Outpost and Evolution
A Quarter Century (and More) of Change

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This keynote was presented at the 2010 Annual Meeting on September 30, 2010 at Boise State University in Boise, ID. The meeting’s theme was Programmatic Trends in Times of Change.

This is the story of just one program, offered as part of the ongoing conversation about our field and its place in the broader intellectual and programmatic landscape.

We have had many discussions of these issues over the years, most recently in the Bruce Maylath, Jeff Grabill, and Laura Gurak June 2010 special issue of Technical Communication Quarterly and in their article “Intellectual Fit and Programmatic Power: Organizational Profiles of Four Professional/Technical/Scientific Communication Programs.” Related issues have appeared recently on the ATTW listserv, and they will be explored in some of the sessions here over the next couple of days.

Let me start with a bit of personal history, because we each experience a story a bit differently. I came to the University of Washington in 1983 with a PhD in English and Medieval Studies from the University of Texas and a background in technical writing, including stints as an editorial assistant at a nonfiction publisher, as a TA in technical writing at UT, and most recently, as a technical writer for Texas Instruments. At UW, I joined the Program in Scientific and Technical Communication (the STC Program) in the College of Engineering (COE). The faculty consisted mainly of program founders Mike White and Jim Souther, Mary Coney, Jan Spyridakis, and Tom Williams. Dave Farkas joined the same year I did. We all had backgrounds in English with the exception of Tom, who came from Communications and was Publications Director for the College.

As I presented this talk, I projected a series of images of the HCDE faculty and labs. To get approximately the same information in a different format, go to http://www.hcde.washington.edu/navresearch.

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The STC Program existed because a century earlier the College of Engineering decided to hire staff from the Department of English to teach Engineering students how to write reports and other workplace documents. Since then, but long before I arrived in 1983, two major phases of evolution had taken place.

First, the constructive phase: in the 1960s, Engineering created the Humanistic Social Studies Department (HSS) to offer courses that applied humanistic and social-scientific insights to engineering issues. And, in 1974, in response to emerging demand in industry, the College created the STC Program as a part of HSS. This new program grew directly out of the engineering-writing program, and the program’s faculty continued to teach a hefty number of sections of technical writing courses for engineering students, but in addition offered a handful of courses for students who wanted to be professional scientific and technical communicators. (These students were not STC majors; most got General Studies degrees through the College of Arts & Sciences.) Typically, students went to work for Boeing or one of the other local industries.

But then, destruction! In the economic downturn of 1981–1982, the HSS department was killed off, leaving the STC Program alive but untethered to any other unit.

Before HSS faded from memory, one of its faculty, my colleague and friend, Dell Skeels (a medievalist and folklorist), unwittingly gave me the theme for this talk today by describing us, in our existence in the College of Engineering, as occupying a distant outpost, “reviled by the home church and in danger of being eaten by the natives.”

So, what has evolved in that distant outpost over the last almost 30 years? Do we cling to a home church, or have we altogether disappeared among the natives? Our history as a unit will, I think, illuminate many of the challenges and opportunities that so many technical communication programs confront.

The fact that Dave Farkas and I were both hired in the same year, into tenure-track lines, indicates that the program had the support of the then-dean of Engineering, and we have been very fortunate over the years in having continuing support from our upper administration. I believe this was absolutely critical for success or even survival. In fact, the same dean supported our effort to launch a master’s program in STC, which we did in 1986.

The creation of this master’s program was the first of four major defining steps in our continuing evolution. Shortly after that, in 1991, we took the second major step that would shape our future: under the leadership of my colleague Mark Haselkorn, we became a formal degree-granting department within the College of Engineering: the Department of Technical Communication (UWTC).
It took us a while to understand all the implications of these two moves; I’ll mention just a few. First, because our new undergraduate degree was granted by the College of Engineering, undergraduate students were now expected to take the same engineering fundamentals as students in the other departments—and in fact, many came from the other departments. Second, master’s students also came from diverse backgrounds, many from the sciences and engineering, and often wrote theses based on empirical research of their own design. Third, with the addition of the master’s program, we found ourselves as faculty in the role of directing someone else’s research rather than doing just our own. And finally, faculty were now, even more emphatically, expected to seek external funding for their research and publish in formats and at levels of productivity valued in Engineering.

But we now had graduate students! This meant that we had TAs to staff the technical writing courses, freeing us up to flesh out our new undergraduate department major and expand our research. And, we had RAs with whom we co-published, thus increasing our research productivity. Taken together, these changes represented a major paradigm shift away from the English-department toward the Engineering model. In fact, during this period, two faculty members (Jan Spyridakis and Tom Williams) went on to get doctoral degrees—not in English or Communication, but in Education, with emphases on educational psychology, assessment, research design, and statistics. (I think it is fair to say that these technical competencies were a better fit in Engineering than my work on the twelfth-century troubadours or Dave’s work on Renaissance literature.)

Also, the second major event, achieving departmental status, had some additional collateral benefits that we can fully appreciate only now in hindsight. Entrepreneurial moves like the creation of certificate programs and self-sustaining degree programs became easier to bring off now that we were a stand-alone department. That is, we may have had to negotiate within the institution to do these things, but the internal, departmental politics were relatively easy in contrast to some programs that must compete for resources with other programs in the same department. Over the years, we have created several such programs: a Certificate in Technical Writing and Editing, an evening MS program, a Certificate in User-Centered Design, and most recently, a Certificate in Global Technology and Communication. In the current harsh economic times, our fee-based programs have given us much-needed flexibility and resources.

I mentioned four watershed events after the initial creation of the program, but so far I have discussed only two—creating the MS program and becoming a COE department. The third event was creating our PhD program, which we launched in 2002. This was (at least) our third try to do so; we had attempted twice before to define interdisciplinary PhD programs with Communications
and the Library School (now School of Information). Although we were disheartened when those earlier efforts failed, we ultimately have been much better served by having our own disciplinary degree. Now, with the degree in place, we can better hold our own when compared to the other departments in Engineering and compete for resources on a more nearly level playing field. I don’t think we would have survived in the College of Engineering if we had not succeeded in putting the doctoral program in place.

Over these years, the character of faculty members has continued to change. Dave, Mark Haselkorn, and I, hired in the 1980s, can be viewed as the “first wave” of new faculty; we all three had (essentially) English degrees, though we also had technical interests and taught somewhat technical courses. The second wave of new faculty, starting in the late 1990s, brought in three new colleagues: Beth Kolko (also with an English degree) and Mark Zachry (the one faculty member to this day with a technical communication degree, in Rhetoric and Professional Communication), but also Jennifer Turns, with a degree in Industrial and Systems Engineering. Jennifer’s main interest is in engineering education, and, more generally, in design education.

UWTC may have been from some perspectives an outpost in the early years after our founding, but by this time we had evolved into quite a bustling busy citizen of the rapidly growing technical communication community. To mention only a few of our contributions and recognitions, we have hosted or been active partners in hosting a number of national conventions, from the 1981 CPTSC meeting to the STC Conference in 2005 to the IPCC in 2007. Considering individual faculty, Mary Coney’s scholarship and service resulted in her being named an ATTW Fellow and receiving the CPTSC Service Award. Mark Haselkorn served as president of IEEE PCS and has been very active in that society. Dave Farkas, an STC Jay R. Gould award winner, has published several popular texts as well as an extensive list of award-winning articles. Jan Spyridakis may have set a record for awards for Best Journal Article from STC, and she and I (I’m honored to say) have both been recognized with the STC Jay R. Gould Award and Ken Rainey Research Award. Beth Kolko is a Faculty Associate at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Mark Zachry served as Editor for the journal Technical Communication Quarterly. Jennifer Turns was the first technical communication professor ever, as far as I know, to win an National Science Foundation CAREER Award. The department’s Laboratory for Usability Testing and Evaluation (LUTE) won the Diana Award from ACM SIGDOC for contributions to communication design. In 2005 our Engineering Communication Program won a Conference on College Composition and Communication award for excellence. We added an international dimension in 1997 by building a partnership with the University of Twente in The Netherlands, which is still
flourishing today. These connections with the national and international networks of the broader technical communication community, as represented by its main professional societies, and the concrete markers of success and esteem represented by these awards, greatly enhanced our standing and reputation within our local setting.

These concrete indicators of excellence were a great help when, with the arrival of a new dean in 2006, we faced our direst existential threat. During his job interview he had stated unequivocally that the College did not need a department of Technical Communication. I was chair at the time, and we spent a huge amount of energy educating him about who we were and what we did, especially in the areas of human-computer interaction, user-centered design processes and methodologies, new media, etc. His response was “well, you have the wrong name!” But at the same time, he became a great supporter and funded the most recent expansion of our faculty.

Of our five new additions to our professorial ranks in the last two years, none has an English or Communication degree. Sarah Perez-Kriz has degrees in linguistics and cognitive psychology; Charlotte Lee has degrees in sociology and information studies; and Julie Kientz and Cecilia Aragon have degrees in computer science. Charlotte and Julie won NSF CAREER Awards and Cecilia won a National Science Foundation PECASE Award. Cindy Atman, who as a full professor moved to HCDE from UW’s Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering and whose interests are in engineering education and design thinking, is Director of the Center for Engineering Learning and Teaching. She holds an endowed chair and is an American Association for the Advancement of Science Fellow. We continue to be the home of the Engineering Communication Program that was our original raison d’être, and we also just hired Kerrie Kephart to manage that program. Kerrie’s degree is in Education (Curriculum & Instruction). Thus, as of now, of our total 15 faculty members (14 FTE), five have English degrees (I’m including Mark Zachry’s technical communication degree here) and ten do not.

This leads me to the fourth and final watershed event that I mentioned earlier: in 2009, we changed the department’s name from Technical Communication to Human Centered Design and Engineering.

Was this the final erasure of our disciplinary identity? Not at all, in my view. Many of the new faculty have interests that revolve around communication: computer-supported cooperative work, scientific visualization, human-computer and human-robot interaction, and user-centered design. We have added important new concerns, like a focus on design and design processes, but again a communication perspective can and does inform and illuminate these concerns. At our annual faculty retreat last Monday, the faculty as a
whole concurred that technical communication would continue to be one central intellectual focus for the department. Some of the PhD graduates want to pursue academic careers in technical communication; so far, two PhD graduates have successfully pursued this option and we have students graduating soon who will be applying for such positions.

But the change reflected in the change of name is real and substantive, and I do have questions about the academic community of which we will be a part over the next five to ten years. The new faculty are coming in with healthy start-up packages that include personal lab space. They all have already won substantial external funding to support doctoral students on their projects. They are highly entrepreneurial and expect and intend to build up large, ongoing independent research programs. This is really the full flowering of the phase of our evolution that began when we launched the graduate programs and adopted the engineering/sciences model of conducting research. But what journals will these new faculty publish in? What conferences will they attend? I have mentioned that the department has over the years drawn much of its identity and validation from its interactions with and recognition by our main professional societies. In fact, these societies to a large degree legitimize the discipline and provide forums for us collectively to negotiate our intellectual space. So it is not an idle question to ask where our new colleagues will publish!

Also, from where will they recruit their doctoral students, and where will they hope to place them as they graduate? This is another source of disciplinary cohesion, one that the technical communication field is now becoming robust enough to fully exploit. In my department we have recruited some of our most exciting students because a professor in another program in a different institution recommended us to the student, facilitated a visit, or otherwise knitted us into a relationship—and we have done the same for UW students going out into the technical communication world. This web of relationships and mentoring is, again, the mark of a mature discipline. But as a unit becomes more radically interdisciplinary, this web of relationships can become thin or even nonexistent. We as a department have embraced the emerging interdisciplinary domain that we can refer to in shorthand as human-computer interaction or user-centered design. But will technical communication, taken as a discipline, also embrace this domain and be an active member of this community? Will other technical communication departments send us UW’s students, recruit HCDE students to their graduate programs, and hire UW’s graduates? Or will we align more closely with programs and departments focused, like us, on human-centered design? In short, what will be our home church, and what will become our outposts?
I have taken a while to talk about our history; I hope I’ve also connected to some of your issues and concerns. I’d like now to summarize a few points that seem to me important dimensions of this history, and voice a few questions that seem to me relevant when thinking about the future directions of our programs:

1. To begin by thinking about community formation, to make ourselves relevant in our setting in a College of Engineering, we have had to take many of the steps I’ve described. What are the forces (of conformity, community, shared values, and so on) at play in your setting? What impact are they having on your program’s health and identity?

2. Early on in HCDE’s department history, we had a shared disciplinary background that gave us stability; later, we drew new people from different backgrounds, but hiring was infrequent enough that we developed a shared history from which we derived stability. Now, after six additions to the faculty in two years, where are we developing our new base? At this point, are we still an outpost planted on “alien” engineering soil, or is this outpost evolving into a new engineering civilization? Are other technical communication units around the country and the world undergoing similar evolutions? Are we arriving at a shared new ground?

3. Turning now to consider our administrative structure and placement, at UW we are evolving into a radically interdisciplinary unit. Other technical communication programs also live in interdisciplinary units. Is this a sustainable posture? What is lost when you try to do this? What is gained?

4. I have said that becoming a department was a watershed event for us, and other technical communication programs also have departmental status or have considered seeking it. What impact is your current administrative location having on your effectiveness? What if anything would departmental status do for your unit?

5. Turning finally to questions regarding our disciplinary identity, in technical communication, we study forms of communication that aren’t necessarily valorized in another field (the email thread, say, as opposed to the novel). Concerning our “signature” objects of study, do we have a disciplinary “home church?” If so, what is it? Writing? New media?

6. A discipline is usually thought to have some kind of ground truth that is held in common. Do we in technical communication have a shared disciplinary “creed”? For me, two of our powerful ideas are audience analysis and the analysis of the ways that
power is enacted and mediated through communication. Do you agree? What other ideas would you add? Or do you question the usefulness of attempting to explicate a technical communication perspective and body of knowledge?

Author Information
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