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***Central Works in Technical Communication*. Edited by Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 512 pp.**

***Teaching Technical Communication: Critical Issues for the Classroom*. Edited by James M. Dubinsky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004. 654 pp.**

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Any landmark or key-works book has a significant burden to bear. Mapping trends, issues, and theories across an entire field or a specific chunk of time is a task that requires delicate maneuvering, incredible sophistication, and intense attention to the names, places, faces, and feel of a field. Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber have tackled this task quite well in *Central Works in Technical Communication*. I am hard-pressed to think of any graduate-level history of technical communication course that would not benefit from using this book. It lends itself well to survey and field overview courses. It is not only a textbook but also a handy guide for the shelves of anyone who interrogates, researches, or writes about trends in technical communication.

*Central Works* is subdivided into histories, rhetorical perspectives, philosophies, theories, ethical and power issues, research methods, workplace studies, on-line environments, and pedagogical directions. The 32 pieces are framed not only by the categories listed above but also by a robust, alternative contents index (6 of

the 32 pieces<sup>1</sup> are also reproduced in *Teaching Technical Communication*). Although they are described as “central works,” surely the pieces in the collection point toward the ripple effect of the core works—the ways in which the landmark essays have expanded in their application, use, and the ways later scholars adopted or questioned the approaches they provided.

The initial fuel for the collection was a piece the editors published in *Technical Communication Quarterly* (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2001) that offered a “Framework for Graduate Education in Technical Communication.” In the article, which may itself someday be included in another central works collection, Johnson-Eilola and Selber argued for a more expansive approach to technical communication and proposed a threefold framework for integrating such an approach, focusing on thinking, doing, and teaching. This arrangement may initially seem simplistic, but the authors unfolded the framework in a way that pulls at the multiple, complex threads of graduate-level teaching in technical communication. Rather than gloss over tensions in the quest for coherence, the framework instead builds on the tensions as departure points for deep investigations into the theory and practice of technical communication. The authors described the approach not as a “monolithic structure,” but rather a “core framework for understanding technical communication as a robust, diverse, complex whole” (p. 409).

The book takes on a slightly different shape, as the article described a framework for introducing graduate students to the field and helping them move from students to scholars actively working in and contributing to it. The core framework the article established, however, also seems to be the spirit of the book: to shift our intellectual gears as to how we conceptualize the theory and practice of technical communication, or, more generally, to provide a big picture overview of the field, inviting reflection and future participation. The editors, in their preface, describe the collection as a “way into the scholarly conversation” (p. xv).

Johnson-Eilola and Selber describe the collection as a “snapshot of the varied areas of the field” and, later, as a sampling “of theories, methods, and practices” (p. xv). The authors, in a short discussion describing how they collected and selected the essays to include, note that the collection focuses on more conceptual and theoretical pieces and that more pragmatic and how-to pieces went by the wayside (in part because such essays are available in alternate publications and in part because of the constraints of the actual size of the book). They are careful to note, however, that they do so not to witlessly reinforce the academic–practitioner binary (or more

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<sup>1</sup>Connors, R. The rise of technical writing instruction in America.

Durack, L. Gender, technology, and the history of technical communication.

Miller, C. A humanistic rationale for technical writing.

Thralls, C., & Blyler, N. The social perspective and pedagogy in technical communication.

Lay, M. Feminist theory and the redefinition of technical communication.

Johnson-Eilola, J. Relocating the value of work: Technical communication in a post-industrial age.

dangerously, hierarchy), and, in fact, they call attention to the ways in which the tensions between and across this balance emerge in the essays selected for inclusion. Johnson-Eilola and Selber note that they are “sketching a map of the research and theoretical portions of the technical communication terrain that can then inform a dialectical relation between theory and practice” (p. xvi). This aspect of the text puts *Central Works* in excellent company with *Teaching Technical Communication*, as they work quite well together; I explain more fully below when I specifically discuss the latter.

One of the unique and, I believe, stellar features of *Central Works* is that each essay is prefaced by a short reflective piece written in most cases by the authors. These pieces provide a face and lend a personality to the chapters and, more important, to the field. A sense of community, camaraderie, and collaboration emerge across these reflective pieces. As Richard Rutter writes in his preface piece, “As I look back on my efforts to work out in my own mind and then to publish my work on rhetoric, humanism, and technical communication, I am even more mightily pleased by this volume. It constitutes eloquent testimony that technical communication has developed that hallmark of a mature discipline—a sense of its own tradition” (p. 21). Carolyn Rude writes about the ongoing life of a document: “Even when an article is published, it is never finished, and since writing the article, I have continued to test its ideas, mainly by analyzing reports written in various contexts” (p. 70).

These reflections reveal a useful and applicable underlife of professional practice, an underlife rarely evident although always already *there* in the published work we read in journals and in the papers we hear delivered at conferences. The reflections chronicle the ways in which the authors struggled to articulate their work, at a time before technical communication had established itself as an academic field. They document some of the key issues of a growing field. They capture voices of excited, engaged scholars and practitioners, and they also call attention to the voices markedly absent in the conversations related to technical communication theory and practice. David Dobrin describes the economic underbelly of his piece exploring what is technical about technical communication. Mary Lay recalls her approaches to weaving gender and technical communication. Steven Katz reflects upon his initial trepidation with the ways he wove the framework he presents in his now very well-known piece, “The Ethic of Expediency,” which dug a deeper channel for technical communication to explore issues of ethics, especially in documents that circulate as somehow voiceless and seemingly authorless. Dale Sullivan chronicles the movement of the field from primarily how-to pieces to deeper and more theoretical explorations of issues that also allowed for the threading of technical communication within rhetoric, communication studies, cultural studies, and philosophy of technology.

Framed by the reflective prefaces, the pieces in the collection become new and fresh again, and make for wonderful reading for the seasoned—or the relatively new—technical communication scholar. The prefaces also allow for those new to

the field to experience the conversations, hesitations, at times even outrage that fomented and fostered the landmark essays gathered in the collection. Carolyn Miller notes that “scholarly publications too frequently become part of an archive, rather than part of a conversation” (p. 47). This set of landmark essays is both—an archive in the best sense of the word, that is, a rich repository of and collection point for key works, and also a conversation. Indeed, the pieces are so well selected and well-placed that they speak to one another and pose questions and invitations for others to join the conversation.

Dobrin notes that “most writing dies quickly and deservedly. It lives only when readers, not authors, keep it alive” (p. 107). When I read good, well-crafted, robust collections such as *Central Texts*, I cannot help but imagine an epilogue, and I cannot help but craft the addenda. I hope that the editors cannot imagine a more rich life for the text than for others to read deeply, linger over, and then write themselves into the history of technical communication as the field continues to evolve and change shape with changing technologies, emerging theories, and more and more globalized practices of knowing, being, and working.

Indeed, the editors invite readers to extend and enrich the snapshot the collected work provides by “keeping up with the field’s journals and by participating in the field’s conferences and online discussions” (p. xv). When I met with Johnson-Eilola and Selber at the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication, we spoke of the collection and talked about a collection of “marginal works” in technical communication. We laughed, of course, but the more I think about it, the more I see *Central Works* as not only mapping the visible terrain and established approaches of our field, but also as calling for a tandem text—perhaps a collection that documents the less-visible approaches and ideas that have fallen under the radar of technical communication as we have more firmly established and anchored ourselves as a field.

Similar to Johnson-Eilola and Selber, James Dubinsky in the preface to *Teaching Technical Communication* notes the broad bandwidth of field knowledge and approaches to theory, research, and practice. He identifies technical communication as a “truly interdisciplinary” (p. v) endeavor and aptly acknowledges the difficulty of achieving coherence while addressing breadth of knowledge. With this as its frame, the collection draws upon 34 essays that reflect issues that have affected or are affecting the field, changing the dynamics of our pedagogical approaches. Issues addressed in the collection include the possibilities and perils of field identity, the influence of the field’s history on today’s practices, the importance of user-centered practices in our approaches, attempts to bridge the academic and workplace worlds, the negotiation of global trends and international communication, approaches to writing and collaborating in digital environments, and the need to anticipate future issues.

Dubinsky’s introductory chapter provides the scaffolding upon which the critical issues are built and fleshed out. As the title *Teaching Technical Communication* suggests, the core focus of the introduction is on “Becoming User-Centered, Reflective Practitioners.” In his introduction, Dubinsky describes the “dialogic and

democratic classroom” that can be built through teacher talk, student engagement, and actively reflecting upon the work we do with students. Dubinsky suggests that we approach the practice of teaching as an art, as “a *techne* in which the form/content dichotomy becomes a Möbius loop” (p. 3), a loop that constantly turns back upon itself. Dubinsky suggests that along this loop, “theory becomes practice, and teaching becomes research” (p. 3). He notes the ways in which this approach allows instructors to move from an instrumental approach to teaching and learning toward a more rhetorical, reflective stance.

The overview of the text on the Bedford/St. Martin’s site notes that the book is “an introduction to the field of technical communication ... designed especially for those instructors who are new to teaching the service course” (p. X). The section prefaces do speak to new teachers, and the selections are, partly, geared to those new to our profession, but I think this too brief blurb does the book a disservice, and it also dismisses the fact that technical communication is less and less a service at many institutions and is instead its own department, unit, or major. The book is helpful for new teachers who will teach primarily in a service setting, but the book also does an excellent job of including pieces that provide direction for those teaching outside of the service box. The book is also helpful for teachers of technical communication who perhaps entered the field with an outsider perspective. *Teaching Technical Communication* offers a vantage point from which, as Dubinsky argues, teachers can refresh their practice and resituate themselves as learners.

If we weave together the theoretical and conceptual stances provided by *Central Works* with the teaching-based philosophies of *Teaching Technical Communication*, we may still very well have the Möbius loop Dubinsky imagines, but I think a more apt comparison might be to an atom—not an atom as a small piece or a tiny particle, but an atom as a key building block of something larger. At the heart of the atom is the history that Johnson-Eilola and Selber argue passionately that the field needs to organize our discipline and frame our work. Radiating outward are the theories, philosophies, and approaches presented in both collections, orbiting around and at times overlapping one another.

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