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Design and Design Thinking in Technical and Professional Communication: Examining Our Pedagogies, Practices, and Perspectives

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Special Issue Rationale

The design "turn" in technical and professional communication (TPC) has surfaced as a disciplinary interest in the last two decades or so as scholars and educators investigated the emergence and applications of design-centric models for the purposes of communication in technical and professional contexts. TPC programs have begun to include design-driven courses, assignments, and learning objectives showing the importance of a designerly way of thinking (Melonçon & Henchel, 2013, pp. 52–53; Tham, 2021). Adjacent to TPC, theorists including Richard Buchanan (1985), David Kaufer and Brian Butler (1996), and David Fleming (1998) situated design within the practice of communication and rhetoric, helping scholars like Charles Kostelnick (1989), Richard Marback (2009), Jim Purdy (2014), Carrie Leverenz (2014), and Scott Wible (2020) to articulate the viability of design and "design thinking" in writing studies and TPC pedagogy. Design adds a tangible layer of deliberation to the product vs. process paradigm shift that influenced a majority of our scholarly and programmatic discussions in the 1980s. Design brings to our scholarship conversations about materiality, multimodality, and usability, among others. Focusing neither just on design nor thinking, however, design thinking is a framework most popularized in business management and engineering that integrates user- and human-centered design philosophies, iterative and participatory design approaches, and socially responsive innovation to address "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The most prominent model for this framework is the oft-cited Stanford d.school (n.d.) schema that includes five recursive phases in designing solutions: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.

The growing interest and deployment of design thinking methodologies in TPC programs today—thanks in part to the rise of user experience studies in technical communication (Kessler et al., 2021; Zachry & Spyridakis, 2016)—indicate a need for retrospection on our teaching and application of design frameworks in programmatic contexts so that we remain socially and ethically conscious about our practice. However, pedagogical and empirical investigations of

design thinking in TPC programs have only recently begun. Ann Hill Duin et al. (2017) studied the affordances of the radical collaboration attribute in design thinking that showed benefits for graduate research collectives. At the undergraduate level, Jennifer Bay, Richard Johnson-Sheehan, and Devon Cook (2018) infused design thinking processes in teaching TPC students how to think like an entrepreneur with innovative solutions for wicked problems:

> We must teach our students how to have empathy for users, peers, and stakeholders, just as we must have empathy for the needs of our students. We must define educational problems from our students' points of view, not our own, and we need to ideate those problems by reframing them and incorporating new technology. We need to prototype new assignments and new activities and then do testing to see which ones work. (p. 193)

Bay et al.'s (2018) model provided exigence for other scholar-teachers, such as Mason Pellegrini (2021), who argued that pedagogical experimentations with design thinking need to happen in conjunction with workplace studies in order to understand the transfer from classroom to professional practice. In a special issue of *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, Rebecca Pope-Ruark, Jason Tham, Joe Moses, and Trey Conner (2019) included several more cases of teaching design thinking in TPC that exemplify its programmatic potential. Nevertheless, as the world of TPC and its programmatic efforts change along with the current health pandemic and arising needs in higher education, scholars are well-situated to examine the pedagogies, practices, and perspectives of/on design thinking at pressing times.

There is a growing body of scholarship in design and design thinking models in TPC and writing pedagogy, but not a lot has been considered for programmatic development or administration. We need research and reports of design-driven efforts at the programmatic level to help the field grow in that direction. As Bay et al. (2018) motivated scholars to introduce design thinking to TPC service courses, we encourage projects that apply design thinking in the broader TPC programmatic landscape, including majors, minors, certificates, and graduate programs. As well, we are interested in studies and findings about design thinking integration in program development and innovation, program transitions, recruitment and retention, and administration and assessment.

Furthermore, critical studies on design thinking are needed because design scholarship has been traditionally biased toward narratives that were largely informed by Eurocentric understandings of the world and Anglo American values. Design thinking is often dubbed a utilitarian method for problem solving, risking itself to being merely an avowal of advocacy. Thus, as scholars, educators, and practitioners, we should examine the ways in which design methods and design thinking are taught and enacted in our programs, and how such enactments are affecting the principles of TPC and beyond.

Potential research questions and programmatic directions include:

- How might design and/or design thinking be integrated with TPC programs, including majors and minors, certificates, and graduate programs?
- How might design and/or design thinking support program growth, including recruitment, retention, administration, and assessment?
- How might design thinking support innovation in TPC service courses?
- How can or do various TPC pedagogies—e.g., client projects, service learning, case method, internships, undergraduate research, and studio pedagogy—align with design thinking attributes?
- What aspects of design thinking could be used or updated to reflect TPC programmatic goals, identities, cultures, and values?
- In addition to user experience and usability studies, how might design thinking augment TPC programs and pedagogies to broaden their reach and impact on students?
- How might design and/or design thinking create spaces for effective university-workplace collaborations as well as for effective co-learning and co-teaching with programs that are design, technology, and innovation driven?
- How might design thinking be combined with social justice advocacy in TPC programs?
- How can design thinking help us navigate the irrevocable shifts in TPC programs and pedagogies wrought by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic?

We are particularly interested in multiply marginalized and underrepresented voices and views on design and TPC programs, such as BIPOC technical communicators, disability studies and disabled scholars, women, and international researchers. We encourage diverse perspectives in the curated discussions, critiques, and recommendations for the future of design and/or design thinking in TPC programs.

Publication Timeline: Fall 2023 Issue
- 1 March 2023 – Proposals due (see submission guidelines below)
- 15 March – Decisions on proposals sent to submitters
- 30 April – Initial manuscripts due
- 30 May – Reviewer comments sent to authors
- 15 July – Revised manuscripts due
- 1 August – Final publishing decisions sent to authors
- 30 November – Publication of special issue

Submission Guidelines

Please send proposals (400-500 words) in MS Word or PDF via email to both
jason.tham@ttu.edu and timothy.ponce@uta.edu, and indicate your submission type:

- Research article
- Program showcase
- Commentary
- FOCUS article

Review the general submission instructions from the *Programmatic Perspectives* webpage for
further details on submission types.

All prospective authors should review Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic
for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors prior to submitting a proposal.

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