

Book Review

Key Theoretical Frameworks: Teaching Technical Communication in the Twenty-First Century

Angela M. Haas and Michelle F. Eble

Haas, A. M., & Eble, M. F. (2018). *Key theoretical frameworks: Teaching technical communication in the twenty-first century*. Utah State University.

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Key Theoretical Frameworks: Teaching Technical Communication in the Twenty-First Century is about the power of technical communication. Haas and Eble and their contributors address the responsibility that goes along with that power, considering how to use it to react to the issues in our changing, newly globalized world. This work is a collection of original essays that offer ways to identify new emerging issues and address existing issues in regards to social justice, while making explicit the way that these approaches to teaching are informed by specific theories. This is how Haas and Eble “[bridge] the theoretical with the pedagogical” (p. 8), in order to move a step further from recognizing existing issues within technical communication, to identifying its power to solve problems of inequity in the world at large. As someone relatively new to theoretical approaches to technical communication and communication design, this book served as something of a primer, but a thorough and nuanced one. It acclimated me to the current conversation in the field, supplied me with practical pedagogical tools and an understanding of how to thoughtfully apply them, and delineated the trajectory of social justice oriented practices in the field, from a tentative past to a promising future.

In curating this collection, Haas and Eble serve to use social justice rhetorics of technical communication to face the globalized world and understand more critically the role of technical communicators in relationship to the cultures and communities to, for, and about whom communication is based, systematic hegemonic powers and how they shape views of cultures often as “Other” or inadvanced,

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Communication Design Quarterly. ACM SIGDOC, New York, USA.

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Manuscript received June 26, 2020; revised July 1, 2020; accepted July 2, 2020.

CDQ 10.1145/3394264.3394270

the effects of globalization and global infrastructure on injustice and human rights, underrepresented traditions of technology, and finally, and I would argue most significantly, the role of technical communicators as stewards of information and power who are therefore potential advocates for diverse communities.

Centering themselves in an ongoing conversation about the growing importance of the field, Haas and Eble begin the introduction of *Key Theoretical Frameworks*, “The Social Justice Turn,” by discussing how technical communication as a profession, and as a responsibility, has become incredibly diverse and widespread in the 21st century. Globalization and the proliferation of technology and technical fields have and continue to broaden technical communication’s role in modern society; a new variety of material goods, technical and scientific information from around the world, and a vast number of new communities, economies, physical and digital places have all broadened the scope of the field. Ideologically, globalization has made a change here as well: what qualifies or is understood as technology is changing and broadening the field even further. But a globalized world is a more complex one. Technical communicators therefore have a responsibility, in their role as stewards of technology, information, and accessibility to both, to look closely at the capitalistic and neocolonial forces at play in the globalized world system. This role imbues technical communicators with the power to be complicit with these hegemonic forces, and therefore, the work argues, they must have a deep understanding of these systems, to be cognizant of the power they hold and who it affects; who it empowers, who it disempowers. To quote briefly from the introduction: “We have a complicated relationship with globalization; thus, we have an obligation to critically assess that complexity” (p. 4). After positing these issues, the work considers structural change in the field at the level of pedagogy as its response.

Key Theoretical Frameworks offers “social justice frameworks” to incorporate pedagogically to teach social justice-oriented approaches to technical communication directly to technical communicators. This book is an attempt at a structural change; working to change technical communication from the inside

out, changing the discipline itself to redress social injustice from the outset. Each section includes approaches to technical communication which incorporate the lenses of various underrepresented perspectives, across four thematic parts. “Part I: Embodied Knowledge and Risks,” for instance, includes Erin Frost’s “Apparent feminism and risk communication: Hazard, outrage, environment, and embodiment,” which outlines her course applying apparent feminism to an exploration of the function of risk communication in regards to design and technology. In “Part II: Space, (Em)Place, and Dis(Place)Ment” Godwin Y. Agboka’s “Indigenous contexts, new questions: Integrating human rights perspectives in technical communication” considers a case study of the Ogoni oil crisis to explore the ways that human rights theories intersect with technical communication research and pedagogy. “Part III: Interfacing Public Community Rhetorics with Technical Communication Discourses” connects technical communication with other communities’ forms of discourse, with Marcos Del Hierro fruitfully applying hiphop pedagogies to technical writing (“Stayin’ on our grind: What hiphop pedagogies offer to technical writing”). Finally, “Part IV: Accommodating Different Discourses of Diversity” examines race and queer theoretical approaches to technical communication pedagogies (in “Race and the workplace: toward a critically conscious pedagogy” by Jessica Edwards, and “Shifting grounds as the new status quo: Examining queer theoretical approaches to diversity and taxonomy in the technical communication classroom” by Matthew Cox.) Overall, the premise of the collection proposes we use the privilege of technical communicators as the stewards of power to intervene in world problems of inequality, and inaccessibility, and each chapter outlines a route we might take to do so.

Once, technical communication was understood as neutral and objective. *Key Theoretical Frameworks* comes in with the understanding that technologies and sciences are not neutral and objective but instead culturally-imbued and informed by ideology, making them selectively empowering and disempowering, drawing from foundational works like Selfe and Selfe’s “The Politics of the Interface: Power and its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones” (1994). The work also engages with more recent discussions in the field, most notably those of technical communication as advocacy work. *Key Theoretical Frameworks*, and the implementation of its methods, is the action outlined by works like Jones’ “The Technical Communicator as Advocate,” in which she identifies how technical communication can work as a structure of oppression, and calls for the integration of social justice advocacy into the field, specifically at the level of pedagogy (2016). This work, and others in conversation with it, consider how technical communication is humanistic, and how its power can be used to fight the hegemonic systems it is often a part of. This movement, the “social justice turn” referenced by *Key Theoretical Frameworks*’ introduction, called for the integration of advocacy into technical communication; the collection is the natural culmination of this theory with praxis. Its implementation is this exact kind of advocacy work, which not only interrogates how this work impacts the human experience, but actively addresses and attempts to change it.

More than anything, this text has an eye to the future. In the introduction, and throughout the collected pieces, *Key Theoretical Frameworks* does not view itself as the solution, but instead a starting point—a text that is addressing a present gap between the shift towards social justice and advocacy in the field and in pedagogy. While filling this gap, it points towards new ideas, and

hopes that it is a springing-off point: not only for use by instructors and scholars in the field directly, but to inspire further thought and more frameworks. Its chapters can be used individually, or in concert, by teachers and in-the-field technology and communication designers alike, to inform the steering force behind their projects’ rhetorical and ideological choices. This collection is something to be built upon to change the perspective of teaching in the field, altering what it means to be truly responsible practitioners of technical communication. Haas and Eble discuss habit, encouraging practitioners to have a constant eye toward their own ability to be advocates and reformers, throughout their working processes. This is technical communication’s own consciousness-raising. By attuning a generation of technical communicators, through the very ways they are taught to do their work, to worldwide social injustice on the part of hegemonic forces, *Key Theoretical Frameworks* works to readjust the field at large towards a new methodology of practices which understands and utilizes the globalized power of technical communication to make real change.

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