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Beyond Audience Analysis: Conceptualizing Empathy for Technical Communication

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Abstract

The concept of empathy involves understanding others' perspectives. Technical communication requires knowing the context of users; however, empathy is neither a prominent term nor a common subject in the accompanying literature.

This article will establish a foundation for empathy to be conceptualized for technical communication. Several definitions of empathy will be reviewed, followed by applicable resemblances from examples pertaining to audience analysis. A wide-ranging analysis will connect features of empathy to topics from the areas of user experience, human-information interaction, user value, business, and design thinking.

This article concludes that there is significant value in giving empathetic attention to the emotions and human psychology of users, which are aspects of their context and overall experience that may otherwise be overlooked. The inclusion of empathetic practices for understanding users provides a more in-depth profile, enabling technical communicators to better create information that will meet audience needs.

Keywords: empathy, audience analysis, user experience, user value, human-information interaction

Beyond Audience Analysis: Conceptualizing Empathy for Technical Communication

Many people are familiar with the notion of empathy as figuratively “putting yourself in someone else's shoes.” Yet, it is curious to note that, with the exception of user experience, empathy is not a term heard in most areas of technical communication. This finding seems incongruous, especially when one considers the discipline’s governing principle to "know your audience." As I will explain below in "The Current Status of Empathy," my assertion about empathy's low profile is based on a brief survey of introductory technical communication books and an online database search of academic sources. Consequently, this article will offer justification that the concept of empathy certainly does have a suitable place in the field. Having an empathetic regard for users fulfills a vital role in the work of technical communicators when they know how their audience thinks, feels, and acts while interfacing with a product or information.

Empathy is a topic that has been examined in other disciplines varying from psychology, communication studies, neuroscience, medical education, organizational leadership, and marketing. When it is recognized as the ability to understand the concerns and needs of customers (Wieseke, Geigenmüller, & Kraus, 2012), the practice of empathy is reported to be a key for increased service quality and business profitability (Ye, Dong, & Lee, 2017). As for its proposed use in technical communication, I recommend that empathy be thought of as understanding a user's thoughts, emotions, perspectives, and goals. This proposed interpretation of empathy will be expanded upon later in “Empathy in Other Fields” so as to include aspects of experience, particularly in how a user relates to or interacts with a product.

Since audience analysis is a task intended to assess and understand who end users are, it is the closest resemblance of empathy found in technical communication. Audience analysis is regarded as a crucial responsibility for technical communicators, regardless of whatever content they are tasked with creating. Undoubtedly, audience analysis is a required curriculum skill taught in many undergraduate technical and professional communication programs (Meloncon and Henschel, 2013). Nonetheless, the phrase "audience analysis" seems somewhat limited in its connotation: collecting basic facts about user demographics, determining what background knowledge they lack, or identifying their problems when using a product. Empathy more fully describes the level of awareness technical communicators should have for their users. Therefore, I submit that when we need to gain valuable insight into what a group of users—our audience—wants and how they think, act, and learn, we are actually calling for an application of empathy, not just mere audience analysis.

To support my argument that empathy should have greater prominence, this article will establish a foundation for how empathy can be conceptualized for technical communication. To do so, the first major section will begin with a broad look at the way empathy is used in other areas. Then, to develop a basis for further understanding, I will report on the current status of empathy in technical communication and then acknowledge how threads from familiar characterizations of empathy can be found in current and historic examples about audience analysis. The second major section contains an extensive analysis that considers empathy as relevant topics from the areas of usability and user experience, human-information interaction,

user value, business, and design thinking. See Figure 1 for a symbolic representation of this article's discussion.

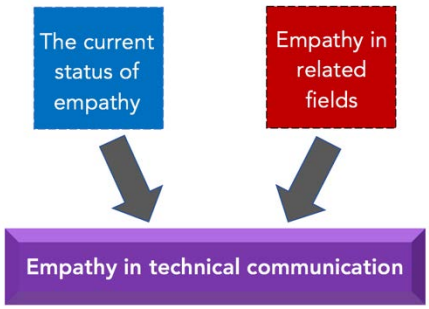

Figure 1: A diagram illustrating how this article will bring empathy into the technical communication discussion.

The observation about the infrequent use of the term empathy is not intended to be a criticism of technical communication book authors or college-level technical communication programs. Rather, my goal is to show that addressing this deficiency is warranted. The lack of prescribed meanings of empathy in current technical communication literature led to the compilation of supporting ideas from other disciplines for this article. It is my hope that drawing attention to this overlooked element can prompt practitioners and scholars to incorporate aspects of empathy into their analyses of audience and users.

The Current Status of Empathy

Before I can determine how concepts of empathy can be conveyed in the field, I will begin by listing commonly understood definitions of empathy. To comprehend the limited discussion of empathy in technical communication, I will next briefly survey several books that provide a general overview of technical communication and then note the occurrences of the term *empathy* using Minnesota State University Mankato's library database. Despite the unnoticed state of empathy, I will then point out how likenesses of the concept are mentioned in both current and historical references about audience analysis, indicating that there has been and is still a need for empathy in technical communication.

To lay a foundation for further discussion, it is helpful to review several definitions. Empathy can be portrayed as having an awareness of another person's inner states (their feelings, intentions, perceptions, and thoughts); it has also been illustrated as placing oneself in the position of another and experiencing that person's feelings (Hoffman, 1984). When defining empathy as the capacity to experience another person's emotions, a distinction ought to be made between empathy and sympathy because the two terms are not the same. Empathy means feeling *with* another person (a sharing of the same emotion), while sympathy means feeling *for* another person, which involves concern, which is a different emotion (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016; Singer & Lamm, 2009).

Empathy is often characterized as being either an affective or cognitive response to another person (Hoffman, 2000; Wieseke et al., 2012; Main, Walle, Kho, & Halpern, 2017). Affective empathy is the capacity to emotionally resonate with and share another person's

feelings. On the other hand, cognitive empathy is the ability to understand and view things from the perspective of another person. In either case, the capacity to perceive people's emotions and experiences can serve as a guide to how an observer will act or respond to others. In particular, empathy is connected to prosocial behavior: there is both conceptual and observational evidence that shows how empathy elicits one's motivation to increase another person's well-being or welfare (Batson, 1987).

Scholars agree that empathy is a concept that is both difficult to analyze and measure (Thiroux, Mercier, Blanke, & Berthoz, 2014), due in large part to its multifaceted quality (Jackson, Michon, Geslin, Carignan, & Beaudoin, 2015). Since it means understanding a myriad of mental processes entailing how other people feel, think, behave, and act (Alloway et al., 2016), empathy is discussed and applied in diverse fields including psychotherapy, social work, education, marketing, and organizational management. While not prevalent elsewhere in the rest of technical communication, the term *empathy* is mentioned in the subfield of user experience. For example, when product designers wish to gain a deeper perception about consumers, they can aim for an empathetic perspective by observing product users in their own environment (van Kleef, van Trijp, & Luning, 2004).

With its focus on users, empathy is well-suited for the field of technical communication. Technical communicators, like businesses or designers, need to analyze and understand their customers (users) so they can better develop products (information) to fit the needs of their target audience. Note: The terms *product* and *users/customers* will be used interchangeably in this article to respectively mean the same as *information/content* and *audience/readers*.

Audience Analysis

Although empathy is not a customary technical communication term, the practice of audience analysis—an effort intended to identify and better understand a group of end users—is a close parallel of empathy and is found in many introductory technical communication books. Audience analysis may be a standard topic, but there is a wide range of coverage about how and what writers should find out about them. For example, Markel (2015) devotes a portion of a single chapter to analyzing the audience. He recommends using an audience profile sheet, which lists attributes such as education, job responsibility, personal preferences, cultural characteristics, attitudes, and expectations. By contrast, Tebeaux and Dragga (2015) have a short section entitled "Understand Your Readers—The Heart of the Planning Process." Two short pages ask writers to ascertain how much their readers know about a certain topic, estimate their educational levels, determine their cultural backgrounds and attitudes, and discover other demographic information. Similar to Markel, Johnson-Sheehan's (2015) reader profile has writers find out who their audience is, including their needs, values, and attitudes, as well as any physical, economic, political, and ethical contexts. There are four pages about creating a "reader-focused" communication and, since the topic reappears elsewhere in the book, there seems to be more emphasis on knowing who the audience is than in the two previous books. Incidentally, Johnson-Sheehan's text is the body of knowledge for the Society for Technical Communication's certification exam.

All three books above touch on the fact that technical communicators need to consider the audience's *attitudes*. Acknowledging what an audience thinks and feels is significant to a more perceptive understanding of that audience. Audience analysis is comparable to user research. An audience is analyzed so information can be provided at a level that is appropriate for the intended readers; likewise, to discover what clients want, data and input are gathered in user research so clients' preferences are reflected in the product's design. There needs to be more discussion about such usability practices and strategies in technical communication pedagogy because textbooks encourage students to "consider their audience but [there is a] lack of useful methods for understanding the audience" (Chong, 2016, 15). On a related note, Albers (2008) remarks that technical communication textbooks do not address how human psychology drives an audience's interaction and comprehension of information. In essence, general technical communication books do not set forth the charge for technical communicators to have a deeper understanding about, or have empathy for, what goes on in the minds of their audience.

In addition to looking for empathy in several books that provide a technical communication overview, I also searched scholarly journal articles using MavScholar, Minnesota State University Mankato's library database for academic sources. Entering *technical communication* and *empathy* as subject terms did not yield any pertinent results. On the other hand, using *empathy* as a keyword turned up dozens of results. However, upon further investigation, the term seemed to only be used in passing. This sporadic presence may indicate the word's latent significance: the concept of empathy is relevant to technical communication but its application to the field has not been completely recognized.

Uncovering Empathy

Older articles in technical communication literature about audience analysis suggest there is a benefit for writers to mentally connect with their readers, implying that empathy has been previously considered in the realm of technical communication. In his treatment of audience analysis, Warren (1993) includes a psychological component, saying that a writer must perceive how readers process information to prepare understandable content for them. The writer's perception of the reader's process can be taken a step further, as demonstrated in the essay “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing.” Note that that idea of a writer *relating* to readers can be regarded as consistent with the word *relationship*.

> If audience adaptation is to be central to technical writing, we need broader and more flexible methods, which will permit analysis of the *relationship* between the writer and the reader. For we have not said anything very useful about the writer-reader *relationship* when we say that the purpose in technical writing is to be clear. Why has it been so difficult in a technical writing class to talk about the *relationship* between writer and readers? (Miller, 1979, p. 615, emphasis added)

In a similar vein, one could consider the audience analysis relationship as consisting of three parts: the audience, the technical communicator, and an assessment of the audience's values, beliefs, and knowledge combined (Schriver, 1997). In her book on document design, written twenty years ago, Schriver advised document designers to contemplate any biases caused by those beliefs and values. Examination on this deeper level helps writers to be “more

considerate of the reader's perspective, allowing them to address the differences between them and their readers" (Schriver, p. 164). I posit that this necessity for reflection about a reader's frame of reference is analogous to my recommendation that technical communicators have empathy for users. By associating with others' feelings and experiences, I believe empathy is that 'flexible method' as referenced by Miller. It is an awareness by which mental connections can be formed as part of the technical communicator-audience relationship. It is critical for designers of information to understand aspects of users' relationships with their social and physical environments; technical communicators fundamentally need to understand a perspective that is not their own (Cooper, Reimann, & Cronin, 2007, pp. 75–87).

Notwithstanding its infrequency in technical communication, a semblance of empathy and hence, its applicability, routinely crops up in the literature. In other words, while the term empathy may not appear in books and scholarly journals intended for technical communication, the concept and its necessity are still very much portrayed in discussions about the design of information and communication. For instance, the creation of a wayfinding system for pedestrians in London (Fendley, 2009) utilized an empathy-based methodology. In another article that discusses the development of effective software procedures, Rush Hovde (2016) pointed out that technical communicators should have a grasp on users' context, their feelings and comfort levels with technology, and the way they learn. In yet another example, the design changes in a health insurance guidebook for immigrant patients (Rose et al., 2017) was informed by an empathetic understanding of patients' uncertainty and anxiety about selecting and comprehending complicated insurance plans. In all these cases, the audience's emotions and attitudes were crucial considerations. These are encouraging examples because they show applications using concepts of empathy in different technical communication areas.

Empathy in Related Fields

Now that a basis for envisioning the potential use of empathy in technical communication has been set forth, it is instructive to see examples of empathy from different disciplines as well as corresponding topics. What follows in this section is an analysis that will connect aspects of empathy to related material from user experience, business, and design thinking. Recognizing how empathy ties in with different but familiar or related contexts can strengthen the plausibility of using the concept for technical communication.

Usability and User Experience

Usability is a subset of user experience which, in turn, is a field within technical communication. Empathy has a justified purpose in usability, especially with respect to comprehending the relationship between the user and product. Initially, the idea of usability consisted the testing of a product's functionality. Usability now includes much more than checking to see if users can complete a checklist of tasks. According to a broad overview that has a timeline beginning in the 1980s, the practice of usability has shifted in three general ways (Redish, 2010; Redish & Barnum, 2011) over the years:

- from lab-performed usability tests typically conducted towards the end of the product development process

- to a broader concept of user-centered design (Salvo, 2001) that incorporates a deeper level of usability throughout planning and development
- to user experience design (Williams, 2010), which encompasses even wider contexts of use beyond the product itself.

The timing is right to apply empathy in technical communication for today's purposes. Usability apparently moved from a product-oriented outlook to a focus on the user's overall experience with a product. To organize and present information that will meet an audience's specific needs, understanding the *experience* of users provides technical communicators a greater appreciation for their *context* (Getto & St. Amant, 2015). Empathy fills that niche for concurrently understanding both context and experience.

There are different names given to usability that extend to broader contexts like contextual design (Beyer, 1998), participatory design (Spinuzzi, 2005), and human-centered design (Walton, 2016; Putnam et al., 2016). These cover a wider focus that correspond with the two latter transitions of usability listed above but will not be further explored here. This article only refers to the general change from usability to user-centered design to user experience. The progression away from traditional usability testing has led to examining the realm of user experience, which aims "to build a more holistic and fluid experience, including one that acknowledges the multiple platforms, interfaces, and spaces by which a user may interact with [an] . . . information product" (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016, p. 249).

When conceptualizing the way usability has changed, it may be helpful to visualize the stages of transition using a modified diagram of concentric circles (see Figure 2). At the center is utility, the most basic facet of usability. The accompanying one-sentence labels are brief descriptions of usability as it might pertain to the user's mindset.

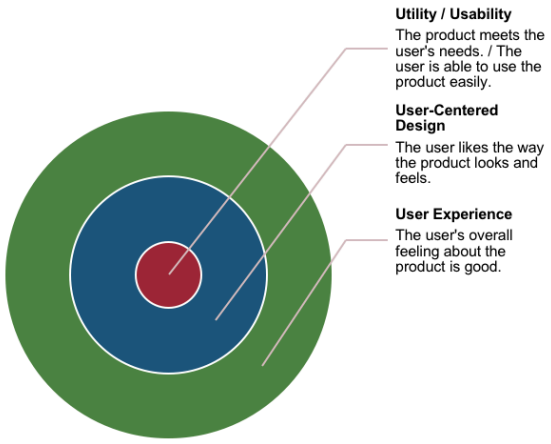

Figure 2: The transitions of usability, including the user's perspectives. Adapted from User Experience 2008, nnGroup Conference Amsterdam. Retrieved from http://www.neospot.se/usability-vs-user-experience/.

Notice that as one moves away from the core of utility, the viewpoints expressed suggest more of the user's inner state such as preference (i.e., "The user likes the way the product looks and feels") and emotion (i.e., "The user's overall feeling about the product is good"). Earlier in this article, it was determined that the emphasis for technical communicators to figure out their audience meant more than simply identifying demographics, background knowledge, or specific product usability issues. Indeed, this situation requires awareness of (or empathy for) what an audience wants, and how they think, act, and learn.

My premise is that empathy, in particular, aptly fulfills that role of awareness because it embodies understanding the feelings and experience of another person. Put in a different way, to acquire meaningful discernment about users, technical communicators can consider the following set of heuristics to identify the utilization of empathy: Empathy occurs when we want to understand how users think, how users interact or engage with a product, and how users have the product as part of their lives (Armfield, 2017). With regard to the word *interact* in both Armfield's heuristics and in Laurer and Brumberger's user experience definition, I will next switch my focus to the relevance that empathy has on a user's *interaction* and discuss the concept of user value.

More about user experience: human-information interaction and user value

Since usability has veered over time to comprise larger contexts, it is reasonable to assume that the term *user experience* entails all aspects (both cognitive and affective) when a user *interacts* with a product. (Likewise, empathy can be either an affective or cognitive response: a person can have an emotional resonance for another, or a person can understand things from someone else's perspective.) Moreover, a user's interaction or experience with information can come from reading, looking at, listening to, or considering text; users also consume text by annotating, linking, and extending information (Marchionini, 2008). Besides handling information in different ways, each user's experience with information will vary, having been influenced or shaped by their personal standards, beliefs, and expectations.

Hassenzahl's (2003) conceptual model of user experience (see Figure 3) shows that users will each have their own perception (called *apparent product character)* as they interact with a product; additionally, users also assign attributes to product character. These attributes are either pragmatic (emphasizing the product's functions to fulfill a user's behavioral goals) or hedonistic (indicating the user's psychological well-being). The user's interaction with a product has emotional consequences that relate to appeal, pleasure, or satisfaction. These emotional consequences are all viewed as outcomes of the experience (Hazzenzahl, 2003). Again, the feature of empathy to consider someone else's thoughts and feelings proves useful in the study of human-information interaction.

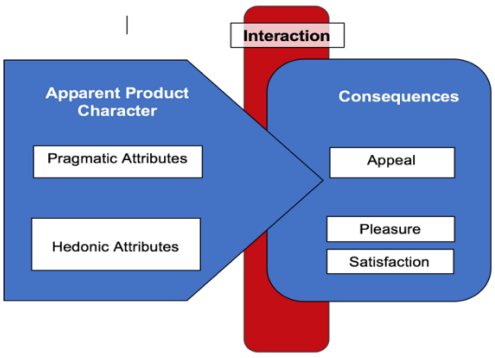

Figure 3: Hazzenzahl's conceptual model of UX from the user's perspective. Adapted from "Why User Experience Cannot Be Designed" by Helge Fredheim. Retrieved from http://blog.usabilla.com/our-5-favorite-articles-on-ux-march-2013/

Human-information interaction or HII is a relatively young field of study. The term *human information interaction* appeared in 1995 as the theme for a meeting of the Fourth International World Wide Web Conference. The conference objective was to consider "how human beings interact with, relate to, and process information" (Gershon, 1995). The priority given to these specific activities makes HII pertinent to the discussion about a user's *experience* because it is directly linked to modes of interaction with a product. HII also seems appropriate for our conversation about empathy because the way a person's bias affects the selection of information (Fidel, 2012, p. 18) during decision-making is included in the study of those processes. Similar to empathy, when considering the nature of *interaction*, the overall experience of a user's cognition and affect (combination of psychological variables) is taken into account (Norman, 1986).

The words *human-information interaction* (HII) was not explicitly used in the following excerpt about audience analysis when it written over twenty years ago. Nevertheless, it is evident that the author expresses how an interaction does exist between a user and product: "[Readers of documents bring] their thoughts, feelings, and values into play. Document designers who are sensitive to the dynamic interplay between cognition and affect during interpretation are much more likely to create documents that people will actually read" (Schriver, 1997, pp. 206–207). Again, I maintain that the 'sensitivity' a document designer should have for a reader's thoughts and feelings is, in fact, a call for empathy.

Like empathy and technical communication, the field of HII is interdisciplinary, with application in areas such as library and information sciences, personalized technology, human information behavior, human-computer interaction, human factors, psychological research, and interactive learning environments (Jank, 2010). That scholarship, though, doesn't appear in the literature of technical communication to the same extent. In his endorsement for HII, Albers (2008) discloses an insufficiency on the part of technical communicators when creating content:

> What a person says they need/want, what the task analysis shows they need, and how they interact with/interpret the information are three distinct and different entities. . .The designers and writers care about communicating information to a

> person but lack the foundational knowledge to make the design choices required to ensure the design fits how a person mentally handles the information (Albers, 2008, p. 119).

Knowing "how a person mentally handles the information" is a clear-cut nod to human-information interaction. Even so, I contend that empathy is clearly involved since this situation asks for an understanding of a user's *interaction* and *experience*. As it has been brought up before in this article, empathy is deeply interconnected with both.

It can be inferred that if human information interaction is constructive for writing contract documents, then it is germane to document development in general. Typical users who lack legal expertise will find the layers of information and complicated jargon written in contracts to be incomprehensible (Passera and Haapio, 2013). Difficulties like this can be mitigated or even avoided by employing the study of HII. These problematic issues of "design illiteracy" (Waller, 2012) are attributed to writers who lack the following: a model to follow or grammar to obey when designing a document, an understanding of affordance, gestalt, and usability, or empathy for users.

User value is the result of the reciprocal relationship between a product's qualities and what users bring to the interaction with regard to their objectives, needs, and limitations (Boztepe, 2007). This perception of user value satisfactorily complements the concepts of *interaction* and *experience*. It was already stated that each user's encounter with information will be different since it is shaped by individual feelings, expectations, and context. In a mutual manner, the physical and intangible qualities of a product affect how a user interacts with it. This point of interaction—the outcome of *experience* between users and their use of a product—contributes to user value. Table 1 delineates each aspect of experience that, as a whole, makes up user value.

	Experience Approach
Value arises from	interaction between user and product within a particular sociocultural setting
Value is	both objective and subjective
Unit of analysis is	any point of experience with the product
Product is	what enables experience
Implications for design	the need to understand what makes up experience

Table 1: User value is derived from the perspective of a user's experience with a product, and not from the product itself. Adapted from Boztepe (2007, p. 58).

In the value proposition design model (see Figure 4), both technical communicators and users are value co-creators who share a "common understanding of context and conditions in which a product is used" (Acharya, 2016, p. 31). That "common understanding" is depicted as the overlap called Interactions in Figure 4. Since individual users' emotional reactions and attitudes towards products influence value, technical communicators should create trust by

building an emotional bond ("deep-level connections") between people and the products they use (Acharya, 2016, p. 28). Again, this situation presents itself as the prime opportunity in which empathy, as the ability to understand and relate to the audience, can better fulfill users' expectations by concentrating on characteristics and goals that are relevant to them.

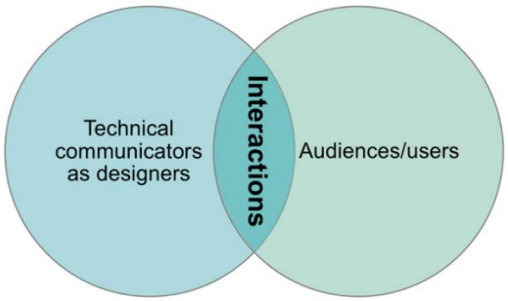

Figure 4: Technical communicators and users are value co-creators, with interactions as their shared common ground. Adapted from Acharya, 2016, p. 31.

Being able to recognize and interpret that commonality is the source for providing solutions leading to greater user value. Empathy can guide technical communicators in making sense of the audience's experience. When technical communicators are better able to understand those interactions, they serve as advocate for users, thereby contributing to the field's professional identity and advancing the significance of technical communication work in organizational contexts (Martin, Carrington, & Muncie, 2017). Furthermore, the capability to maintain quality content *and* interactions (Swarts, 2015) enables those employed in the field to affirm both their skills and their worth as effective communicators.

Business and Design Thinking

Since I am considering information and audience to be parallel to product and customers, I will summarize some literature from business and design about practices that manifest an understanding of users' needs in these fields. Empathy has emerged as somewhat of a buzzword in media headlines from both areas. For instance, there appears to be a correlation between increased profits and companies who establish a culture of empathy (Palmar 2015; 2016). Specifically, such businesses focus on understanding their customers and their needs, as well as cultivate emotional connectivity with their employees and the public.

An example of incorporating a strategy for empathy in business is the SERVQUAL tool. SERVQUAL was devised in the 1980s to measure service quality by enterprises such as information technology providers, travel agencies, software developers, the hotel industry, etc. Five areas that the questionnaire measures are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (see Figure 6). Empathy represents caring and individualized attention given to customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Creators of the SERVQUAL evaluation designated empathy as a construct based on research that customers want a relationship with a service provider who sincerely helps and understands them (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1991).

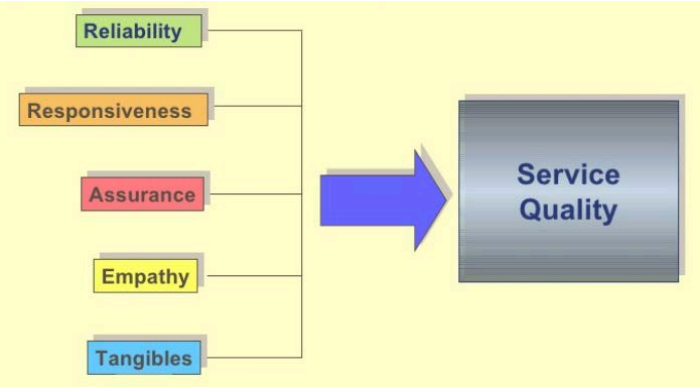

Figure 5: Empathy (or giving caring attention to customers) is of the five dimensions for determining service quality. Slide by Siddharth Nath, Gap Model & Others (2009). Retrieved from http://www.slideshare.net/siddharth4mba/gap-model-others/6

As for technical communication, users also want to feel like they are being cared for and understood. In a similar sense, their relationship (interaction) with information should ideally be clear, helpful, and free from frustration. Again, it is apparent that the capacity to relate to others is vital for customer satisfaction, just as it was implied that empathy affects user value. Speaking in business terms, Butz and Goodstein (1996) explain that customer value is the creation of an emotional bond after the customer uses a product or service and finds that the product gives added value. This stage is also explored in by Klein (2016), whose book about building successful digital products could also include creating effective content for users. Listening to what people say, watching how they behave, and understanding their context are all critical to knowing about a product's target audience. Empathy is closely related to walking a mile in someone else's shoes and understanding why somebody feels the way they feel (Klein, 2016, p. 90).

The notion of attempting to understand end users' concerns and issues to guide product enhancement is not new in the world of design. Empathy plays an underlying role in design thinking, which is the creative problem-solving approach popularized by Stanford University's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, otherwise known as "d.school" (Gloppen, 2009). It has been said that "designers work with people and for people, and the designers' main objective is to transform people's existing situations into better ones" (Frascara, 2017). The design thinking method includes an *empathize* phase at the beginning of the development process. Before solutions can be innovated, designers need to first observe, interview, or even engage with users to better understand their values and beliefs (d.school, 2010). The approach is also suitable for unpredictable, complex situations and engages an empathetic understanding of people and the situation as a whole (Glen, Suciu, Baughn, & Anson, 2015). With a lengthy history in the areas of architecture, industrial and graphic design, urban planning, and engineering, design thinking also appears in non-design contexts such as business, law, and health (Retna, 2016).

To build empathy with individuals and communities, IDEO's *The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design* (2015) explains that it is necessary for designers to innovate solutions by seeing problems from the users' perspectives. Users' emotions do matter in the product

development process; researchers and designers need empathy to understand the “uniquely human traits that are responsible for people’s liking, using, and wanting to live with the products” being designed (Dandavate et al., 1996, p. 415). These elements are strikingly similar to Armfield’s (2017) heuristics: when technical communicators endeavor to understand how users think about, interact with, and want to have a product as part of their lives, they are putting empathy into practice. The readership of technical communication will soon have the opportunity to see how design thinking methodology has made its way into the field in an upcoming publication (Pope-Ruark, Moses, Conner, & Tham, 2017) that will feature articles about how design thinking approaches have entered into and influenced the settings where professional communicators work.

Conclusion

To reiterate that empathy can be conceptualized for application by technical communicators, this article looked at latent examples from technical communication and more apparent examples from other disciplines. Seeing similar strands from different areas underscores the importance of considering users' thoughts, feelings, and contexts, and makes it easier to fathom its use in technical communication as an alternative, more in-depth means of audience/user analysis. Additionally, focusing on a user's *interaction* with a product (or information) can help us to better appreciate the scope of the user's *experience.* A distinguishing aspect of empathy—the ability of factoring in emotions and human psychology—is pivotal for technical communicators to comprehend the breadth of a user's context and experience so that information can be designed that is of the most benefit to the audience.

My investigation of empathy extends a prevailing convention in technical communication regarding the approach and type of relevant data sought when analyzing an audience or group of users. What are some suggested next steps for moving forward? This could simply include a fundamental change in our mental approach by recognizing that emotions matter. Earnestly seeking ways to better relate to our audience can prove insightful in the ways information and documentation are developed. Also, as Albers (2008) reiterated, focusing human-information interaction—the study of how people receive, process, and make sense of information—can go a long way in expanding technical communicators' perceptions of their users. Another next step might include reevaluating the processes of audience analysis and persona creation to include more discerning inquiries about users' beliefs, expectations, and mental outlook.

So, although the topic of empathy has not been directly singled out in existing literature for the field, a variety of situations positively show the obligation for technical communicators to understand the emotions and mental processes behind a user’s experience and interaction with information. Being able to adapt information necessitates the strategy of empathy because users will come from varying contexts, whether it be abilities, attitudes, or cultural backgrounds. Those in the field are empowered as mediators, filters, and remixers of media who use “empathy . . . to make more effective rhetorical choices, create reader-centered deliverables, and become better collaborators” (Dusenberry, Hutter, & Robinson, 2015, p. 307). Unquestionably, making use of empathy to better understand users is an asset that will serve technical communicators well.

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