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Annotated Bibliography of the future of Technical Communication as a profession in Technical Communication from May 2001 to August 2005


ABSTRACT:
This article examines the implications of greater professionalism for the future directions of technical communication. It contains steps toward professional status, a discussion on the rise of professionalism in technical education, and the distinction between technicians and engineers.

ANNOTATION:
In this article, Marjorie Davis discusses the steps necessary for technical communication to graduate from a subservient craft to a genuine profession. An experienced educator with over thirty-five years to her credit, Ms. Davis created both the BS and MS degree programs in technical communication at Mercer University. She is also a Fellow in the Society for Technical Communication and well qualified to speak about the future of technical communication. Speaking to technical communicators at large, she contends that the future of technical communication is “intimately” tied to the future of technologies. Technical communicators have come from a variety of disciplines to work in support of other disciplines. To attain true distinction as a profession, technical communication must complete the same process of development that other professions have. She uses medicine and engineering as examples to illustrate that process. Both medicine and engineering had humble (and in the case of medicine, dubious) beginnings. Both strove to gain respect and
recognition by establishing accredited academic degree programs and by establishing standards of competency. Today these standards are enforced by entities of the highest caliber within both fields and by government. Technical communication needs to do the same. She argues that even though technical communication has made great strides to distinguish itself from other fields of endeavor in the last decade technical communicators need to move from simply “reacting to…[the] work of others” to become distinct “information creators and designers”¹. Davis’ article speaks to the educational aspects of technical communication as does Hayhoe and Pringle and Williams. Her discussion puts more emphasis on how degree programs in technical communication can provide the leadership, skills, and know-how to move the field to a recognized profession.

ABSTRACT:
This article presents an overview of the challenges facing the future of technical communication, as of August, 2005. Although it had existed for thousands of years as an activity, technical communication got its start as a profession in the years after World War II when defense and aerospace contractors in the U.S. and Great Britain were required to produce large numbers of proposals, reports and procedures in response to government requirements. In his new book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas L. Friedman claims that the convergence of technology and economic, political and social events have propelled China, India and other countries to become competitors in the world economy. Major problems face us, and the most important is energy. I think there are three major areas on which we need to focus. Reform professional education, build stronger, more diverse professional alliances, and enhance professionalism in processes and products. I am convinced that the future of our discipline in the West and its development elsewhere in the world depend to a great extent on our wisdom in addressing the challenges of education, strategic alliances, and professional standards.

ANNOTATION:
In his editorial, George Hayhoe provides a blueprint for the future of technical communication in North America and the western world. As a professor of technical communication and director of the MS in Technical Communication Management program at Mercer University and the former editor of *Technical Communication*, a leading journal in
the technical communication profession, he is well suited to speak to technical
communicators. Agreeing with Thomas L. Friedman’s warning about nations like China and
India surpassing the West economically and technologically he considers the implications of
that change on technical communication. He isn’t fearful but proactive in his prescription for
strengthening the position technical communication in the West. He makes three sound
recommendations for addressing this threat: reform of education in technical communication,
stronger interdisciplinary alliances both foreign and domestic, and the enhancement of
professionalism in maintaining and creating standards and processes within technical
communication. Mr. Hayhoe’s editorial compares to those by Davis, and Pringle and
Williams who also discuss the formal education of technical communicators. The editorial
provides valuable information concerning the global aspects of technical communication and
how technical communication can remain competitive in the western world.
ABSTRACT:
This article reports results of a practitioner survey on the definition of technical communication and the role of technology in their work. It argues that technical communication demonstrates a stable set of core values which suggest the field has a professional identity.

ANNOTATION:
In this article, Kathy Pringle and Sean Williams examine the “dual aspects of technical communication” suggested by Roger Grice and Robert Krull in their May 2001 special issue of Technical Communication. Grice and Krull predicted that technical communication would become “both a design field and a technological field” requiring practitioners to possess a dual set of skills; a “core set of information design skills and technology skills”. Pringle and Williams also focus upon an article by Marjorie Davis in that May 2001 special issue in which she alluded to certain unspecified core skills for technical communicators. They pursued Davis’ recommendation to identify the skills valued by technical communicators by observing them while they worked. The first part of their study revealed how participants defined technical communication. Audience analysis was the most commonly cited skill with writing, design, editing, and managing also cited but to a lesser extent. The second part of the study revealed a comparable link between what was actually observed and what participants declared to be their primary tasks. Writing was observed as a task performed and most
frequently declared to be a typical task by the participants. Although technology use was not part of the participant’s definition of technical communication, most of them said it was an integral and indispensable part of what they typically do. This gave credence to Grice and Krull’s position about technical communication as both a design field and a technological field. As a result of their study, Pringle and Williams predicted that technical communicators will continue to “subordinate technology to information design skills”, practicing and teaching these skills as they continue to be dedicated users of technology and “participate more frequently in the development cycles of technology.”

This article shares likenesses with Davis’ article in elaborating upon the core skill sets of technical communicators that she infers. It also shares a likeness to Fisher and Bennion’s article by focusing upon technical communicators in the workplace. It differs from their article as a case study of specific skills used by technical communicators instead of methods and conventions used to interact with each other and other colleagues in different disciplines. This article strongly suggests that design and technology will increasingly characterize technical communicators.

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This article describes evolving methods and best practice that can be applied in the workplace to support effective communities of practice. It provides a case study of ways an organization can support skill-based and multidisciplinary goal-based communities of practice.

ANNOTATION:
In this article, Lori Fisher and Lindsay Bennion discuss communities of practice, how they can be applied in the workplace, and how they can facilitate the ongoing development of technical communication. Communities of practice have evolved through the interaction of individuals coming together to collaborate on common goals in a business organization. These communities consist of individuals with similar skill sets or different skill sets and have been formed to support them with a means of networking, knowledge sharing, collaborating, and mentoring. The authors describe how communities of practice can be implemented, particularly by technical communicators. The authors use the Data Management (DM) User Technology community of practice at IBM as a case study of a community that is working successfully. IBM’s DM User Technology demonstrates a very effective means by which technical communicators find ways to develop skills and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams toward IBM’s business objectives. Critical to this concept is the need to balance the immediate needs of technical communicators (and other specialists) with the company’s overall goals. At IBM this balance is achieved through the...
imposition of an internal departmental structure, product-specific project teams, and informal project-specific educational gatherings such as "lunch and learn" sessions. The authors conclude by saying that the most valuable technical communicators will be those who can effectively implement and use communities of practice. They will be the technical communicators who can optimize the core values and skills they bring to a business organization while also balancing their roles as specialists and key project team contributors. Fisher and Bennion’s article differs from the others in this series in that they are examining a particular convention within the workplace and its implications for technical communication. Communities of practice will be critical to the future of technical communication in that they will give technical communicators a much more viable means of learning new technologies, a much more efficient means of collaboration, and a much more effective means of gaining distinction as a valued group of specialists in their own right.

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