

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Project Management in the Technical Communication Classroom

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Joann T. Hackos Ph.D., Managing Your Documentation Projects, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994. 629 pages.

Gabriel Lanyi, Managing Your Documentation Projects in an Imperfect World, Columbus Ohio: Battelle Press, 1994. 178 pages.

As instructors in Technical Communication, we have a particularly difficult task keeping up with the literature and practices in our field. Not only are we expected to keep up with research studies in professional communication but we are also expected to update our computer skills as well as our knowledge of industry practices. In the last two years or so, numerous job ads in *The Globe and Mail*, as well as contacts with former students, have convinced me that we need to add yet another set of practices to our teaching repertoire. Specifically, I am referring to the techniques and practices associated with project management.

Some current technical communication textbooks briefly cover project management. However, two recent practitioner-oriented sources — Joann T. Hackos' *Managing Your Documentation Projects* (Wiley, NY, 1994) and Gabriel Lanyi's *Managing Documentation Projects in an Imperfect World* (Battelle Press, Columbus Ohio, 1994) — cover the topic in detail and could prove useful to technical communication instructors.

From the outset, one point should be made perfectly clear. Neither source is suitable as a textbook. Both are written for professional project managers. Consequently, the advice and information these texts offer make sense in an organizational context, but instructors will need to adjust this information to make it pedagogically useful.

Hackos' *Managing Your Documentation Projects* is the larger and more detailed source. Hackos links issues of quality control to project management and makes a strong case that technical communicators must become experts at project management if they wish to be perceived as professional communicators. She is aware of the lack of project management and therefore professionalism (from her perspective) in many organizations, and she provides a useful analytic tool that technical communicators can use to assess their organizations. Hackos suggests that six types of project management exist: the oblivious, the *ad hoc*, the rudimentary, the organized and repeatable, the managed and sustainable, and the optimizing. She then provides useful political advice as to how to gradually improve project management within organizations. As an instructor, I could see assigning this chapter to students prior to a co-op placement. Hackos provides a useful perspective from which students can analyze their workplace experience.

For teaching purposes, I found Hackos most useful in the way she divided the project-management process and then elaborated each phase. She divides the process into five stages: information planning, content specification, implementation, production, and evaluation. She argues that just plunging into writing a document is a waste of time and money, and insists that at least 30% of a project should be dedicated to planning (information planning and content specification). Given that, as instructors, we are always emphasizing planning in our classroom instruction, this piece of advice is welcome support. The first two stages, in particular, have many classroom applications. Hackos sees three tasks as essential for information planning: user analysis, task analysis, and project analysis. She provides a far more detailed audience and environment checklist than we find in most textbooks (check out her appendices to find these useful items). Her task analysis presumes perhaps more background knowledge than some of our students possess. But instructors will find her chapter on project analysis really useful. Hackos provides not only a useful overview of the document process but also a great deal of industry information on time and cost estimating. For example, she suggests that user guides usually take about five hours a page to write and that each hour of classroom training requires about forty hours of preparation (this last figure was a surprise, although I suppose it shouldn't have been). She suggests, too, that about \$55 an hour is a reasonable rate for the production of a user guide. All of this is useful information for instructors wanting to build more realistic assignments for their students. In my course, for example, students in groups prepare a user manual. As a preliminary assignment each group develops a proposal that analyzes the audience, the software system and their process of producing the manual (time and costs estimates included).

In the chapters on implementation, Hackos provides detailed advice on the process of producing and controlling drafts. Again, although too complex for direct classroom application, this section is filled with useful industry information. Hackos summarizes, for example, all different types of testing from “paper-and-pencil tests” to the “technical review” and also does a good job over-viewing usability testing.

In the fourth section, Hackos devotes much attention to the production aspect of technical documents. This is an area that is seldom covered in technical communication courses because we can rarely ask our students to prepare multiple copies. But many students would find this section useful as a future resource. Finally, Hackos insists that all projects must be evaluated after their completion and she provides a “wrap-up report” template (see the Appendix) to help communicators assess their own products and production processes.

Gabriel Lanyi’s *Managing Documentation Projects in an Imperfect World* is a brief, less detailed account of project management. It has a different tone and audience than Hackos’ text. Hackos has in mind a novice audience of project managers. Lanyi’s observations are obviously intended for the dedicated project manager in a position of authority. For instance, Lanyi makes a strong case for a “project-oriented” rather than a “personnel-oriented” approach. This approach, consisting of a small group of documentation specialists who work only on carefully defined and budgeted projects, has two implications: contractors and consultants on short term contracts do much of the work; and the organization has little commitment to staff development. Fortunately, Lanyi also includes an essay in the appendix (“Managing a Headcount-Based Documentation Group”) articulating the opposite point of view.

Despite this caveat, Lanyi offers much that is of value to technical communication instructors. He provides an overview of the common genres of user documentation and templates for some of the major types such as tutorials and user guides. These templates have immediate application for instructors involving their students in group projects developing hardware or software documentation. He makes a strong argument for the necessity of style guides and then provides a “bare-bones, generic style guide” (p. 149) as an appendix. Lanyi’s direct advice to communicators dealing with technical reviewers is heartwarming. He provides a handout called “the Art of Draft Reviewing” (p. 64) in which he explains the difference between useful and useless comments and concludes with “Don’t be nasty, sarcastic, or mean-spirited. Some day we may get a hold of a sample of your prose” (p. 65). Salutary advice.

Lanyi also incorporates many graphs and charts that technical instructors could use to help students manage their projects. His project-report forms, for example, would find immediate application. His model questionnaire on usability testing is thorough and practical. And, like Hackos, he provides fill-in charts to help manage the entire documentation process.

Finally, Lanyi ventures into discussing on-line documentation. This section is useful in that it raises some of the implications of designing on-line documentation from an industry perspective. Lanyi suggests that, because on-line readers can link immediately to definitions or other kinds of contextual information, on-line writers can afford a “tunnel-vision approach” wherein “the writer concentrates on the topic at hand and ignores related issues” (p. 135). Unfortunately the comparative ease of writing on-line documentation is not matched by the ease of editing this material. Clarity in on-line documentation lies in the effectiveness of the link and editors must do a great deal of testing to ensure that the documentation is consistent, clear, complete, and logical.

In conclusion, I found both sources useful and would recommend either to any practicing technical communicator interested in project management. For technical communication instructors, if I had to choose between the two, I would recommend Hackos simply because it is more complete. However, with some adjustment, both texts provide useful classroom material and I recommend both for the resource shelf of the technical communication instructor.