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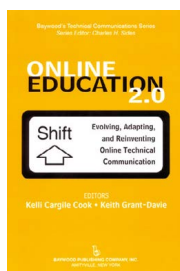
**Why is English so difficult
to spell?**

Teaching technical communication online

Online Education 2.0: Evolving, Adapting and Reinventing Online Technical Communication

Edited by Kelli Cargile Cook and Keith Grant-Davie

Baywood Publishing Company (2013), paperback, 328 pages, ISBN 978-0-89503-806-7. Reviewed by Alison Peck FISTC.



The title of the book makes its subject matter clear in retrospect, but it isn't as obvious when you first pick it up.

The book is part of Baywood's Technical Communication Series

and that, together with the subtitle of 'Evolving, Adapting and Reinventing Online Technical Communication', made me believe that its subject matter was the technical aspects of providing online education.

In fact, the book has a very different perspective, and had its subtitle been 'Evolving, Adapting and Reinventing the Online *Teaching* of Technical Communication', it would have more accurately reflected the content. That, however, is my only negative comment.

The content of the book consists of a number of case studies, split into three sections. All of the case studies are US-based, but the issues and their resolutions felt familiar. An added bonus was the understanding I gained of how education in technical communication is tackled in another country — particularly the practice of incorporating a module in technical communication (or business communication in some cases) into a wide variety of degree programmes.

The first section — 'Evolving programs and faculty' — deals with the changes in course focus and the way those who teach the course are organised. The case studies in this section cover the move from face-to-face campus-based teaching to an online alternative from the perspectives of students, tutors and institutions. The reasons for the change were varied, ranging from budget cuts and the perception that online delivery would be more cost-effective, to a desire to widen the appeal of the course. The support (or lack of it) given to tutors in transferring their knowledge and skills to an online environment is mentioned several times, with one case study devoted to the implementation of a mentoring scheme.

Of particular interest to me were the necessary compromises between what was possible technologically and what was feasible (in terms of cost, time and expertise). I was also very interested in the descriptions of how courses were 'customised' by those delivering them. From a technical communicator's viewpoint, I was thinking of additional or modified materials; from a teacher's perspective, many of the changes involved more extensive use of some of the communicating technologies that were available.

The second section is called 'Adapting to Changing Student Needs and Abilities'. It looks at the changing demographic of online students to that of a world-wide international community, and examines how that can introduce both challenges and resources. It explores the level of comfort with communicating technology, and the use of environments such as Second Life (<http://secondlife.com>). It also looks at the suggestions provided by students for improving an online education experience — do they differ from suggestions for campus-based tuition, and has there been any recent change? (The answer is 'no, not in many cases'.)


This section concludes with a familiar issue: the digital divide. As we increase the interactivity in our courses and the technological capabilities of our delivery systems, are we excluding significant portions of the population?

'Reinventing Course Contents and Materials' is the final section, and this is where you will find information that is probably more familiar to you. It covers issues such as the need to recreate materials for online delivery, not simply upload existing word-processed documents. It also looks at the flexibility that an online distributed community brings, with individual students more able to take from the course the elements that they need.

The final case study touches on extremely important aspects of any technical communication course — copyright, intellectual property rights and commercial confidentiality. These

are particularly relevant when that course is delivered online and students are interacting outside the constraints of the provided learning environment. Students are encouraged to embed their learning within their normal environment — but must consider the implications of, for example, uploading a technical proposal to illustrate good or bad practice when that proposal may potentially be accessed by anyone.

Would I recommend this book? Yes, I would — but you need to approach it with an open mind. If you're looking for a book to tell you in detail how to do something, this is not the book for you. If, on the other hand, you have an interest in online education and are looking for some thought-provoking accounts of real-world implementations, this book is very good.

Although technical communication is the theme running through the book, many of the observations would be equally valid when transferring other campus-based courses to an online version. I know I will be thinking deeply about some aspects before the next presentation of the Open University course I teach. 

Rating: ★★★★★☆

About the editors:

Kelli Cargile Cook is an Associate Professor of Technical Communication and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University. She has taught online undergraduate and post-graduate technical courses both at Texas Tech University and at Utah State University.

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