Practice What You Teach

Jim Ramsay
Precisely: Documents by Design
jramsay@indra.com
81 Cree Court
Lyons, CO 80540

Abstract: Technical communication practitioners have a wealth of experience to bring to the technical communication classroom, but they do not always see themselves as the best teachers. If they rely on the same skills that made them successful technical communicators, practitioners with little or no teaching experience can be equally successful in the classroom.
Keywords: technical communication practitioners, technical communication teachers, instructional design

Technical Communication Practitioners

Practicing technical communicators spend their days gathering technical information and processing that information to make it accessible to the intended audience. Consciously or unconsciously, they perform audience and task analyses to determine audience needs, set clear objectives to meet those needs, and use appropriate tools and techniques to develop procedures and descriptions that provide just enough guidance for the audience to achieve those objectives. They use a review process to verify that what they have written is correct, and whenever possible they seek opportunities for improving the efficiency of communication with the audience through reader surveys and documentation usability tests.

With their first-hand knowledge of technical communication techniques and procedures, these practitioners can make a valuable contribution as teachers of technical communication. As the recent economic downturn causes many practitioners to reflect on alternative ways to apply their skills, technical communicators with little or no teaching experience may find themselves drawn toward teaching. Making the transition from practitioner to teacher may be daunting, even for those with teaching experience. Lesson planning, classroom management, and textbook selection for a new course demand a lot of time, as does devising a system for tracking grades and attendance. Often the first-time teacher needs to develop a course curriculum, syllabus, reading lists, tests and exercises from scratch. However, by using many of the same principles and skills that made them successful technical communicators, practitioner-teachers can achieve the same success in the classroom.

The Intersection of the Technical Communication and Instructional Design Models

The process technical communicators follow as they practice their craft mirrors the model widely followed for instructional design: audience and needs analysis, setting goals and objectives, selecting instructional methods and media, designing instructional material, and formative and summative evaluation (Gagne, Briggs, & Wager, 1992; Leshin, Reigeluth, & Pollock, 1992; Seton Hall University Teaching Learning and Technology Center, 2001). Preparing a class can be handled in the same way a technical communicator prepares to write a manual, web page or online help system.

1. Audience analysis: Who is the course for? Find out as much as possible about the students before the class begins. For open enrollment classes, a student questionnaire can be a good starting point for an audience analysis.
2. Needs assessment: Why do the students need this class? It may be a prerequisite for other classes, essential to the success of their careers, or simply nice-to-know information. This will determine the extent to which the students need to master the material you will be covering. And these needs may not be the same for all students in the class.
3. Goals and objectives: What do you expect the students to know and be able to do? Proficiency standards, specific objectives, and evaluation criteria need to be spelled out in advance for both the teacher and the students. Instructional objectives are the criteria against which teachers measure student progress and results, and students need a clear idea of what they will be expected to accomplish.
4. Instructional methods and media: How much hands-on lab experience, classroom lecture, or assigned reading is required and appropriate for the audience to meet the objectives? Methodology and media selection may also be predetermined by external factors such as budget or availability of facilities, or by internal factors such as student expectations or instructor capabilities.
5. Formative and summative evaluation: How much of the information just presented did the students master? And how much will they be able to apply once they leave the course? Exercises and quizzes provide immediate feedback on how closely you are meeting your objectives. Final exams and projects provide a bigger picture of the students' achievement of overall goals for the course.

Practice What You Teach

Following these technical communication best practices makes practitioners better teachers. If they draw their students' attention to what they are doing and why, they take further advantage of a valuable opportunity to teach by example. The teacher-practitioner might distribute a student questionnaire on the first day of class, for instance. A best practice turns into a teaching point by mentioning to the students how this survey helps the teacher prepare appropriate lessons just as an audience analysis helps a technical communicator design an appropriate manual, help system or web site. The teacher-practitioner can further bring the point home by drawing on first-hand experiences to provide good and bad examples of how this technique works in the real world.

The following table lists the five stages of technical communication and instructional design outlined earlier. A few examples of classroom activities are included; presentation participants will be encouraged to provide more.

Stage of Design	Classroom Activity	Real-World Example
Audience analysis	Student questionnaire	Customer interviews
Needs assessment	Career counseling	Site visits
Goals and objectives	Identify objectives at the beginning of each presentation, activity or assignment.	"Who should read this book" introductions
Instructional methods and media	Explain the division of course content into lecture, lab and reading assignments	Online vs. print document decisions
Formative and summative evaluation	In-class item analysis of exercises and tests.	Usability tests

Conclusion

By focusing their attention on how best practices for technical communication apply to the classroom as well as the work place, teacher-practitioners can bring real-world techniques and experiences to the technical communication classroom. When teacher-practitioners share their observations of the parallels between good pedagogical practice and good technical communication, the students benefit from learning by example.

References

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About the Author

Jim Ramsay is a technical writer, editor, educator, trainer, and project manager. He plans documentation deliverables from specifications to shrink wrap, turns big-binder manuals into fat-free guides, and produces everything in-house, from text and graphics to online documents and marketing materials. He is proprietor of Precisely: Documents by Design and a part-time Web Design instructor at the University of Colorado in Denver.