

CPTSC Round Table Write Up

7-15-15

<http://www.cptsc.org/initiatives.html>

On 15 July 2015, CPTSC sponsored the sixth in its series of international roundtables for technical communication educators. Organized alongside the IEEE International Professional Communication Conference (IPCC) held at the University of Limerick in Ireland, this year's roundtable drew 32 technical communication educators from five countries: Denmark, Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, and United States. The roundtable series began in 2000 in London, followed by ones in 2003 in Milan, Italy; 2005 in Limerick, Ireland; 2008 in Montreal, Canada; and 2010 in Enschede, Netherlands. Altogether, the series has attracted participants from 15 nations.

The 2015 roundtable was a structured discussion on the topics of trends and partnerships. Attendants organized into several small groups and addressed four questions to stimulate discussion about research and partnerships across the globe:

Q1: What trends are affecting the field?

Q2: How does current research address these trends?

Q3: How should research be expanded to examine these trends?

Q4: How can we create partnerships to address and examine these trends?

What trends are affecting the field?

Small groups reported an overriding theme of increasing complexity in many areas of research in technical communication. Our work is more complex than it used to be; in addition, we are trying to reduce the complexity for users. One common theme in the discussion of trends included technology and new media, such as anything evolving beyond the single document and into systems and technologies. Examples included structured authoring, social media, content strategy, crowd-sourcing, and analytics. Another theme introduced by participants from Germany included "Industry 4.0," or a kind of industrial revolution in which machines talk with machines based on intelligent agents. "Industry 4.0" is becoming more common among engineers in leading eastern and western countries, and it is affecting the structure of work and how to communicate information on demand. "Internet of Things" is a related branch of this area. For academics, research in this area becomes very expensive and difficult due to proprietary issues. Trends in education were also discussed among attendants; a European trend mentioned in the discussion was to integrate research more explicitly in technical communication courses, which is different from the US model where teaching universities and research universities have different expectations for teaching. Attendees also discussed online education as an increasing trend, particularly in the US, as well as credential-based education. Another theme was program identity, including defining ourselves internally and externally to fellow academics and students. Also in relation to programs, some discussed the core of technical communication programs and the need to identify a core curriculum. Another program-related

theme included academic-industry partnerships, specifically how to better cultivate these relationships. Additional trends in the discussion included social justice, such as a turn from critical awareness to critical action, paying attention to vulnerable populations, and issues of power and marginalization. Other trends mentioned in the discussion included medical rhetoric and writing, space/place and related sustainability issues related to ecological theory, and finally, issues related to usability, user empowerment, and documentation.

How does current research address these trends? Which ones are appearing in our field? Which ones are appearing in other fields? Which trends are well represented, which ones are being addressed better in other fields?

Groups addressed this question in various ways. Some noted that trends such as technology, academy-industry partnerships, professional identity, and medical rhetoric have been discussed in technical communication scholarship for a while now. Despite the presence of these trends, attendees commented that more research on academic-industry partnerships would be beneficial, especially empirical studies regarding “Industry 4.0” and structured authoring practices. Other trends in need of further attention included the role of social media in social justice movements, analytics and data/information management, online education, and connections between writing-in-the-disciplines and technical communication. Several attendees also noted identity issues and complications of defining ourselves; some commented that it is harder to make rationales for publications in the field without a central definition of the field (it is also difficult when reviewers are not familiar with the field). Others noted that those discussions have occurred for a long time without resulting clarity, and that some organizations, most notably the Society for Technical Communication, have stopped trying to define the field. Many commented that a firmer definition and identity are needed to establish credibility for journals in the field as well as to make disciplinary arguments such as academic hires and support for undergraduate and graduate programs. On a related point, some noted the diffuse and fragmented nature of professional organizations, especially those based in the US: CPTSC, ATTW, ACM SIGDOC, IEEE’s IPCC, STC. Some wondered if it might be worth collaborating more purposefully, such as the ways ACM SIGDOC has purposefully collaborated with CPTSC and IEEE’s IPCC to co-locate conferences. There was much support for these sorts of collaborative efforts.

How should research be expanded to examine these trends?

Great ideas were discussed among attendees, but an overriding response was to make stronger arguments about the implications of our work within both the academy and industry. As an example, one group mentioned that often times industry will ask the “so what” question regarding research in our field. Many discussed the need to provide stronger rationales and connections, particularly those that may cross borders into industry and workplace environments. Related to this issue is the need for more funded research from funding agencies and possibly

from industry. Attendees also mentioned the following ideas for expanding the frame of research in technical communication:

- Encouraging journals to create calls for special issues on some of these emerging trends
- Pursuing funding for ethnographic and empirical research
- Identifying and applying for micro-grants that may fund empirical research projects
- Building relationships and pursuing funded research through industry sponsors
- Crafting stronger identities for journals so we know which journals are the best fit for our work
- Publishing in professional journals with industry folks as co-authors
- Reviewing your academic department tenure and promotion guidelines regarding opportunities and impediments to research topics
- Creating a shared list of funding organizations that would be likely to support research in these emerging areas
- Conducting more meta-analyses of research in technical communication to have a better handle of what has been done and what needs to be done in the field
- Considering more international and interdisciplinary sources among the journals we cite in our publications – expanding our horizons to recognize how others explain related phenomena (example given of “disontology” or disaster communication as discussed in Europe and “risk communication” as discussed in America)
- Expanding our research to include the terms discussed in this discussion, to create stronger “impact factors” for journals
- Expanding data collection methods and approaches to analyzing data (multiple data analysis methods)
- Pursuing more international collaborations, especially considering how technological improvements in data collection may facilitate such collaboration
- Include more research on the topic of social justice, particularly underrepresented groups
- Discussing review processes openly with graduate students and helping new colleagues understand the challenges of open-source publication as well as peer-reviewed publication processes

How can we create partnerships to address and examine these trends? Think about different structures and ways we can foster collaboration.

Discussion on this point addressed ways to build partnerships both internationally and within/among our professional organizations. As well, ideas included ways to strengthen academy-industry partnerships and strengthening funding opportunities.

- Building trust across different groups and creating shared leadership across groups
- Attending international conferences to solidify international connections
- Co-locating conferences
- Pursuing grant writing culture
- Fostering cross-organizational research, webinars, grants
- Fostering community-based research and local connections
- Maintaining alumni connections and relationships: surveying and keep tabs on alumni and career paths they are pursuing and finding out what paths should be addressed in future
- Establishing co-PIs among community, international, and industry that could lead to other kinds of research and publications
- Creating special issues on topics such as those in this discussion
- Setting up academic-industry advisory boards
- Inviting an industry person in residence
- Pursuing industry partnerships that sponsor scholarships and internships
- Getting involved in “meet-ups” and student groups and how those help establish more connections.
- Creating a data base of contacts or bios so we can see who is doing work in what area
- Establishing student internships with local communities and networks
- Establishing faculty internships (send faculty for a semester into industry or abroad or give faculty space to pursue such opportunities)
- Creating bigger data buckets such as data repositories that connect several programs nationally. Some examples include the Elon Transfer project, Citation Project, and Genre Across Borders.
- Creating curricular bridges and supporting foreign language departments and study abroad
- “Co-co-locating conferences”: possibly pursuing a large conference with special interest groups to reduce some of the conference duplications
- Pursuing more international opportunities; working with other programs across the world and getting involved with faculty in other countries.
- Leveraging human relationships; seeking personal learning networks or ways to connect with others
- Encouraging PhD students to take courses abroad; in Europe PhD courses can be as short as 4 days long, making them easy to manage while still allowing students to bond with other PhD students

Final thoughts?

Final thoughts addressed the need to make stronger connections between programs in different countries. An announcement was made regarding the opportunity to attend the next European Symposium on Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), to be held 28-30 June 2017 in Bergen, Norway. (In August 2009, the CPTSC annual meeting and the European Symposium on LSP were co-located in Århus, Denmark, with parallel sessions.)