

Book Review

Tracy Bridgeford, Karla Saari Kitalong, and Bill Williamson, Editors

Sharing Our Intellectual Traces

—Reviewed by
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Index Terms—*Academic programs, technical writing administrators.*

This collection of 11 narratives is a well-crafted assemblage of stories that illustrate diverse experiences in the technical communication academic program offices at colleges and universities across the country. This book is intended for those who are responsible for creating and administering technical communication programs and aims to provide its readers with lessons learned from the field. The readers of *Sharing Our Intellectual Traces* will come away with some thoughtful points to consider as they work within the framework of their own academic resources, whether it involves multidiscipline departmental influences, or resistance to change from long established traditions.

As an introduction to the collection of stories, the editors of the book point out that story telling has often been used throughout history to teach others about lessons learned in their own lives. This reviewer works with engineers preparing reports on various analyses, and although I prepare technical reports frequently, I am an avid reader and love a good story. The prospect of reading a collection of stories about technical writing was intriguing; however, in the end, this book was not as I expected. While this is a collection of narratives, it reads like a collection of research papers, with citations throughout each chapter and a full list of references. Each chapter is devoted to one story-teller's account of technical communication program administration. Some are from the perspective of a new program in its infancy stages, and other stories are from more

established programs facing the challenge of providing meaningful curriculum to the students, while navigating the complexity of academia. A reader who is not involved with developing a technical communication program may not find this book relevant.

Program Administrators, on the other hand, will find this book interesting and inspirational. The academic and business culture across higher education facilities can vary widely: between large and small, East Coast and West Coast, public and private. Political differences, endowment or foundation constraints, and faculty priorities can all influence the success or failure of a technical communication program. The narratives presented in this book provide a wide range of experiences from contributors who have decades of experience as well as many published articles, books, and textbooks on the subject of writing and technical communication. The readers of *Sharing Our Intellectual Traces* may not have an identical experience that matches any of the contributors' stories; however, the narratives provide such a variety of content that every reader should be able to correlate portions of some accounts to apply toward their own experience and developing programs.

One of the most memorable chapters was contributed by Meg Morgan, who talks about transformational leadership and her proactive stance to involve students and the community in the development of the relationships that would solidify and enhance the technical communication program at UNC Charlotte. Her narrative can be applied to any program, whether it is well established or new, at a large university or small private college. Morgan challenges the reader to work toward inspiring students into becoming leaders of the community. This short but important chapter is immediately applicable to all technical

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communicators and is indeed one of the more thought-provoking stories.

A theme that runs through several chapters in the book relates to the challenges of elevating the status of a technical communication program within the university setting to one of increased value. The perceived higher importance of engineering degrees over a technical communication degree frequently dominated conversations, and yet faculty complained that their engineering students lacked good presentation and writing skills. Incidentally, this is seen in business today, as college interns regularly demonstrate their high-school writing capabilities. The chapter by Julie Dyke Ford titled "Intersections Between a Technical Communication Program and an Engineering Department" provides an insider view of the interdisciplinary initiatives undertaken at New Mexico Tech. This effort focuses on technical communication students partnering with mechanical engineering students in a collaborative effort such that both may benefit from the experience. Ford strives to make relationships among her peers in the Mechanical Engineering Department, and provides students with real-world opportunities to utilize skills in communication. The mechanical engineering students, while not professional communicators, are encouraged to take advantage of technical communication courses. New Mexico Tech faculty has reported marked improvements in students'

ability to present their research since the inception of Ford's careful stewardship of the technical communication program.

In summary, *Sharing Our Intellectual Traces* is an extremely well written and informative book well suited to the professors and Department Heads charged with providing technical communication programs of study at colleges and universities around the world. Reading these narratives about what worked, as well as what did not work, will provide readers with clues to a path forward in their own environment and achieve their goals of providing world-class technical communication programs. There are examples of curriculum outlines, ideas on program assessments, and information on creating an outcomes statement. Programs in their early stages can extract examples of how various structures may fit within their organization, while fully functional programs may benefit from a new perspective of curriculums which may augment what is already working well in their institution. In addition, faculty involved with any scientific or technical field may find that incorporating some of these ideas into more mainstream engineering degree programs will improve their students' overall ability to communicate effectively in the real world and make better engineers, scientists, and researchers in the process.