

Introduction to Special Issue on Programmatic Research

Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Victoria Sadler

Metropolitan State University

Programmatic Perspectives has always been a space in which to discuss issues particular to academic scientific and technical communication program administration. This special issue on programmatic research explores the intersection of research and programs, and it strives to do so in ways that reflect the diversity of the field. As well, this special issue provides a touchstone in terms of the evolution of programmatic research in technical and professional communication. In 2009, Bruce Maylath and Jeffrey Grabill articulated an overview of the accomplishments of CPTSC over its then 35-year history. That article described the origins of CPTSC's research grant program and the beginning of *Programmatic Perspectives*, and it's our hope that this special issue will support the continued development of those two important aspects of CPTSC. As stated in the original call for proposals, "This special issue will focus on approaches to and applications of programmatic/program-based or focused research in the field in order to enhance our understanding of and perspectives on programs."

Yet as guest editors of this special issue, we found ourselves confronted with one fundamental question: *What counts as programmatic research?* One of the tensions present in this question is a definition of "research." For example, we might think of "research" as systematic, methodologically-driven data collection that addresses a specific research question or hypothesis and is intended for scholarly publication. Research articles of this sort carry expectations about methods, analysis, and ethical treatment of data involving human participants. However, assessment is another important form of programmatic research, which may involve

local or global evaluation of student work, curricular outcomes, and perceptions of programmatic value (see the CPTSC white paper on TC Program Assessment by Tammy Rice-Bailey for an excellent overview). Certainly, program administrators consider assessment a form of systematic, empirical data collection that would count as research. What, exactly, do we mean by “programmatic research”?

Our perspective on this question is informed by the insightful contributions to this special issue. We suggest that there are different types of programmatic research that are equally valuable to administrators of academic scientific and technical communication programs, and we have organized our special issue around them. For example, the Articles in this special issue report findings from completed empirical studies that address issues pertinent to programs. Program Showcases highlight uses of systematic assessment data to inform unique programmatic emphases and directions for program growth. And Commentaries offer suggestions for research methods and approaches that might positively influence program development. In any case, we believe that *Programmatic Perspectives* welcomes discussions about programs that are informed by and/or driven by research. As such, this journal holds a special place in technical and professional communication that emphasizes the intersection of research and program administration.

We received many proposals for this special issue, and choosing which ones to accept was not an easy task. Our end goal was to publish the results of research, so we gravitated toward work that presented a research methodology appropriate for programmatic issues and that presented data (qualitative or quantitative) as evidence of the usefulness of the research methodology. What follows is an overview of the contents of this special issue.

Nancy Coppola, Norbert Elliot, Faye Newsham and Andrew Klobucar reviewed program assessment models and introduced a Design for Assessment (DFA) framework that emphasizes accountability. They applied the DFA framework to a case study involving surveys of program alumni about valued competency areas in curriculum and on the job. They presented a rigorous and informed approach to assessment that will help program directors make decisions.

Chris Lam, Mark Hannah, and Erin Friess analyzed social media data about technical communication topics and argued that such data may supplement other program metrics like enrollment and graduation rates. The authors described archival methods (Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet/TAGS) for collecting and analyzing language data such as

Twitter. Using Twitter data relating to technical communication topics, they explained uses of AntConc to analyze word frequency analysis, concordance analysis, and collocation analysis. They applied findings from their Twitter analysis to three types of programmatic decisions: assessment, vision, and curriculum. Their article demonstrates how social media data and analysis can insightfully inform programmatic decisions.

Susan Popham presented a qualitative study of African-American women in a graduate master's program in technical communication. Noting the current lack of African-American students in technical communication programs, she argued that we should actively explore ways to shape our programs to better appeal to African-American students. She used positionality theory to identify three areas of power in which African-American women felt power or felt the lack of it in their technical communication programs. Ultimately she illustrated the need for programs to recognize unique needs of minority students in technical communication programs.

Scott Kowalewski and Bill Williamson discussed the evolution of a professional writing program focus on usability and user-centered design, based on years of program assessment data. Their Program Showcase not only argued for the value of a usability focus, but it also argued for an integrated assessment approach. They demonstrated how this focus on usability helped their department establish itself on campus, noting that usability studies connected their department well to its campus and community.

Rebecca Walton, Jared Colton, Krista Gurko and Rikki Wheatley-Boxx shared interview data from community-based clients and students based on classes they teach and changes they have made to incorporate a social justice theme. They showed how a social justice emphasis fit their university, and they argued for other programs to consider it. Further, they reported that their social justice emphasis is informed by and continues to inform programmatic research at their institution. As an example, their Program Showcase in this special issue is informed by an on-going empirical study of student and community partner engagement in social justice courses and projects.

Heidi McKee showed how assessment data such as enrollment data, qualitative surveys of students, and curricular assessment informed program decisions at Miami-Ohio to close a low-enrolled Scientific and Technical Communication (STC) degree and create a Professional Writing (PW) degree, all within an English Department. The change resulted in great success and dramatically increased numbers in the PW degree

program. She described a process and rationale that could help administrators with new programs, those within English departments seeking to create new programs, and those wondering what to do about low-enrolled STC programs.

John Spartz and Julie Watts discussed the importance of external advisory boards to technical and professional writing programs. They advocated participatory action research (PAR) as a research method that can extend traditional forms of program assessment to include external advisory boards. In addition, they illustrated how PAR can be integrated with existing forms of program assessment such as portfolio evaluation, and they offered suggestions for integrating external advisory boards in regular program assessment.

Denise Tillery and Ed Nagelhout advocated a student-centered assessment approach designed for flexibility in their undergraduate professional writing minor program at University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Their assessment approach emphasized “knowing why” over “knowing what,” and it integrated elements of the National Writing Project “habits of mind” (creativity, persistence, risk-taking, mindfulness, and engagement). Their dynamic assessment approach is flexible and designed for situated learning and continued study beyond the undergraduate minor; they advocated learner control and involvement in assessment.

In sum, the focus of this special issue carries the theme from the 2015 CPTSC conference, “Programmatic Research,” and we hope it inspires readers to continue conducting research that improves programs in technical and professional communication. This special issue also serves as a transition in *Programmatic Perspectives* editorship. As editors of this special issue, we are grateful to the leadership provided by former editors Tracy Bridgeford and Kirk St. Amant. We also extend our gratitude to Karla Kitalong and Bill Williamson, who founded the journal with Tracy Bridgeford in 2007. And we look forward to the leadership of editor Susan Popham, who will continue the important work of this journal into the future.

References

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- Rice-Bailey, Tammy. (2016). *TC program assessment* (White paper). Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication. Retrieved from <<http://www.cptsc.org/ProgrammaticAssessmentRice-Bailey2016>>