Book Review

Resilient, Proactive, and Visible: Lean Programmatic Development and Better Writing Programs

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Johnson, Meredith A., Michele Simmons, and Patricia Sullivan. *Lean Technical Communication: Toward Sustainable Program Innovation.* Routledge, 2018. 155 pages.

Lean Technical Communication offers an empirically grounded model for growing and stewarding an academic writing program. The book's main contribution is a definition of lean programmatic work and point-by-point breakdown of its tenets. Three on-the-ground cases then illustrate what those tenets can look like within a writing program. While the book focuses on professional and technical writing programs, its principles of lean technical communication can be equally useful for any WPA working to balance the priorities of several institutional and public stakeholders. The authors encouragingly present a flexible set of principles and techniques helpful for meeting the challenges involved in preparing academic programs that will benefit students, the academy, and—more expansively—professional relationships, civic communities, and even the physical environment in meaningful and sustainable ways.

The realities of WPA and all its attendant work within any given institutional context will vary, and this variety is part of why the book is needed and why it takes the approach it does. The book's purpose is to inspire better writing programs (p. xx). This means, as the authors indicate throughout, better for *everyone* those programs might impact: students, faculty, administrators, universities, communities, governments, and workplaces. Perhaps most crucially, better writing programs should also be better for our planet and environment. The authors' specializations in technical communication (their chosen term for encapsulating the variety of titles across

the field—see p. 5) circumscribe the focus of this book accordingly. It is a book for anyone "involved in the development of professional and technical communication undergrad and graduate programs in the US" (p. xix). However, the authors also acknowledge a wide range of secondary audiences, including writing program administrators, graduate students learning the basics of curriculum development, e-learning product developers, and human resource specialists who teach or train employees. Principles of lean programmatic work can be applied for any writing program (and perhaps any academic program). After all, embracing and enacting principles of lean, sustainable, enduring institutional innovation should be relevant for higher education as a whole.

Lean Programs for Everyone

Lean Technical Communication is relatively compact. The book's preface articulates and situates its practical contributions to programmatic innovation. Early chapters describe seven tenets that constitute lean programs and explore what it means to be innovative, providing heuristics relevant for measuring programmatic leanness. Part two of the book presents three distinct and detailed cases that show how the tenets of lean technical communication are (or should be) relevant to the labor and processes involved in particular institutional scenarios. Each case provides examples of where, when, how, and why one might apply or adapt the ideas, values, strategies of lean technical communication to writing programs.

As I read *Lean Technical Communication*, I recalled being present at Meredith Johnson's 2016 CCCC talk on the topics that became this book. My notes from that conference panel remind me that I didn't immediately follow Johnson's use of the term "lean." At the time, I was unfamiliar with the term's use in business and manufacturing, and I found my mind caught up with its physical connotations: *low-fat*, *trimmed*, *toned*, *sinewy*. I've since become more aware of lean as an ideal for systems and organizations: lean systems are those that do more with less, that minimize or eliminate wasted resources, wasted time, or wasted labor. Johnson, Simmons, and Sullivan intentionally note others' valid critiques of lean business approaches and express their goal to contribute to a version of lean that "prioritizes disruption, resilience, sustainability, and innovation" more than merely cutting corners or "profit-maximizing" (p. 4–5). Thoughtfully building visible, flexible, and ethical paths to higher value and sustained support are crucial aspects of their lean programmatic model. This book adapts the term further into a context of academic stewardship, embracing the motivations underlying leanness (to do more with less, etc.) and demonstrating how

program administrators can enact principles of lean, sustainable, long-term and forward-thinking program development. *Lean Technical Communication* somewhat takes for granted readers' background understandings of *lean* more generally and the benefits of leanness more broadly. The book elides the deeper origins and histories of *lean* as a concept, since other scholars engage with that background elsewhere (p. 5). Readers wanting a more well-rounded or comprehensive understanding of lean will need to go elsewhere. A few helpful contextualizing citations point readers to other relevant work on lean, agile technical and professional communication programs. The book particularly recommends three edited collections (Tilery & Nagelhout 2015; Bridgeford, Saari Kitalong, & Williamson 2014; Franke, Reid, & DiRenzo 2010) while also promising a more unified approach than these collections provide (p. xix).

Toward Lean, Sustainable, Enduring Innovations

Part one's chapters lay the groundwork needed for readers to engage fully with the cases detailed later in part two. Together, the first three chapters define key terms, carefully unpack the seven tenets of lean technical communication, and engage with four central tensions that intersect with the model's tenets. Important to the first part of the book is an acknowledgement that the field of technical communication is not static, but fluid based on changing technologies, workplace norms, genres, and pedagogies. Rather than focusing on objects, the book asks "what sorts of *practices* must happen to keep [a] program going? That is, if a program is understood as a collection of practices, what do named programs keep doing, start doing, and stop doing that makes it seem like they are doing programmatic work?" (p. 17). Navigating the push and pull of institutional and departmental priorities matters whether a program's goals include teaching technical communication or any other subject.

Chapter one begins reflexively, positioning writing programs themselves as rich and available research sites analogous to the many various types of workplaces and corporate organizations that technical communication scholars often study. This chapter also continues the work of defining key terms (and recognizes the challenge involved in all definitions). Attention to the meanings and resonances of *lean*, *disruption*, *resilience*, *sustainability*, and *innovation* in this chapter sets the stage for how the remainder of the book will build on and apply those concepts, asking readers to begin taking these terms and their attendant stances seriously, to challenge the status quo through disruption.

Then, in chapter two, the authors present the nuts and bolts of the lean technical communication model. Seven tenets outline what it means for a program to be *lean*:

1. **Recognize value, not deficits.** Recognize that values are prerequisite to action. Account for what is valued by the institutions we work within, rather than only looking for what is missing.

2. **Innovate and disrupt.** Attend to the structure that exists, improvise or embellish on an appropriate scale, continually gauging risks versus rewards.

3. **Remain rooted in local needs.** Carefully and conscientiously take socially responsible actions, building realistic, inclusive, and affordable essentials without oppression.

4. **Regulate cost.** Leverage the low-cost possibilities of free and open source software and other tools built on principles of freedom and collaboration.

5. **Engage with sustainability.** Make future-focused, planet-friendly, user-centered, equitable decisions, advocating beyond mere efficiency for its own sake.

6. **Promote efficiency.** Avoid wastefulness. Take responsibility for the acquisition, use, and management of material resources.

7. **Enhance visibility.** Clearly document and demonstrate the value of programmatic work; follow examples of WPA scholars and take program development seriously as a form of scholarship.

A lean approach takes a proactive, iterative, engaged role in balancing stakeholders' needs, not merely working in reactive "crisis mode" or, conversely, a "waiting for the perfect moment." Lean programs work to foster short- and long-term resilience by embracing procedures and technologies that lead to more sustainability (financial and ecological).

Two particularly useful concepts have stayed with me from this chapter: the Weick continuum and the Improvisation Quotient. Both support the idea that innovation and disruption (of the kind encouraged by tenet 2, above) can occur in many modes along a spectrum. Innovation might range from relatively small interpretations or minor embellishments, all the way up to bold variations and wholly new improvisations (pp. 20–21). Along with this continuum the authors offer the Improvisation Quotient. To calculate the Improvisation Quotient of a program or organization, divide its

number of innovations by the total number of day-to-day actions. An innovation quotient of 0.5 means a program is taking active but measured steps to grow and develop in innovative, lean directions.

In transition from these introductory foundations, chapter three presents specific guidelines for assessing programmatic leanness and innovation. Change, for better and for worse, will always be a part of programmatic work. Program visibility can go up and down. Building and maintaining a program must be an iterative process. Given this dynamic context, two heuristic tables provide steps and questions useful for addressing those challenges and enacting lean change with the support of solid metrics and evidence (pp. 49–52). The first of these focuses on the processes of enacting lean change through identifying the spaces, boundaries, and resources available for such work (p. 50). The second heuristic explains ways of capturing metrics for purposes of raising visibility, arguing for the value of new innovations, and conducting assessment (pp. 51–52).

Classifications, Computing Infrastructures, and Community Engagement

The book's second half presents three on-the-ground cases followed by a short concluding chapter. Leading us through the details of institutional, departmental, and programmatic concerns at the University of South Florida and at Miami University, this section applies the principles from part one to real world complexities, including: program classifications, standards, and funding models; material program facilities and computing infrastructure; and community-based technical communication pedagogy. Each case illuminates a set of intersections among the seven tenets of lean technical communication.

Chapter four discusses the implications of course classifications and categorization standards, offering strategies for how program administrators can effectively respond to the imbalances and constraints of institutional funding decisions. Funding decisions can affect program visibility and negatively impact program development and growth. This chapter's example involves the Performance Based Funding opportunities offered by the state of Florida and its Board of Governors to public sites of higher education. The metric ratings used to determine funding streams seem to favor some institutions more readily than they do others. In response to such institutional logic, the authors would have program administrators interrogate them carefully, saying: "Rather than bolstering or dismissing metrics, this chapter attends to them as boundary objects that can function as a means to forward lean technical communication's goals" (p. 59).

Among the boundaries or gaps between on-paper definitions and real-world practices, there is space for disruption.

However, to negotiate and translate value across boundary objects may involve a great deal of hidden labor. Unpacking an example—Florida's statewide course numbering system and the Federal Department of Education Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes—the chapter maps out various possibilities and what they would take in terms of innovative risk, use of resources, cooperation across institutions, programs, etc., also noting which tenets each move would align with. The chapter suggests productive moves to make when facing top-down budget constraints that seem to call on—or call for—different potentially conflicting priorities across "federal, state, institutional, departmental, and programmatic levels" (p. 60). As a junior faculty member, I found the critical, grounded discussion in this chapter particularly eye-opening and thought provoking, and I came away inspired to investigate possibilities for intervention within my own institution.

Chapter five explores the potential for writing programs to foster sustainability and leanness in the physical spaces they control. In particular, this chapter's University of South Florida case centers on "one of the field's bedrock landscapes: a standard-issue, 26 station, computer classroom" (p. 79). In its consideration of campus spaces, computing hardware, and power usage, this case takes a serious look at the many intersections of materiality and sustainability within any given writing program. The complexities of balancing costs (not only of purchasing but of maintaining computer facilities) against various affordances and other long-term consequences may involve quantitative assessments (measuring energy, carbon, amounts of e-waste) and qualitative comparisons of features within the context of other priorities. The chapter applies a four-part heuristic, which lists metrics related to the computer classroom overhaul, along with evidence that could be used to support the program's claims of lean-ness and arguments for additional changes or future purchasing decisions. Given what we know about the amounts of e-waste involved in producing, consuming, and managing our many electronic devices, adapting or even fully replacing classroom or other campus infrastructure as part of meeting lean and sustainability goals is a worthwhile endeavor (for programs and for the environment). The detail covered in discussion of this case exemplifies what it looks like to think carefully and pragmatically toward sustainable futures.

Chapter six provides examples of projects that engage students with communities beyond their classrooms. In their discussion in this chapter, the authors argue that pedagogy and research around community-based writing work needs to be intersectional and consider a full range of sus-

tainability indicators. Within the intersections of pedagogy, community, and research are powerful possibilities for making visible our expertise and more fully preparing students to be citizens and advocates (not just workers or employees). Two detailed examples from Miami University may inspire readers to look for similar opportunities to partner on projects outside the classroom. Students in technical and professional writing courses at Miami have had opportunities to write for the public, explore usability and user experience in real-world contexts, develop personas and heuristics, conduct and interpret user research, propose change, and reflect on the skills and work involved in all of it.

Such community engagement projects can have fluid outcomes and assessment can be tricky. *Lean Technical Communication* asks specific questions helpful for assessing how well community engagement pedagogy serves students, communities, and programs (pp. 113–114). Moreover, assessment is not the only challenge involved with community engagement projects. Partnering students with campus or community participants involves increased resources from instructors (whether time, materials, social connections/obligations, or money). There are also the ethical considerations of student labor and privacy to account for. No single community engagement plan or approach will be tenable or practical for all situations, which is why principles of lean technical communication—or lean program administration—emphasize flexibility and adaptation in leveraging available opportunities.

These final two cases present arenas where first-year writing and other writing courses could benefit from innovative action. Writing and composition programs are rarely siloed away from technical and professional communication programs, after all, nor should they be. Johnson, Simmons, and Sullivan acknowledge that both types of program are very rooted in critical writing and composition as practices (p. 5). Importantly, the book's conclusion reiterates a need for thinking critically about programmatic infrastructures in terms of greater access, justice, inclusion, and equity even in the face of significant constraints. This book is an optimistic treatise on what it means to actively, productively, and conscientiously steward a writing program for the benefit of all. The seven tenets defined and discussed in this book can stand as guiding principles beyond the context of a technical and professional communication program. All program administrators should accept the importance of both present and future needs and recognize that sustainable resilience cannot be a passive practice. The practices of programmatic development should be active, thoughtful, ethical processes that help us reinforce efforts that are efficient, flexible, and, perhaps most importantly, visible.

References

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