

REVIEWS

Tracy Bridgeford, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Editor

Reshaping Technical Communication: New Directions and Challenges for the 21st Century. Ed. Barbara Mirel and Rachel Spilka. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 216 pages.

Reviewed by Tracy Bridgeford
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Good research, like a good story, is not discovered; it is interpreted, analyzed, shaped, and reshaped so that members of a community understand and accept its value. And like a good story, *Reshaping Technical Communication*, demonstrates a level of verisimilitude—or tellability—that convincingly presents a collective history, adds value to that history, and negotiates the future status of the technical communication community. What makes this collection tellable is the comprehensiveness with which the editors and contributors portray technical communication as both “resting on its laurels” and “reinvigorating” its collective history (1–2). According to the editors, this collection aims to “reinvigorat[e] our status, identity and value” by reshaping the perspectives, methods, and stories we tell about our discipline (2). Its value as a collection for researchers, teachers, students, and practitioners is its expansive view of the history of academic-industry relationships.

Part of the editorial framework, however, lacks verisimilitude in that the editors identify the need for reinvigoration as necessary because the field has not “kept pace with either the transformations wrought by the technologies with which we work or the growing demands for effective, valuable, and satisfying interactions with technologies and information systems” (2). This technological preference provides the groundwork for what the editors identify as the problem with current research: the status of technical communication, technical communication researchers, and technical communicators. The question of status in technical communication (for academics and practitioners) is a story that has been retold vigorously with each decade since the 1970s. From the instrumental vs. rhetorical, skill vs. knowledge, or humanistic vs. technical perspectives, the question of status has permeated our research discussions as we struggle to identify who we are and our value to the world (see, e.g., Moore; Miller, “Humanistic”; Dombrowski; and Johnson). Although the story of status is something that has always been a problem in our field, as the editors suggest,

the retelling of this story does not reinvigorate history as much as it solidifies the "identity crisis" with which we are already very familiar (4).

The book is divided into two parts, which together explore the two sides of the academic-industry relationships. In Part I, "Revising Industry and Academia: Cultures and Relations," the contributors explore current relationships between industry and academic factions, proposing "conditions for accommodating more dynamic and flexible academic and industry contributions to training, research, and practice" (8). These conditions include identifying cultural differences (Dicks), exploring overlapping spaces between industry and academia (Blakeslee), and creating communities of practice as a bridge for active-practice (Bernhardt). Although these chapters each basically tell the same story about past efforts to build relationships between academia and industry, they each provide different parts of the putative whole. Dicks, for example, broadly identifies the cultural differences between industry and academia, while the rest of the Part I contributors explore more discrete parts, such as exploring the overlapping spaces that join these cultures (Blakeslee) or the community of practices academics and practitioners could create by working together (Bernhardt).

In Part II, "Re-envisioning the Profession," the authors investigate topics such as the credibility issues associated with becoming a profession (Spilka), the problem with dissemination of research in information design (Schriver), the need for a corporate-university hybrid sort of learning (Faber, Johnson-Eilola), the expansion of support for career transitions (Anscheutz and Rosenbaum), and the role of usability specialists for complex activities in context (Mirel). In some ways, the editors and contributors realize the promise of the collection's title—reshaping technical communication—by providing what the editors call a "more expansive vision of what we could or should become" (4) and by reemphasizing the strategic value of "what we add to our work contexts and product designs and directions" (92). In stressing this valued added, however, the contributors call more attention to the need for status than the actual status.

For a story to be worth telling, it must be about how a familiar, conventional, story has been breached in some way that questions or reverses that story (Bruner). From this perspective, two chapters in particular provide such a breach by revealing and interpreting two significant ideological blind spots in our history.

In her chapter, Deborah Bosley explores what she sees as three barriers that stand in the way of academics forming collaborative relationships with industry: Academics tend to focus on differences rather than on similarities (see Dicks's chapter for this discussion), to distance themselves from practitioners in unproductive ways, and to underestimate the value of academic research to practitioners. From a perspective of identity, Bosley explains that academics must learn to define themselves as practitioners in order to learn more about the work environment" (35) and "to publish the results in forms and publications that practitioners read" (38). Given the early battles for academic respect, which probably

continue yet in some departments across the country, I imagine that some members of the technical communication community might cringe at the term *practitioner* because early efforts to identify technical communication as a bona fide scholarly endeavor suffered from our association with practical skills (see, e.g., Miller, "Practical").

Anthony Paré's perspective of "writing in the service of something else" (59) could cause a similar response. Like *practitioner*, the term *service* has a pejorative history in our field because it is associated with paying one's dues (i.e., until literature courses became available) or providing mere support for other fields rather than a field of study with its own intrinsic knowledge and value. But Paré's focus on writing as "guided expertise" that transforms over time (as opposed to one-time classroom testing) insightfully reminds us that practitioners use "writing to perform or participate" (62) in workplace activities or actions (what Bernhardt in this volume refers to as *active-practice*). The breach in Paré's version—writing as performance or participation—reveals how often, no matter how much we protest, we talk about writing comprehensively in terms of assignments, research, or assessment, but not as part of other activities. We forget that we choose to focus our research on writing as an area of study, but practitioners use writing to do something in particular with the writing.

For both Bosley and Paré, practitioners might find academic research more valuable if it existed in a form designed with the knowledge that time and relevance influence a practitioner's decision to read an article or a book that doesn't directly connect with the exigency of their work. As academics, we sometimes forget how demanding workplace schedules and deadlines can be (which is not to say we don't experience similar grueling demands) or how production mishaps often hinder practitioners' progress and efficiency.

Of special interest to me is the last chapter: Russell Borland's "Tales of Brave Ulysses." To fully appreciate the creativity with which Borland sets forth his chapter, readers should take the time to read Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*: King's novel is a masterful storytelling experience in which he reshapes some hard-held Christian myths through the trickster figure Coyote. Borland's chapter demonstrates the depth with which technical communicators understand themselves, their identities, and their value to organizations. In this historical narrative, Borland captures the essence of the stories we tell about who we are. In fact, Borland demonstrates, just as Thomas King does, the danger of retelling the same story, such as ours about status, without harmonizing it with current circumstances and audiences.

Because this collection provides insight into the value question, it should be included on every reading list for comprehensive exams, course research seminars, and dissertation proposals. Current and future PhD students, researchers, and dissertation directors might begin their explorations by reviewing the research agenda outlined in the Appendix. I'd suggest, though, that when developing research ques-

tions, researchers begin with the assumption that we are valuable, not work their way toward it.

Good research, like good stories, should challenge readers to see what is familiar while providing new interpretations. The editors and contributors to this volume certainly provide a plethora of venues for crafting future stories about technical communication. If anything is missing for me, it is direct reference to pedagogical research, but perhaps that topic warrants a second volume. This collection offers mostly what its editors promise: "to propose far-reaching, innovative, and nontraditional strategies, visions, and ways of thinking" (5). Its overall purpose—to "inspire readers to continue the discussions and debates introduced here" (5–6)—challenges each of us to participate more fully in the story of technical communication in ways that add value to our knowledge domain.

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