January 25, 2019

To:            Nancy Jensen and other students
From:        William Frank
Subject:     Discrepancies in education and expectations in professional writing


        In recent years there have been increasing reports of students graduating from college without the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. These discrepancies have most often manifested in the department of communication. As technology becomes ever more prevalent in society younger generations are increasingly comfortable with it, creating a divide in the way young people and the older generations communicate. In a professional environment it is vital that communication is clear, both written and not, and these differences threaten that.

        Engineering students, in particular, are prone to underestimate the importance of communication, and soft skills in general, in the workplace. The article by Joanna Wolfe highlights one specific type of writing prevalent in the world of engineering: meeting minutes. A way to document group meetings, managers at companies such as Intel often found younger hires unequipped for this task. While this is a very specific and rather small part of the job, it is a very important one. Three engineering managers interviewed by Wolfe described meeting minutes as "either 'very important,' or in [one manager's] case 'absolutely critical'" (Wolfe 5). The article "Millennials and Technology" highlights the larger extent of this problem. The authors, Lindsey Gibson and William Sodeman, point out that this generation is more comfortable with technology than any before them, and that classrooms have not adapted to take full advantage of this. Gibson and Sodeman say, "research suggests that recent graduates, while technologically adept, are deficient in soft skills" (Gibson, Sodeman 2). Soft skills which are necessary to reach one's full potential in a professional environment. One solution the authors recommend is an increase in mentoring to help bridge the generation gap, as well as "reverse mentoring" where a young person early in their career could help familiarize someone older with new technology.

        As the rate technology is adapted in the lives of young people greatly outpaces the rate technology is adopted in the professional world, there will likely always be a gap between preferred methods of communication and widely accepted ones. One particular group looking to narrow this gap is a portion of the scientific publishing community, particularly in the field of computer science. As research is being done on an increasingly global scale, more and more papers are being published, in English, by non-native English speakers. English being the lingua franca of computer science, it is very important to write papers and deliver talks in that language to reach the largest possible audience. As a result some peer reviewers and journal editors – in various fields – are beginning to relax their requirements.

        As technology rapidly evolves, it is increasingly difficult for large institutions to adapt. Be it education or business that's behind, employees are increasingly finding their new hires not properly prepared for the expectations of professional writing. Schools need to reevaluate the ways they teach certain subjects, while other professional institutions perhaps need to examine the processes that are causing their expectations to not be met.

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