



## ***Resources in Technical Communication: Outcomes and Approaches***

*Editor*

Cynthia L. Selfe

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Cynthia Selfe developed *Resources in Technical Communication* with a very specific purpose and audience in mind—to provide resources on key performance outcomes so teachers of introductory technical communication courses may assemble a set of outcomes for their local situation. She does an excellent job of fitting the volume's pedagogical framework to her specified rhetorical context. But there are other audiences and purposes for this book, especially program administrators who need to develop and assess programmatic outcomes and manage program faculty.

Selfe's accessible and obvious format makes this text especially easy to use as a rich resource to return to for inspiration and innovation. Common organizational features—and the fact that all authors have taught or studied at Michigan Technological University—give structure to the text. Each chapter begins with a statement of key performance outcomes around which assignments might be structured, then moves to arguments from business and industry leaders that support the importance of the particular performance outcomes, followed by an examination of outcomes from academic research perspectives. Each chapter concludes with a practical overview of assignments targeted to the performance outcome that also explains how experienced teachers work through the assignment sequence, and then assignment worksheets, materials, and samples of student work.

Selfe's pragmatic approach fits the realistic world of teachers and students in introductory technical communication courses, many of whom wish they were somewhere else. The business and industry reports of importance of performance outcomes, for example, help persuade the recalcitrant student who is required to take the intro course. The edited collection speaks to influencing new teachers as well as the reluctant students; academic findings in each chapter are intended to help teachers understand why they would want to shape a course around any set of outcomes.

Program directors who need to enlist instructors for their programs may face resistance from those who find technical communication courses less than engaging or creative. This teacher might embrace Tracy Bridgeford's approach to establishing a community of practice in the classroom that requires students to read a novel. The chapter outcomes are also specialized skill sets not often treated in technical communication textbooks—to communicate effectively within and among communities of practice, demonstrating understanding of how these communities work, how they establish expectations for membership, and how they agree on rules for negotiating meaning. Bridgeford, noting time limitations as a difficulty with creating and sustaining a community of practice within academic contexts, finds that students must add their own practice stories to become members of a community. To provide students with opportunities to enter a community of practice as a newcomer and move to experienced member while contributing their own practice stories, Bridgeford requires students to read a novel. Two assignment sequences, based on the novel as the community's body of knowledge, allow students to learn imaginatively how to participate in the practices of a community and to recognize how tacit knowledge is shared and interpreted.

In this collection, program administrators may also find ways to implement a contemporary performance outcome in their curricula. For example, we who are concerned with ways to introduce innovative new media approaches would benefit from Anne Wysocki's excellent chapter "Using design approaches to help students develop engaging and effective materials that teach scientific and technical concepts." Wysocki presents compelling arguments from business and industry to demonstrate that people who think as designers function well as a knowledge worker in the new work environments. Her academic research cites contemporary resources that show the design process as meaning making, which is embedded in cultural practices and multimodal and multimedia. The assignment overview and materials are transparent and immediately applicable. A teacher could take these 13 pages and transfer them directly into the classroom. With words that an instructor might use to introduce the assignment—"Why I ask you to do this"—Wysocki takes time to lay out how

students might react to this assignment, the course structure, and performance outcomes. She provides two projects with handouts for both in-class and at-home assignments, photos of student deliverables, and rubrics for evaluating each project.

Program administrators might read the text as a resource for key performance outcomes for a technical, scientific, or professional communication program. Twenty authors, who are experienced teachers and/or recognized scholars, have created 17 chapters that are arranged in three thematic sections. In Section 1 of the volume, the focus is on rhetorical understanding with these authors and outcomes: Summer Smith Taylor and Art Young, understanding written communication as a problem-solving activity; James Kalmbach, conceptualizing reports as collections of rhetorical practices and improvisational strategies; Jennifer Sheppard, understanding the value of research; and Michael R. Moore, identifying contemporary contexts and issues in copyright and fair use. Section 2, with its focus on sociocultural understanding, features these authors and outcomes: Gerald J. Savage and Teresa Kynell Hunt, analyzing contexts of writing tasks within organizations; Peter Praetorius, developing interpersonal communication and understanding of organizational culture; Richard J. Selfe, understanding factors that shape the technology-rich spaces in which they create and exchange texts; and Ann Kitalong-Will, understanding how audiences construct communal knowledge bases in digital contexts. Section 3 focuses on the complexities of practice in chapters by these authors and with these outcomes: Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber, developing a holistic understanding of usability; Michael Martin, making ethical decisions in technical communication practices; Karla Saari Kitalong, selecting, interpreting, and producing graphics for technical documents; Patricia Freitag Ericsson, developing effective strategies for listening to and evaluating oral presentations; Gary Bays, speaking and listening in the workplace; Danielle Nicole DeVoss, understanding the elements of editing; and Marilyn M. Copper, evoking the contexts in which documents are used and working with readers to understand their needs.

When read as a whole, the volume might be considered a collection of core competencies for technical communicators. This is no small matter for those of us who determine what students are supposed to know when they graduate into practice. Our field has no collection of empirically based and nationally recognized core competencies comparable to that developed in other fields. Without a defined set of specialized skills, abilities, and knowledge, we are not a profession. One professional organization has worked to locate, classify, and make accessible the core competencies that sustain a body of knowledge for our field. For the past 24 months, STC has been developing a web-based

Technical Communication Knowledge Portal where program administrators are especially encouraged to contribute to the wiki describing and enumerating key competencies that most academic programs should address.<sup>1</sup>

Only when a faculty group identifies the learning outcomes and expectations for their program can their program be assessed in any meaningful way. Here, CPTSC has made significant contribution to assessment research with its committees on program review and assessment. Each program needs to carefully select the core competencies that are right for them. Selfe makes this contextualization clear as she recommends that teachers assemble a set of outcomes tailored for their local student populations, department goals, and institutional missions.

One of the most difficult aspects of our roles as program directors is finding materials that we can pass along to our programmatic colleagues to illustrate the point we are trying to make. *Resources in Technical Communication* provides not only a macro view of learning outcomes along with business approval and research/theory support but also the granular level of implementation of the learning environments needed to enact assignments and the nitty-gritty of assignments and materials. I strongly recommend this book for program administrators.

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<sup>1</sup>Wiki available at <<http://stcbok.editme.com/corecompetencies>>.