Transitioning from Technical Communication to User Experience (UX): 
A Case Study of a Collaborative Curriculum Redesign

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ABSTRACT

This article details a collaboration between a Technical Communication (TC) academic program at Milwaukee School of Engineering and its User Experience (UX) industry and community partners. This collaboration resulted in rethinking a TC degree program and establishing a new UX and Communication Design B.S. degree program. This article responds to TC scholarship calling for increased collaboration between academia and industry. The authors further explain how this particular collaboration was guided by Stakeholder Theory, enabling the program to identify its stakeholders and balance their differences while establishing new partnerships with the UX professional community. This article presents a case study of academia/industry collaboration and details both the challenges and successes that emerged during a program redesign. It concludes with models, a tools, and preliminary lessons that can assist other academic programs considering or undergoing similar curriculum or programmatic changes.

KEYWORDS

Academia-Industry Collaboration, Program Administration, Stakeholder Theory, Technical Communication, User Experience

Having enjoyed a steady enrollment for several years, primarily through internal transfers from the engineering programs, the Technical Communication (TC) program at Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) entered an identity crisis at the end of the 1990s and began experiencing a rapid decline in student enrollment in the early 2000s. By the end of 2010, the program found itself at a significance risk of being dissolved. This case study details the steps this program took to redesign the TC curriculum and curtail its pending dissolution. Undergirding these steps was the embrace of academy-industry partnership and a systematic application of Stakeholder Theory, which had previously been only hypothetically applied to TC program implementation. This case study argues that Stakeholder Theory provides a strong foundation for establishing and developing meaningful and mutually-rewarding partnerships between an academic program and its community partners. It further promotes discussion of the academic-industry relationship by addressing benefits and challenges that emerged during the collaborative process.
ACADEMY/INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

To appreciate the collaborative process detailed in this case-study, it is helpful to place it within the context of the historical relationship between the academy and the TC industry. Understanding changing perspectives about the nature and challenges of this relationship also helps illustrate how our case provided an ample opportunity to apply Stakeholder Theory.

Relationship Tension

In the discipline of TC, differences have historically existed between the academy and industry. Stanley Dicks (2002) observed that these cultural differences have often led to unflattering stereotypes of each other. St. Amant (2015) described an internal binary that is “related to how technical communicators perceive, conceptualize, and discuss the field, both among themselves and with others” (p. 1). Other scholars have pointed out the tension arising from various aspects of this binary. Among these aspects are a focus on theory (or pedagogy) versus practice (Bosley, 2002; Hayhoe, 1998; Rude, 2009; and others), differing views on information sharing and collaboration (Dicks, 2002), and dissimilar models of decision-making (Dicks, 2002; Mirel, 1998; Odell, 1985; and Winsor, 2003).

Carolyn Rude (2015) noted that in addition to the tendency to think in binaries, other challenges have historically faced the academy/industry relationship. She named one of these challenges as the academy’s emphasis on individual research, which can be off-putting to some practitioners. As Rude explained, the result of many TC programs being housed within English Departments is, “faculty have followed the humanities model of pursuing their own research interests rather than trying to define the needs of the field…” (2015, p. vi). Other challenges Rude cited included diminished opportunities for the two groups to meet in shared forums and the lack of shared vocabularies. For example, the journals in which many academics publish do not often include articles by industry contributors.

Related to and perhaps fueling the tension existing between the academy/industry was the concern by some TC scholars that closer relationships with industry would lead to TC programs becoming merely a training grounds for industry. In fact, Bernhardt (2002) called to keep academy and industry separate in their goals and practices. His suggested partnerships instead consisted of what he called “shared communities of practice” (p. 85) in which there would remain a productive tension resulting from the partnership of “distant, academic, critical posturing and industry skepticism” (p. 89).

Building Relationships

Since the early 2000s, however, TC scholars (Blakeslee, 2002; Bosley, 2002; Hayhoe, 1998; Rude, 2000, and others) have called for building a bridge between the academy and industry. Building this bridge, they presciently advised, would be beneficial to all—scholars, practitioners, and students alike. More recently, TC scholarship has seen specific instances of successful academy/industry collaborations on such topics as content management (Batova, 2014); web information design (Thrush & Hooper, 2006); and writing, editing, and training tasks (Hirsch, 2016). As the authors of these studies pointed out, such partnerships are important to our research and teaching. In 2015, an important text, emphasizing the necessity for more conversation between the academy and industry, was published. *Academy-Industry Relationships and Partnerships: Perspectives for Technical Communicators* (Bridgeford and St. Amant) emphasized the critical nature of identifying mutual interests and common contexts in which both the academy and industry could benefit from interaction with the other. Several chapters in this text focused on collaborations in industry settings or on collaborations where the two worked together to forward industry needs while providing job-ready experience to students. In these traditional models of partnerships between TC programs and industry, students learned collaboration, usability, and emerging technology via internships, service-learning project, and other types of experiential learning.

An area that has received less attention is how the academy and industry have successfully worked together to forward academic goals, specifically TC programmatic needs. Our case study provides such a model and employs Stakeholder Theory as one component of that model.
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