

Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber

Central Works in Technical Communication

Book Review

—Reviewed by
JO MACKIEWICZ

Index Terms—*Professional communication, technical communication, technical writing.*

Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber's purpose in their collection of essays, *Central Works in Technical Communication*, is to map the profession of technical communication and to introduce the "intellectual enterprise" of the field to three types of readers. The editors' audience comprises (1) students, especially graduate and advanced undergraduates; (2) academics who are new to the field; and (3) practitioners. In regard to this last group, Johnson-Eilola and Selber point out that their purpose is not to convince people to "put aside their jobs and pursue a graduate degree" (p. xv). Rather, their purpose is to initiate their readers—students, new academics, and practitioners alike—to the theory that underlies current scholarly research and common professional practices. Their collection impressively achieves this purpose through the breadth of its content and the utility of its extra features, especially its section introductions and its "reflective commentaries."

Johnson-Eilola and Selber include a total of 32 articles in the collection. These articles "address technical communication as an intellectual endeavor," are "conceptual in nature," and "contribute more directly to the research base of the field" (p. xvi). In other words, the selections are not "how-to" articles. The editors chose the 32 articles through a rigorous and triangulated process, consulting seven reviewers, examining reading lists from graduate exams, using journal indexes, and checking awards like the Nell Ann Pickett and Frank R. Smith Awards for the best articles.

The collection's primary table of contents groups the articles into eight sections, each containing three to six articles. Part 1, "Histories," contains three articles that examine technical communication's development as a field of study. It includes, for example, Robert

J. Connors' comprehensive history of "The rise of technical writing instruction in America." Part 2, "Rhetorical Perspectives," contains four articles that examine how rhetoric and specific rhetorical situations influence how technical information is communicated. For instance, Carolyn D. Rude's "The report for decision making: Genre and inquiry," is included here. The underlying concepts of the field are examined in the five articles that comprise Part 3, "Philosophies and Theories." Articles found in this section, such as David N. Dobrin's "What's technical about technical writing?" demonstrate the "increasing diversity and interdisciplinary nature" of technical communication (p. 106).

Part 4 contains four articles related to "Ethical and Power Issues," such as Stephen B. Katz's powerful article "The ethic of expediency: Classical rhetoric, technology, and the Holocaust." This article masterfully conveys the responsibilities concomitant with communicating technical information and is certain to engage students. Part 5 comprises four articles about "Research Methods." Perhaps the most important article in this section for readers coming to technical communication from the humanities is Davida Charney's "Empiricism is not a four-letter word," an article that responds to critics of science in the profession. Part 6, "Workplace Studies," contains six articles that examine the writing process within organizations and the written products that organizations produce. This section includes Jack Selzer's important study "The composing processes of an engineer" and also Dorothy Winsor's "Engineering writing/writing engineering."

Three articles examining "Online Environments" comprise Part 7. Tharon W. Howard's "Who 'owns' electronic texts?" is particularly relevant and useful. Howard explains the intellectual property and copyright issues that apply to five scenarios related to online communication. Students and professionals need to understand the extent to which they can, for example, use electronic images that others have created or use online communication as data in their research. "Pedagogical Directions" are the topic of Part 8. This section contains one of the few

Manuscript received July 8, 2004; revised July 10, 2004.
The reviewer is with the University of Minnesota Duluth,
Duluth, MN 55812 USA (email: jmackiew@d.umn.edu).

IEEE DOI 10.1109/TPC.2004.837976

Book Publisher: New York: Oxford University Press, 2004
512 pages, with index.

articles in the collection that examines cross-cultural communication: Deborah S. Bosley's "Cross-cultural collaboration: Whose culture is it, anyway?" This article benefits readers in that it examines an increasingly common but especially difficult variety of technical communication. It delineates differences between "Euro-North American" culture and other cultures, such as different emphases on the individual versus the group, and explains the effect of such differences on communication.

Each of the eight sections begins with a short introduction that ties the articles together. For example, the introduction to Part 2, "Rhetorical Perspectives," points out that the essays show how "technical communication has traditionally involved approaching technical and scientific topics from a rhetorical rather than (or in addition to) a positivist perspective" (p. 45). Here, and in all of their section introductions, the editors help readers see connections among the articles that might not have been obvious, especially to readers who are new to the field. In addition, the section introductions help readers to compare articles from different sections. For example, by recognizing how the study of technical communication is grounded in the study of rhetoric, readers are better able to understand the motivations of the authors whose articles are included in Part 5, "Research Methods."

Although the articles themselves are what will draw readers to this collection, the "reflective commentaries" provide some of the book's most memorable and interesting moments. In these commentaries, authors reflect on how their work emerged and how their views have changed since their essays were first published. Sometimes authors critique their writing rather harshly. For example, Teresa M. Harrison says that writing "Frameworks for the study of writing in organizational contexts" required "many hours of painful drafting and revision to spit out, make understandable, and ultimately render persuasive to reviewers" but "now seems like yesterday's news" (p. 255). Other authors express similar sentiments. For the most part, though, authors demonstrate a fondness for their work, even as they point out its failings. About their article "The politics of the interface," for example, Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe, Jr. write that it "only scratched the surface" of analyzing the visual content of interfaces; however, they also state that the article is some of their "best work" (p. 428).

These commentaries are memorable for other reasons as well. Some of them reassure fraught writers by illustrating that even successful writers struggle to get words down on the page. In her reflective commentary for "Empiricism is not a four-letter word," Charney writes, "I am not the kind of writer who keeps a

journal and I do not write a certain amount every day. In fact, writing is difficult enough for me that it takes a concerted effort to begin and sustain a paper" (p. 281). Especially interesting for *Transactions* readers who work in academia are reflective commentaries that expose the difficulties of publishing and academic life. Stephen Doheny-Farina, for example, comments upon how he had to leave out much of the drama that he witnessed in the workplace that he analyzed for his article "Writing in an emerging organization." He writes, "The article's form reflects, I think, less the rigors of objectivity and more the gate keeping forces I was negotiating as I tried to produce an acceptable dissertation and later publishable article" (pp. 325–326). Dobrin is especially candid in his commentary for "What's technical about technical writing?" He writes,

Reading it over, I wonder. The piece ought to have been leaner, and it ought to have gone farther. I can see, as well as remember, that the ambitious young author wanted tenure at MIT a little too badly. (p. 107)

For me, an assistant professor who struggles to write and teach conscientiously, these reflective commentaries about the tribulations of academia stand out. Mainly, though, these reflective commentaries fulfill their primary purpose: to allow authors to comment on the extent to which their thinking about their subject matter and the stance they took up in their original writing have changed.

The collection includes several other useful features. In an alternative table of contents, the editors have grouped articles with "primary connections" and "secondary connections" to topics such as "gender," "genre," and "usability." Instructors will find these alternate groupings helpful when organizing their reading lists and syllabi. Also, the index at the end of this collection lists terms that range from specific (e.g., "windowpane theory of language") to general (e.g., "audience"). Instructors can use the comprehensive index to find other connections among the articles. The editors also provide a list of bibliographic resources, particularly bibliographic essays, and point out that journals like *Technical Communication Quarterly* regularly publish bibliographies.

In sum, Johnson-Eilola and Selber effectively achieve their goal of introducing the enterprise of technical communication in *Central Works in Technical Communication*. They accomplish their goal artfully, by carefully grouping articles into sections and explaining the connections among the articles. In addition, they add value to the collection by allowing contributors to update their viewpoints in reflective commentaries. With a price tag of \$39.95, this collection is a steal, even for those financially strapped students who will be buying it.