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Power and legitimacy in technical communication

Volume 2 — Strategies for Professional Status

Edited by Teresa **Kynell-Hunt** and **Gerald J Savage**
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Reviewed by **Gavin Ireland MISTC**

In Volume 1, Kynell-Hunt and Savage sought to show how the technical communicator and the profession have evolved, comparing the development to that of established professions such as engineering. Despite being hard going for the average reader, the book makes many valid points and provides an interesting collection of background stories and hints for the future. In Volume 2, the same editors begin to explain and suggest strategies for developing the profession, based on the lessons learned in Volume 1.

In Part 1, Kynell-Hunt recaps the development of technical communication out of the engineering profession, through the introduction of engineering writing courses and on to recent history. Chapter 2 examines the more recent history of technical communication and suggests future direction. Chapter 3 examines points of reference contributing to the professionalisation of technical communication, selected from several technical communication journals dating from 1988 to 1997.

Part 2, 'Strategies for Contemporary Practice', contains three essays that discuss the current situation and problems faced by technical communicators. It examines the differences and relationships between the practitioners and academics.

As in many chapters in both books, Marjorie Davis compares the profession's development with the professionalisation of engineers and medical doctors. She argues that, while most of us have 'drifted' into the field, the emergence of what she calls 'the new professionals' who consider themselves apart from us 'drifters' represent new, higher standards of professionalism. She also identifies key areas of development for a professional future, including research, accreditation for technical communication programmes and licensing for practitioners — areas that any professional association in the field should already be aiming for.

Louise Rehling looks at relationships between professors and practitioners of technical communication, and describes the apparent disregard between the two. She goes on to suggest that, as long as we lack respect or recognition for each other, we can hardly expect to be respected or recognised by anyone else.

In the last chapter of Part 2, Robert Johnson examines the recent growth in technical communication and suggests it must be sustained to develop our profession. He looks at 'deeply sustaining a relationship with technology', 'deeply sustaining academic programs' and 'sustaining communities and selves' and concludes that we should 'redefine growth as it applies to technical communication programs', 'become stewards of the technologies that fall within the purview of technical communication' and 'foster a stronger sense of technical communication's responsibilities outside of our immediate academic and workplace contexts'.

In the final part of the book, the authors look to the future of the discipline and some of the paths that our profession may take. Carolyn Rude examines Best Practices in Policy Discourse and uses various examples such as computer documentation, feminist critique and studies of stakeholder participation in practice to see what lessons we can learn. The title of this part, 'Strategies for Alternative Futures', might lead you to expect some strategies or direction for the future of technical communication. However, it reaches a rather weak conclusion that suggests where we might end up if we fail to identify practices that lead policy discourse in a direction that suits practitioners.

In 'Critical Interpretive Research in Technical Communication: Issues of Power and Legitimacy', Nancy Roundy Blyler suggests that scholars could adopt an alternative research perspective and re-examine the goals of research, thereby altering the type of legitimacy sought for our field. Blyler gives practical suggestions of how 'Critical Interpretive Research' could change the way in which research is done and the conclusions that it reaches, challenging the traditional concepts of power and legitimacy.

Savage, in the penultimate chapter 'Tricksters, Fools and Sophists', gives a detailed and easy-to-read discussion of how existing and previous notions of professionalism are becoming unsuitable for both the theory and practice of technical communication. He presents an alternative model for its development, based on a sophistic practice.

In the final chapter, 'Technical Communication in the 21st Century: Where Are We Going?' originally published in 1999 in a periodical, M Jimmie Killingsworth examines some of what we currently do and offers one or two alternatives. However, he seems to avoid the subject of where technical communication is heading in the 21st century completely. The chapter is interesting and well written, but badly titled and not the best choice with which to finish the book.

Like its predecessor, Volume 2 makes interesting points and tells entertaining stories, but fails to live up to its title. I would expect it to be aimed at people in a position to change things in technical communication. However, not everyone in such a position has an academic background and so I suggest that the editors, in adopting such an academic tone and language, have failed to consider an important section of their audience. **C**

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