

Call for Papers

Special Issue of *Technical Communication* on “The Work of Storytelling in Technical Communication”

Guest Editors:

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Overview of Special Issue

Stories are everywhere in our public and professional lives. From casual conversations and social media posts to published explanations of complex scientific information, the act of storytelling affords humans a rhetorical capacity to engage with one another and the world around us. Stories bring cause and effect together into a cohesive event, thus helping us make sense of and impose—even just temporarily—a sense of stability to an uncertain world. Through stories, we are also able to articulate the complexity of firsthand experience into knowledge that is social, shareable, and lasting. That is, storytelling helps us communicate complex ideas to one another, particularly in ways that not only increase comprehension but also engagement, curiosity, and even excitement. Stories and storytelling are, and always have been, at the heart of TC. With its emphasis on characters, settings, descriptive language, metaphor, and narrative structure, stories are arguably one of the most effective ways of communicating complex technical and scientific information to a diverse audience of non-experts.

In keeping with *Technical Communication*'s mission to publish research about the practical applications of technical communication (TC) theory, this special issue explores the vital, rhetorical role storytelling plays in TC as a field and profession. It is no surprise then that TC scholars have long sustained a sporadic interest in stories and storytelling over the years (Barton & Barton, 1988; Blyler & Perkins, 1999; Perkins & Blyler 1999; Lemanski, 2014; Small, 2017). Much of this interest stems from Barton and Barton's (1988) early call to explore “the pervasiveness of narration in TC,” despite it being largely “devalued as a mode of discourse,” and to embark on a “more conscious and informed exploitation of narration in TC” (pp. 36-45). And stories and narratives have indeed shown up in TC scholarship across a diverse range of topics, such as DIY instructions (Van Ittersum, 2014), automotive repair work (Cushman, 2015), history of government nuclear facilities (Hirst, 2017), nonprofit organizations (Dush, 2017), pedagogical approaches to studying/teaching policy (Moore, 2013), scientific narratives and explanations (Forbes, 1999; Johnson Sheehan & Rodes, 1999; Journet, 2009), UX and human-centered design (Ballentine, 2010; Jones, 2016; Bacha, 2018), organizational crises and change (Faber, 2002; Marsen, 2014), empowerment of black entrepreneurs (Jones, 2017), YouTube beauty community tutorials (Ledbetter, 2018), instructional design (Andrews, Hull, & Donahue, 2009), multigenre coordination in marketing campaigns (McNely, 2017), and historical accounts of marriage and maternity policies at IBM (Petersen & Moeller, 2016).

While this scholarship clearly demonstrates a keen and varied interest in the intersections of storytelling and TC, it nevertheless belies Perkins and Blyler's (1999) prediction that storytelling would be a well-respected and thriving form of knowledge-making in TC. As Smalls (2017) has recently argued, the field of TC is still somewhat cautious in fully embracing stories, and its lack of a fuller, more direct engagement with it may be due to storytelling's continued unfair association "with folksy (i.e., nonempirical) campfire scenes or of professors and students not having a clear way to account for the role of stories in research that meets the field's standards of rigor. Stories may be viewed as too personal, too incomplete, too anecdotal to qualify as formal research in our field" (p. 235).

We believe the time is right to reexamine the power and potential of storytelling. In a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Karen Mazurkewich (2018), head of Communications and Marketing at MaRS Discovery District, a start-up innovation consulting firm, reports hearing the continuous refrain "if only we could tell our stories better" from practitioners in technical and scientific industries (p. 1). Mazurkewich thus sees a pervasive need for technical experts, particularly those working in start-ups and technical businesses, to be better storytellers able to craft effective narratives about their technical innovations that resonate with people. Similarly, in the field of environmental management and conservation, Anneli Sundin, Karolin Andersson, and Robert Watt (2018) call for the "use of storytelling to communicate results from systematic reviews and systematic maps" in order to "transfer evidence and communicate it to multiple audiences (decision-makers, environmental managers, the public, etc.)" (p. 3). Despite the increasing popularity of storytelling as a form of science communication, they note, skepticism still exists about the subjective or manipulative risk of transferring scientific information into narrative form. Ultimately, they call for greater "space and possibilities [to be] available to researchers, reviewers and review teams who are motivated to explore novel methods for translating knowledge and communicate it to multiple audiences" (p. 5). Bridging that pernicious gap between expert and non-expert, storytelling has the power to not only increase stakeholder comprehension but also stakeholder engagement and investment across technical, scientific, and medical fields.

TC's hesitancy to directly engage with storytelling as a legitimate form of knowledge-making is also evidenced by the relative lack of special issues and edited collections on the topic. Since the publication of Blyler and Perkins' special issue of the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* on narrative and their edited collection, *Narrative in Professional Communication*, twenty years ago, there have been no formal calls or invitations for scholars to bring together their expertise on storytelling and the rhetorical work of TC in a published work. Our special issue of *Technical Communication* hopes to fill that gap and provide an opportunity for a deeper exploration of storytelling in/as TC.

Topics to Consider for the Special Issue

In their preface to *Narrative and Professional Communication*, Perkins and Blyler (1999) recall deliberately choosing to keep the initial call for papers and its definition of narrative as open and

inclusive as possible so that potential contributors would come to the topic with their own perspectives, values, and understandings of stories (p. ix). Doing so, they suggest, invited a broad range of scholarly contributions that “both legitimize narrative in professional communication as a vibrant focus of research, pedagogic, and practical interest and offer many possible directions for future work” (p. ix). In keeping with the spirit of Perkin and Blyler’s inclusive approach, our goal for this special issue is to gather together diverse and innovative perspectives on storytelling and its role in TC today. Our CFP invites research articles that, in some form or fashion, address the multifaceted role storytelling plays in contexts of technical and scientific communication, including but not limited to:

- Storytelling as a methodology for TC research and practice
- Storytelling as a pedagogical approach to TC for graduate or undergraduate students
- Stories and storytelling practices in technical, scientific, or medical workplaces
- Storytelling in human-centered design or user experience research
- Storytelling as an instrument for social justice in TC
- Storytelling in/as information or experience architecture
- Diverse perspectives and voices in storytelling
- Stories of failure, uncertainty, and lessons learned
- Storytelling about big data, archival work, data visualizations, etc.
- Storytelling as an embodied and/or material practice
- Stories in/of extra-institutional TC
- Intercultural, global, non-western approaches to storytelling in TC
- Storytelling in public scientific initiatives or programs
- Stories about/from writing program administrators and TC program directors
- Storytelling that pays specific attention to genre, form, medium, and style.
- Storytelling in public planning, policy writing, and government service design
- Stories of activism, organizing, community engagement, and civic participation
- Visual forms of storytelling in TC (i.e., comics, infographics, etc.)
- Storytelling in the aftermath of natural or human-instigated disasters
- Stories of complex environmental problems or crises
- Stories of interdisciplinary collaboration and academic/industry partnerships

Types of Manuscript for the Special Issue

Proposals for the following types of manuscripts will be considered for publication in the special issue:

- Original research articles
- Review articles
- Focused commentary
- Teaching cases
- Case studies

Deadline for submission of proposals is October 1, 2020.

Submission Procedures for Proposal

- Cover page containing your name, institutional or company affiliation, and email address.
- 400-word proposal
- All submissions will be reviewed by at least two readers, whether you are submitting a research article, review article, focused commentary, teaching case, or case study.
- Proposals should be sent as a .docx, .doc, or .rtf file attached to an email message with the subject line: “The Work of Storytelling in TC”
- Submit proposals or direct any questions via email to Kyle P. Vealey (kvealey@wcupa.edu) and Jeff Gerding (gerdingj1@xavier.edu)

Timeline:

October 1, 2020	Proposals for special issue due
November 1, 2020	Notifications sent out to authors
February 15, 2021	Authors submit manuscripts for review
April 1, 2021	Reviews sent back to authors
July 1, 2021	Authors submit revised manuscripts
November 1, 2021	Publication of special issue

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About the Guest Editors

Kyle P. Vealey, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of English at West Chester University. His research and teaching specializations include technical communication, rhetoric of science, visual rhetoric, and civic engagement. His work across these areas focuses on the rhetorical work of storytelling, specifically the telling and circulating of stories that make sense of complex and ill-defined problems. His scholarship has appeared in *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, and *Programmatic Perspectives*.

Jeffrey M. Gerding, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of English at Xavier University. His teaching and research focuses on the intersection of technical communication, digital rhetoric, and the rhetoric of civic engagement. More specifically, his work examines the ways in which businesses, governments, and other institutions seek to openly integrate citizens into their work practices while balancing competing and often conflicting interests of other stakeholders. His scholarship has appeared in *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, and *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*.