The Role of Theory in Technical Communication

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” This is a famous quote by the founder of social psychology, Kurt Lewin. A quote that has been misused by scholars in a wide variety of disciplines who do not care about the practical relevance of their work. But also a viewpoint that may be overlooked by scholars who are primarily focused on making practically relevant contributions.

Technical Communication has always emphasized the importance of the practical relevance of articles. After all, the journal’s audience consists of practitioners and academics. But there is a more fundamental reason as well. The journal presupposes that technical communication is an instrumental discipline: a discipline that eventually seeks to contribute to the effectiveness of communicating about technology, a discipline that aims to support technical communication practitioners in their jobs. It is a discipline that, so to speak, resembles medicine more than biology.

In the past decades, technical communication has made the successful transition from an informal and intuition- or expertise-based discipline to a more formal and research-based discipline. Empirical research methodology and formalized analytical approaches have become more important, both in academic and in applied research. But where does the theory of technical communication stand now that the journal celebrates its 60th anniversary?

Notions of the Concept of Theory

There are many notions of the concept of theory. The most simplistic one is that a contribution is theoretical when it lacks practical relevance. I have often encountered this in practice, for instance in selection processes for research funding. Scholars who do not have any practical aims almost automatically score high on the theoretical contribution of their research plans, whereas scholars who propose practically relevant research are easily suspected of not making a real theoretical contribution. In the field of technical communication, all publications that do not eventually contribute to the adaptation of technology to human needs, to the usability of technical devices or instructions, to the process of creating user support, or to the profession of technical communication practitioners would be characterized as theoretical in this definition. The term “theoretical” then serves as a euphemism for practically irrelevant.

A more fruitful definition of theory refers to knowledge that is, to some extent, generalizable, verifiable, falsifiable, and predictive. A theory exceeds specific research contexts, and can be tested—in some cases with formal experiments, in other cases with less straightforward empirical data. In the context of technical communication, a theory would offer practitioners guidance in their daily work, not by prescribing them what to do, but by helping them to understand and make sense of their situation. This is, in my view, the kind of theory that Kurt Lewin must have been referring to.

Another, more superficial characteristic of a theory is that it is more or less formalized. It has a name with words like “theory,” “model,” or “hypothesis.” It is referred to by other scholars, and investigated in several studies. It is, in other words, a social construction, and may be connected to standard research instruments with known psychometric properties.

Technical Communication Theories

When reading the main technical communication journals, I cannot help but make a number of observations that call for reflection. First, there are many contributions in our field that do not seem to aim at the core of technical communication (effectively communicating about technology) and do not seem to have any practical relevance. I can understand people investigating communication in general as a cultural phenomenon, but the usefulness of technical communication as a non-instrumental discipline is in my view debatable.

Second, despite the growth of an empirical tradition, there are...
very few real theories available in our field. Theories that help us understand users of technology, their selection of information sources, their informational needs, the way they use (or do not use) instructions, the causes of usability problems, the effects of visual and verbal information, the effects of different types of user support, and the problem of intercultural communication. Or theories that help us understand the process of efficiently creating user support, the collaboration between technical communicators and engineers, and the use of applied research techniques. Or theories that help us understand the nature of expertise in technical communication, the role of communication skills, the way communication skills can best be taught, and the role of empathy and perspective-taking. Of course, these are only examples. There are several studies that contribute to our knowledge on these issues, but they often do not exceed the level of single studies, and they do not seem to aim at formalizing theory, and preparing it for further investigation.

Third, empirical contributions are often either entirely descriptive (trying to map a current situation), or predominantly prescriptive (formulating guidelines or heuristics). In my view a step toward useful theory-building

Frank R. Smith Outstanding Article Award 2012
Each year, an independent jury of three researchers and practitioners selects one outstanding article and up to three distinguished articles that appeared in *Technical Communication* during the previous calendar year. This year’s jury members were Jan Ulijn (chair), Editorial Advisory Board member Michelle Corbin, and winner of last year’s Distinguished Article Award, Luc Desnoyers. The award honors the memory of Frank R. Smith, during whose 18 years as editor this journal became established as the flagship publication of STC and of the profession. This year, the jury selected one outstanding and two distinguished articles.

**2012 Outstanding article in Technical Communication**
**Hanna Jochmann-Mannak, Leo Lentz, Theo Huibers, and Ted Sanders.** Three types of children’s informational Web sites: An inventory of design conventions. (November 2012)

“For its focus on the core tenets of technical communication (audience analysis, use cases and scenarios, and information design); for analyzing a large corpus of children’s Web sites to identify and better understand what design conventions exist today; and for putting this research in the context of one of the most interesting literature reviews that described the cognitive development of children and its impact on general Web site design principles on scanning, searching, and browsing. This article inspires, informs, and directs practitioners and academics alike.”

**2012 Distinguished articles in Technical Communication**
**Saul Carliner.** Using business models to describe technical communication groups. (May 2012)

“For providing an excellent introduction to the management theory of business models, detailing a taxonomy of business models for technical communication groups, and reviewing the implications for practicing technical communicators. Technical communicators can apply this theory to better identify and choose a technical communication position in a variety of companies.”

**Jason Swarts.** New modes of help: Best practices for instructional video. (August 2012)

“For identifying a set of best practices that practitioners can readily apply when creating instructional videos, for identifying the communication design features of good videos, and for completing a rhetorical analysis of instructional videos.”
requires a focus on understanding and explaining, instead of describing or prescribing. For instance, we know much about the kinds of courses currently offered in technical communication programs, and we also know what kinds of competencies employers ask of technical communicators, but do we know what makes a good technical communicator and how they acquire the relevant competencies?

Fourth, the topics addressed in the technical communication literature are very diverse, and there seems to be a tradition of continuously exploring new topics instead of deepening existing insights. This tendency, although innovative and fresh, is not beneficial for the chances of building substantial theories. I would like to argue that practical relevance is a *sine qua non* for theories in technical communication, and that it may be useful to view research contributions more from a theoretical perspective.

**In This Issue**
This issue includes three articles. The first article was written by Derek Ross. He developed and tested a method of “deep audience analysis” in the context of environment-related communication. He describes the rationale of his approach and explains the procedure for technical communicators who want to use it.

The second article was written by Heidi Everett. She focused on the credibility of small business Web sites. She developed a six-step process of conducting a cost-effective credibility test, and illustrates the process using a particular small-business Web site.

The third article, by Ehren Pflugfelder, focuses on the use of minimalist design principles in the design of so-called Web-app videos. He does this in an educational context. The effects were tested using a student instruction of minimalist documentation concepts and heuristics.

**IN MEMORIAM: A. Stanley Higgins**
We are saddened to lose one of the great former editors of *Technical Communication*. On 3 March, A. Stanley Higgins passed away. He served as the journal’s editor for an impressive 15 years, from 1961 to 1976. In an interview with Ed Malone, he stated that he was most proud of the fact that he “kept the journal going.” He probably put into words the feelings of all his successors. We will keep on keeping the journal going, with great respect and thankfulness for his contribution to the field.