Toward a More Integrated View of Technical Communication

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For the past few years, I have attended a number of industry conferences focused on content management (CM); reviewed a wealth of CM-focused publications, including trade books, white papers, newsletters, and blogs; and followed numerous CM-focused online discussions. Through these experiences and readings I have learned a great deal about the affordances and challenges of CM. But the message that has most impacted my thinking about CM—and what it means for the field of Technical Communication (TC)—is this: the era of document-based information development (ID), which has shaped all aspects of TC research, training, and practice since the field's inception, is coming to an end.

The era of topic-based ID, commonly referred to as CM, has arrived in full force. And this era is all about integration—that is, integration of organizational and user-generated content, disciplines and departments, expertise and roles, and business processes and tools. In a topic-based approach to ID, organizational content, from technical to marketing to training content, is created in the form of stand-alone topics rather than documents or books. These topics conform to predefined rules that ensure the topics are consistently structured and can be assembled into different information products (e.g., user guide or training module) rendered in different outputs (e.g., HTML or ePub) for different delivery channels (e.g., mobile phones or websites).

A key goal of topic-based ID is to enable organizations to meet consumer expectations for content in an increasingly mobile world. To do this, organizations are adopting strategies, processes, and technologies that allow them to create highly engineered, modular

content that is not limited to any "one purpose, technology, or output" (Rockley and Cooper, 2012, p. 52). Cross-disciplinary teams of strategists are identifying and analyzing customer-facing content across organizational units (e.g., technical publications, training, product support, marketing), architecting and modeling that content, and developing unified processes so that all involved in developing, storing, and publishing content do it in the same way, allowing for content to be effectively shared and combined in myriad ways (Andersen, 2014).

Given sweeping changes in the content industry, I reemphasize in this inaugural column on CM the pressing need for the field of TC to develop a framework for its work that centers on collaborating with other fields and achieving cross-disciplinary goals. Spilka (2009) first emphasized this need in her edited collection, *Digital Literacy for Technical Communication*, which called on technical communicators to focus more on how the field can evolve rather than how the field is going to survive. As Spilka noted, other fields are claiming a stake in the topic-based approach to ID; to thrive, she argued, our field must find ways to collaborate with these fields, to join together in achieving larger, cross-disciplinary goals (p. 4).

To get us thinking about what such a framework might look like, Spilka urged us to put aside traditional boundaries that have long distinguished our work from the work of other fields and instead focus on questions such as follows (p. 6, questions copied verbatim here):

- How can we adapt, adjust, and contribute?
- How can we help toward goals that are larger in scope than those we have worked on in the past?
- How can we contribute to the social good with our unique perspective, knowledge, and strategies?
- How can we join others in "adding value" and in making a difference?
- How can we show how we matter in the context of the larger social environment of our work and how can we help in broad, even global ways?

CM thought leaders, who widely agree that the field of TC needs a changed mindset, have begun talking about an integrated view of TC as one answer to Spilka's questions—as a new way of framing our work (Baker, 2012; Giordano & Martine, 2011; Gollner, 2011; Parker-Richards, 2012). A promising column in Tech Writer Today articulates what an Integrated Technical Communication (ITC) might look like. In the column's first article, Giordano and Martine (2011) define ITC as follows:

> *"Integrated technical communications (ITC*) is the coordination and integration of all technical communication processes, tools, functions, and sources within an organization to convey information and knowledge relevant to optimizing the users' product experience."*

This definition, the authors explain, "focuses on increasing the users' understanding and experience" rather than on researching and creating content, and it focuses on integration, which "leaves ample room to look for strategic coherence in our vision, planning, and execution of technical communication activities." Integration has been articulated by Gollner (2011) as the convergence of TC and business analysis. This convergence is critical to the success of an organization's content strategy, or the underlying framework that governs the production, management, and delivery of topic-based content.

In an interview with Giordano (2012) on the topic of ITC and the content revolution, Gollner proposed an Integrated Product Teams (IPT) model that integrates TC with all aspects of the product lifecycle. As key contributors, suggested Gollner, technical communicators can help the IPT "develop a knowledge base for the product … [that] informs not just the users activities but the product design itself." Gollner described the technical communicator as a "choreographer, curator, facilitator and community builder" who works "in concert with engineering and product marketing to manage [the] iterative refinement cycle more effectively." In the IPT model, the technical communicator becomes product insurance, keeping user needs and expectations in mind at all stages of product development, including the development and management of all product-related content.

Gollner's vision of the technical communicator's role on an IPT is not all that different from TC researcher articulations of TC as symbolic-analytic work, or knowledge-centered work that affords technical communicators meaningful agency in their organizations (Albers, 2005; Dicks, 2009; Faber & Johnson-Eilola, 2002; Hart-Davidson, 2009; Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Salvo & Rosinski, 2010; Slattery 2007). What his vision and the ITC framework offer beyond existing articulations, though, are concrete starting points for how the field can adapt to the massive changes taking place in the content industry. These starting points position technical communicators not as content creators but as strategic contributors to CM initiatives, a role that requires collaboration with cross-disciplinary teams and content strategy work throughout the product lifecycle.

But, as is too often the case, most technical communicators have not been trained to think like managers, business analysts, or content engineers, and they have little to no experience analyzing a large corpus of content and architecting and modeling that content for topic-based ID across the enterprise. Most technical communicators are thus ill-prepared to help orchestrate CM initiatives. Our academic programs, with few exceptions, have not kept pace with changes in the content industry (Gu & Pullman, 2008; McDaniel & Steward, 2011; Spilka, 2009) and are still training students for the era of document-based ID (see Meloncon & Henschel's telling survey of 185 undergraduate programs). Developing a new framework for TC education means, among other things, designing new curricula centered on vastly expanded rhetorical situations, situations that look very different from the document-based rhetorical situations that have long driven pedagogical approaches to TC (i.e., situations focused on the writer-audience-subject relationship).

A first important step toward developing this framework is to conduct research that helps us understand what these expanded rhetorical situations entail and what skills, people, resources, and tools should be integrated to effectively assess these situations and develop and implement appropriate solutions. A second important step is to actively engage with and learn from CM thought leaders and other fields that are largely defining and shaping the CM

discourse, including best practices that organizations are widely adopting. The more our field is able to collaborate and integrate with other fields that have a stake in CM, the more our field's unique perspectives, knowledge, and strategies will be recognized for the value they add to the CM discourse. It stands to reason, too, that graduates of our academic programs will be more prepared to assume leadership positions in CM contexts.

In this bi-annual column on CM, I have as a goal to follow Spilka's advice to put aside traditional boundaries that distinguish the work of TC from the work of other fields and to explore questions, ideas, and practices that focus on a more integrated view of TC.

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