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Subject: Opinions on Technical Writing 101

Date: April 13, 2013

Dear Alan S. Pringle, Sarah S. O’Keefe

I am a college student at City College of Technology and enrolled in a classed called technical writing. I am to read two books, one of them is your book called “Technical Writing 101” and the other book “Too Big To Know” by David Weinberger. Our assignment was to read your book and look for something to criticize or disagree with and in comparison to Too Big To Know. If find your book to be quite knowledgeable for people who are interested to becoming a technical writer, but there are three points I must stress that I think it is flawed. One of them is that I believe that you have to be an expert in order to be a technical writer. Second, in order to perform an “Audience and task analysis” (94), it can be costly which I tend to disagree with. Third, I believe that manual texts are on their way out due to the internet.

Years before search engines such as Google or other search engines were popularized, if people were to find certain information, let’s say I would like more information on a product. People would call people who are experts on the product, “…folks who know the product or are learning about it – for example, tech support personnel, trainers, and customer service reps.” (29). Although people today are still using wired or wireless communication to look for information based on previous example, I believe it’s on the decline due to the internet or I might even go farther to call it old school.

I feel that people who are seeking information no longer calling up experts, whether it’s about a product or subject but instead they’re “googling” it. If you have ever search in the Google, such as “how to…” you will find vast amount of results, it will even auto fill in the blank before you finish typing. If I need to know how to change my oil in my car, I don’t need to call up the mechanic, all I have to do is search for “How to change oil filter” and it would come up with 27 million hit results! David states that “…Now if you want to know something, you go online. If you want to make what you’ve learned widely accessible, you go online.” (14, pdf) What’s even better is that instead of reading the website I can just go to YouTube and have it shown it visually! But that is a whole another topic. I just want to say that the internet has changed the way we perceived information and the “Mechanic – How to” book in the library are just there collecting dust.

You say that “You don’t have to be a programmer, but you do need to understand the fundamentals of programming.” (27). When one think of an expert, what do you think of? I think of a person that who knows the subject of the in’s and out, person that I can ask any questions to without any hesitance to a quick witted response, or else why would they be called an expert. I think in order becoming a technical writer, you must have the knowledge of an expert or at least closed to it. If someone were to write about Search Engine Optimization or SEO, they should know the subject about SEO and not just know the fundamentals as you put it. Or as David puts it, “…People study hard and become experts in particular areas. They earn credentials – degrees, publications, the occasional Nobel Prize…”

You talk about audience and task analysis being too costly, I don’t think that is necessary true but I do agree it is time consuming. One of the ways I would try to communicate with users with audience analysis is to take advantage of the social media via the internet. Since Facebook, brands have been signing and setting up their own Facebook page to keep in touch with its users. I would try to use some kind of survey service such as surveymonkey.com and try to communicate with the fans of the product directly. Or even sometimes you can look at Amazon.com forum product page where people discuss their opinions or problems to each other. I think there is valuable data to be collected there.

Overall your book was very nice and insightful; I hope you can take my opinions into consideration into your future books.

Thanks

Ludwig Liu