Understanding Users, Technical Communicators, and Business

Understanding Users
Technical communicators are and should be the user’s advocate. All-round technical communicators are better equipped than other professionals to understand and predict whether and how people will use technology, what kinds of problems they may encounter using it, and how they can best learn how to use technology. To fulfill that role, technical communicators must know the user, preferably not in a cold scientific way, but from within, based on empathy or perspective-taking.

A major role of technical communication research, then, is to contribute to technical communicators’ empathy with users. Everything we want to achieve in our discipline, in terms of contributing to society, can only be achieved through the technical communication professionals who are working in practice. Any conception of an academic discipline that systematically and gradually solves the complete puzzle of, for instance, instructing users about technological devices—comparable with the unraveling of DNA’s genetic code—is not justified. It is very unlikely that all our work will eventually lead to a fundamental and exhaustive set of guidelines, which can be applied mechanically to ensure effective communication.

Two plausible but trivial arguments for that position are that there are insufficient numbers of technical communication researchers to make that happen, and that their research activities are too scattered. Both are true, but two other arguments are more fundamental. We are working in a dynamic and complex world, and our knowledge and skills are context-dependent and often tacit. It is a harmful illusion to see social sciences or humanities as a clone of the natural sciences. In such a dynamic and context-dependent environment, the practical wisdom of technical communicators is of vital importance. Understanding users is a crucial part of such practical wisdom.

Understanding Technical Communicators
Given the crucial role of technical communication practitioners, it cannot suffice to understand the users; it is important to also have an understanding of technical communicators. We need to know more about the empathic competencies of technical communicators, as basic competencies, but also in relation to their daily workload, the tools they use, and the organizational context they work in.

What exactly is the nature of the expertise of technical communicators? It is no secret that this expertise is multifaceted, and empathic skills are just one of the many aspects. No matter how useful and insightful, existing research into the design of academic programs and the competencies asked in job postings merely scratches the surface when it comes to the competencies that make a difference, and the potential shortcomings in the competencies of technical communicators.

We need to study technical communicators in the workplace more in-depth, and learn from the expertise of experienced and seasoned professionals, and from events in specific projects. We can learn a lot from successful and unsuccessful projects. Our journal has two article categories for such experiences: “Tutorial” for the exchange of research- or experience-based insights, and “Case history” for descriptions of projects and the lessons that can be learned from them.

Understanding Business
It is also relevant to study the business context in which technical communicators have to function. I do not think there is research to prove it—at the very least I have not found such studies—but I am convinced that an organization’s mission is an important factor for the user friendliness of the user support. Does an organization see the user support as a fully-fledged part of its products? Does it make the point that the quality of user instructions and the usability of its products are important?
Or is it more about money, and
the availability of an acceptable
looking manual?

We have seen various initiatives
in the past focusing on the added
value of technical communication.
It may be a good idea to follow
up on that line of research, with
empirical studies of organizational
strategies, user perceptions,
and technical communicator
perceptions. The research may
have a critical tone: eventually, it
is about the power of money and
the interests of users or consumers.
I can see parallels with prolific
themes such as sustainability and
corporate social responsibility.
For a sustainable relationship
with customers, high-quality user
support appears to be important.
To what extent can an organization
afford to make users pay for
functionality they will never use
and are not even aware of?

About the Journal
A few announcements about the
journal must be made. I regret to
say that two of our long-standing
Editorial Advisory Board members
have decided to step back. Sherry
Southard and Carolyn Rude
resigned from their jobs at their
universities, and chose to also leave
the Editorial Advisory Board. Sherry
Southard was not only an Editorial
Advisory Board member; she has
also been an Associate Editor in
charge of Recent & Relevant for
many years. I want to thank Sherry
and Carolyn for their work and
dedication, and for the always
pleasant collaboration, and I wish
them all the best.

A second announcement
involves a change in the review
procedure. At the end of this year,
I will have installed an Editorial
Review Board of expert academic
researchers and practitioners.
The main purpose of moving from
ad hoc reviewers to a more limited
group of dedicated researchers is
to accelerate the review process.
I strive to reduce the maximum
turnaround time for manuscripts
to two months in 2014.

Third, the new impact factors
in the Web of Science have been
announced. The impact factor
gives an indication of the academic
influence of a journal, and is
computed on the basis of the
number of articles published in the
journal and the number of times
other articles have referred to them.
*Technical Communication* has a
new impact factor of .750, and
ranks 36th in the broad category of
communication journals. The new
impact factor is a little lower than
last year, but close to the impact
factor of two years ago. Within
the sub domain of technical
communication, the journal takes a
stable first position.

Finally, the article Hanna
Mannak, Leo Lentz, Theo
Huibers, and Ted Sanders wrote
in last year’s volume (“Three types
of children’s informational Web
sites: An inventory of design
conventions”), which already
won the Frank R. Smith Award,
also received a Silver EXCEL
Award from the Association
Media & Publishing, in the
category “Journals: Feature
Article.” EXCEL Awards are
presented to the finest media
products and publications in the
industry, and the competition is
strong. I am very proud of this
achievement, both for the article
and for the journal. My heartfelt
congratulations to the authors.

In This Issue
The first article in this issue,
written by Kevin Garrison, explains
in detail why it is important for
universities to have a usability lab,
and how universities can design
and implement such a usability
lab at relatively low costs. In his
tutorial, he draws on the specific
experiences he had implementing
a usability lab at Angelo State
University.

The second article is
written by Nicole Loorbach,
Joyce Karreman, and Michael
Steehouder. They focus on the
motivation and encouragement
of elderly people who must use
modern technological devices and
their manuals. Specifically, they
investigated users’ reactions to two
motivational elements that might
be added to user instructions:
verification steps and personal
stories. They conclude that both
elements appear to be acceptable to
elderly users.

The third article, by Hans van
der Meij and Jan van der Meij,
discusses eight general guidelines
for instructional videos. Video
instructions are increasingly popular,
and the phenomenon therefore
calls for systematic research and
analysis within the domain of
technical communication. In last
year’s volume, Jason Swarts already
presented guidelines based on an
analysis of YouTube videos. In
this issue, Van der Meij and Van
der Meij take a more theoretical
perspective. They present and
illustrate guidelines based on
instructional theories and tested in
empirical research.