

# Technical Communication and Practical Wisdom

Coincidence forces me to address two topics in this editorial that are hard to combine. I will do it and let the contradiction speak for itself. The first is a book about practical wisdom I recently read, which made me think about technical communication and also about social sciences and humanities in general. The second is the external recognition for this journal, as it shows in its latest impact factor in the Web of Science and an APEX Award of Excellence for the recent special issue on Professionalization.

## Practical Wisdom

The book *Practical Wisdom* by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe (2010) has an image of Aristotle on the cover because the concept of “practical wisdom” goes back to Aristotle. Schwartz and Sharpe discuss the importance of practical wisdom predominantly in professional contexts. Practical wisdom involves a thorough understanding of purpose—why am I doing this job, who am I serving, and why—and the willingness and ability (“will and skill”) to always do the right thing. Practical wisdom is not institutionalized but is part of the professional identity of professionals. People need practical wisdom to live their lives, and, more specifically, to do their jobs well. The book is full of convincing anecdotes about people who do or do not right in professional contexts. Many of those anecdotes show that empathy is a core competence for people who want to

develop their practical wisdom. But it is more than empathy: it may also involve finding a balance between empathy and detachment.

Professionals might already start developing practical wisdom during their education and may further develop it on the job. Practical wisdom is based on experiences, but we can only learn from experiences when we have the opportunity to make mistakes and get feedback. It is a form of tacit knowledge (as opposed to formal or explicit knowledge): it is knowledge that cannot effectively be transferred by means of communication. It is not necessarily linear, it may involve different shades, and it cannot be caught in simple rules. Educational programs, the design of organizations, work teams or jobs, and leadership may affect the extent to which professionals can actually develop and use their practical wisdom.

The book can be read as a complaint against modern society, in which practical wisdom does not seem to be valued anymore, and in which regulations, procedures, bureaucracy and control are used to compensate for that. A society that is based on distrust, uniformity, top-down management, easily quantifiable performance indicators, and a firm belief in the universal benefits of competition. A society that disregards individual initiative, responsibilities and capabilities of professionals. In that sense the book relates to the idea of the McDonaldization of society (Ritzer, 2011).



The book raises important questions about the design of academic curricula in technical communication. To what extent is it possible to make a start with the development of practical wisdom in the undergraduate and graduate programs? How would a curriculum that optimally supports the development of practical wisdom look like? How does practical wisdom relate to theories and academic research? I would argue that theories may provide useful windows to frame new experiences. At the same time, theoretical rigidity may severely narrow people’s experiences: If you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The least an academic program can do is create awareness among students of the importance of practical wisdom, and a critical attitude towards the benefits of guidelines, procedures, checklists, and spreadsheets.

The book also raises questions about the design of jobs. Do we offer professionals sufficient opportunities to (further) develop their practical wisdom? Are professionals rewarded or punished when they try to use their practical wisdom? How can we persuade organizations to invest more in the development of employees and less in procedures and structural changes? And how can we find a

balance between using practical wisdom and quality assurance?

Finally the book calls for reflection on the nature of academic research, especially in those disciplines, like technical communication, whose reason to exist is based on their strong ties with the professional practice. In the social sciences and the humanities it seems to be an illusion that academic research one day will uncover the complete truth about a certain behavioral phenomenon. People change and contexts vary. It is also an illusion that academic research will lead to the optimal solutions of problems. When people are involved, many different strategies may be successful, and for each and every strategy there may be many flaws that undermine its effect. The real value of academic research, then, would be that it provides practitioners with rich new learning experiences or with perspectives that help them make sense of their past and future experiences. Research as a source of inspiration. That is what we are aiming for in *Technical Communication*.

### Impact Factor and APEX Award

Let me briefly mention two recent signs of external recognition for the journal, which at the very least show that we are doing well. First, the new impact factors of the Web of Science have been published, and *Technical Communication* maintains its position as leading journal in the field of technical communication. An impact factor reflects the relationship between the number of references to articles in the journal and the number of articles

published in a certain period. Regrettably, only three of the technical communication journals are included in the Web of Science, which is likely to have a negative effect on the impact factor of the journals included. The journal's new impact factor is 1.027. It ranks 26th of the 72 communication journals included. It is a clear sign that publishing in *Technical Communication* matters.

Second, the special issue on Professionalization, guest edited by Nancy Coppola, has received an APEX Award of Excellence in the category "Magazine Series." Congratulations, Nancy, and again thanks for the excellent work.

### In This Issue

The first article in this issue is a new episode in the series of articles John Killoran has written about technical communication professionals and businesses. In this new article, he focuses on "About Us" information on the Web sites of technical communication contractors, consultants, and companies. Again he used a questionnaire and interviews as data collection methods. In the results he addresses, among other things, the issue of foregrounding a personal vs. a business profile. His study focuses professionals' attention on the strategic aspects of their self-representation on a Web site, and outlines the various options.

In the second article, Julianne Newmark and July Dyke Ford describe a specific project in a Technical Communication major, in which students were made responsible for the production of an issue of an established ejournal. In

addition to extensive information about the project and its place in the curriculum, Newmark and Dyke Ford also provide evaluation results of the course. As a matter of fact, a course like the one described may be an excellent opportunity for students to develop some practical wisdom at the university.

In the third article, Hanna Jochmann-Mannak, Leo Lentz, Theo Huibers, and Ted Sanders contribute to a relatively new line of research focusing on Web sites for children. Instead of focusing on the users' perspective, they used a content analysis to reveal current practices of Web designers. In the results they distinguish between three types of Web sites for children, and outline current design conventions.

Finally, Ann Jennings describes the design and results of a study into practitioner-student interaction. She used a questionnaire among technical communication practitioners to investigate how they can benefit from various types of interaction with students. Just like the special project described by Newmark and Dyke Ford, these confrontations between academic programs and practice may result in promising opportunities to develop practical wisdom.

### References

- Ritzer, G. (2011). *The McDonaldization of society* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. (2010). *Practical wisdom. The right way to do the right thing*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.