

**Stuart A. Selber, Ed.**

*Computers and Technical Communication:  
Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives*

**Index Terms**—*Computer, pedagogy, technical communication.*

## Book Review

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Life sometimes plays interesting little tricks on us, and the arrival of *Computers and Technical Communication: Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives* on my desk for review was a very interesting piece of timing. You see, as a technical communication practitioner and manager who has conducted job interviews with several graduates of various technical communication programs, I have often wondered just what those folks in academia who administer and teach technical communication programs are up to. With *Computers and Technical Communication: Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives* in hand, I now have a much better understanding. Ironically, I was asked to participate in the early stages of the development of a technical communication program at a nearby community college just about when this volume arrived, and it supplied me with much-needed insight into the problems associated with starting a program.

*Computers and Technical Communication: Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives* is a collection of 17 essays in four groups that address “issues crucial to the emerging discipline of technical communication.” It is the third in the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing Contemporary Studies in Technical Communication series. While written by and for members of the academy, it also makes an interesting and informative read for practitioners.

The five essays in Part I, “Broadening Notions of Computer Literacy,” cover social and political implications of computers in our society and in technical writing. Although in some ways the weakest part of the book, due in part to a smattering of misplaced political pedantry and some thick writing, essays in this section, to the credit of the writers, do cover critical “big picture” topics with perception. Lee Brasseur, for instance, in “Visual Literacy in the Computer Age: A Complex Perceptual Landscape,” makes a brilliant and important connection between the types of “graphicacy,” considered normal in some scientific disciplines, with the visual communication skills, now considered essential in technical communication.

The blurb on the back cover of the book states that Part II, “Exploring Pedagogical Frameworks for Computers and Technical Communication,” “considers how computer technologies such as the World Wide Web, hypertext, electronic mail, Internet discussion groups, and real-time conferencing environments might challenge traditional notions of technical communication pedagogical practice.” Now there’s a magnificent understatement! These technologies already are affecting every type of pedagogical practice, and the authors of the four essays in this section have some great stories to tell from the bleeding edge. Particularly impressive was Brad Mehlenbacher’s “Technologies and Tensions: Designing Online Environments for Technical Communication.” The research and vision

that went into the Techcomm-VC learning space described in this essay highlight the kind of work we will find most useful in the future; and the story, as written, is captivating.

Part III, "Examining Computer-Supported Communication Facilities from Pedagogical Perspectives," contains fascinating and sometimes disturbing accounts of implementations of computer-supported facilities. For instance, James Kalmbach's otherwise excellent essay "Computer-Supported Classrooms and Curricular Change in Technical Communication Programs" contains the following passage describing an innovative approach to including a World Wide Web component in a hypertext course, "I showed them strategies for teaching themselves to write HTML (such as viewing source and copy and paste)" (p. 268). While this may be acceptable use of the fair use doctrine of copyright law in an academic setting and pedagogically sound, I hope this same course also covered plagiarism at some point. I code and write for the Web, and this line made me cringe.

Part IV, "Planning for Technological Changes in Technical Communication Programs," offers distinct hope for the future. In "New Roles for Technical Communicators in the Computer Age," Henrietta Nikels Shirk covers an inter-

esting corollary to the main thrust of the book, about "how technical communicators should respond both individually and collectively to computer technologies." This is pie-in-the-sky material that is nonetheless coming true every day. How many of us practitioners have been dabbling in user interfaces lately, for instance? Pamela S. Ecker and Katherine Staples cover new ground regarding academic-industrial partnerships involving technical communication in "Collaborative Conflict and the Future: Academic-Industrial Alliances and Adaptations." Here is a concise and appreciated overview of some very interesting topics, such as nontraditional delivery systems, shared research initiatives, and the essential conflict that results from such collaborations.

Some of the leading lights in the field of technical communication pedagogy are represented among the authors of these essays, and they do not disappoint. I was particularly impressed with the work of Selfe and Selfe, "Computer Supported Communication Facilities;" Bill Karis, "Building Relationships to Garner Technological Resources and Support in Technical Communication Programs;" and Tharon Howard, "Designing Computer Classrooms for Technical Communication Programs."

The volume suffers from book-design problems. I started at one point to count the "rivers" caused by setting the type justified, but I soon lost count. Pages are heavy-looking, deeply black with type, and push typographical conventions for type size to line length (10 point type on 30 pica columns). Perhaps not enough time has elapsed since I read Karen A. Schriver's wonderful *Dynamics in Document Design*. Or perhaps the folks at Ablex could stand to read it and other book design material.

There is also too much harping about skills-based technical communication programs, which several authors describe as working to the detriment of aesthetic concerns. This may be true, but as important as it is to make an "aesthetic investment" in technical communication students, the skill levels, especially tool skills, of graduates that I have met are not nearly good enough.

While of interest mainly to members of the academy, practitioners will find this a useful and fascinating glimpse into the world of pedagogical concerns in our craft. If you are interested in the state of teaching technical communication, I recommend *Computers and Technical Communication: Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives*.