in their workplaces.

For instance, four years ago, an advanced graduate student, Ulrike Mueller, worked within our technical communication program. As a part of her studies, Ulrike developed a research project for a Milwaukee technical documentation company. Ulrike observed the management of this company, gathered documents and information, and interviewed technical communicators. One result of her research was an academic paper -- but she also wrote a report to the president of this company that recommended specific steps to improve its operation. Those of us at the university were pleased with her work, and the president of the technical documentation company was very pleased because Ulrike helped him improve his operation.

This is only one example of how the academic community can do its work and help practitioners at the same time. However, I am concerned that the practitioner-academic differences could become greater over time. I worry about academic programs and research becoming too removed and too self-conscious as we develop Ph.D. programs in technical communication. As advanced students work to find topics for dissertations, it will be easy to become further and further disconnected from the realities of the workplace professional.

One answer for those of us in the academy is to keep our research grounded, like Ulrike Mueller's project, in actual workplaces. But another is for those of us in the academic world to avoid dismissing the works of someone like Tufte and begin to understand why they are so valuable to practicing technical communicators.

Of course, some undeniable "cultural differences" in perspectives may not need to be fully understood by each side. As I have argued before in relation to national cultural differences, "Perhaps all we can do, perhaps all we should do, is view our cultural differences as differences – nothing less and nothing more."

Having said that, however, I also argue that practitioners and academics in technical communication need to respect the perspectives that are reflected by works—that is the books, articles, and other resources—that are essential to helping each of us reach our goals.

I like especially the way Ulrike Mueller put it in a recent message to me. She noted:

I agree that it is dangerous if both sides stick to their own side of the fence. This fence needs to have holes and needs gaps where one can pass through. I have the working perspective now and do not spend much time thinking about the academic world I have to admit. But I think that is probably true for most technical writers out there. So coming to a compromise, accepting both sides, certainly [benefits practitioners and academics] since both sides have valuable input that they can provide for each other.

I agree with Ulrike, but we may find that it is the students who come to our academic programs and then become practitioners who will help us maintain balance in our perspectives. And balance is essential because I believe that the strength of technical communication grows from the combination of and a respect for both the academic and practitioner perspectives.

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES: THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND PEDAGOGY

*George Hayhoe, East Carolina University*

*Technical Communication* received an overwhelming response to the call for proposals for Mike Albers' special issue (August 2005) on the future development of the technical communication profession. The large number of outstanding proposals for that issue included a cluster of proposals on topics related to academic programs and pedagogy. Rather than turn down outstanding potential articles, we decided to do a second special issue focusing on the future direction of academic concerns. Carol Barnum of Southern Polytechnic State University has agreed to serve as guest editor of this second special issue to be published in August 2006.

We have space for a few more articles, so we encourage anyone who is working on innovative curricula or pedagogical techniques in technical communication to consider a proposal for this special issue.

The schedule for this special issue on future direction of academic programs and pedagogy is as follows:

1 September 2005	500-word proposal due
15 October 2005	Acceptances sent to authors
15 December 2005	Draft manuscript due
1 February 2006	Comments sent to authors
15 March 2006	Final manuscript due
15 July 2006	Issue published

Proposals and drafts will be peer-reviewed. Acceptance of a proposal does not guarantee acceptance of the final article.

Send proposals by e-mail to [cbarnum@spsu.edu](mailto:cbarnum@spsu.edu) If you have questions about a proposal idea for this special issue, or if you wish to be considered as a reviewer of proposals and manuscripts for this special issue, please contact Carol Barnum at the same e-mail address.

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