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Are there Roles for Technical Communicators in Small Community Food Systems?

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Are there Roles for Technical Communicators in Small Community Food Systems?

By

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Are there Roles for Technical Communicators in Small Community Food Systems?

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This alternate plan paper has been examined and approved by the following members of the committee.

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Abstract

The author explores the viability of incorporating technical communication genres, practices, and theory, into various components of small community food systems. He argues that certain types of food systems and users in those food systems allow technical communicators to participate in ways aligning with genres of conservation writing described by Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan (2009). He also incorporates ideas about authorship, describing that technical communicators can improve food systems by reconciling disparate agricultural technical material, advocacy for action, and the articulation of previously non-existent food systems.

Introduction

In my experience as a technical communication student, I have yet to see research about technical communicators in roles related to agriculture. It is true that technical communicators help serve clients like John Deere (Almon Inc 2012); however, my interest lies in something less related to mechanical implements and more related to a previously unaddressed area: community food systems. Specially, I examine if participating in community food systems is a viable option for technical communicators.

What are Community Food Systems?

A community food system is one in which “food production, processing, distribution, and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and

nutritional health of a particular place. A community food system can refer to a relatively small area, such as a neighborhood, or progressively larger areas—towns, cities, counties, regions, or bioregions” (Eames-Sheavly and Wilkins 2012). This means that a community food system can take many forms. They can include university programs on college farmland, community supported agriculture (CSA), a city garden that supplies food to a food bank, a school district where students grow their own vegetables, a rooftop farm the supplies a co-op, or collective farms contributing to a community market.

The exact definition of a “local” or “small” community remains intentionally undefined in this paper, though I focus on some individual, neighborhood, city, and county-level examples. This allows opportunities for exploring the application of technical communication in community food systems while asserting that these applications can produce significant benefits if they are implemented on smaller scales.

Impetus for Research

My interest in this subject matter came from a collision of several research articles, a class in environmental rhetoric, and my own experience dealing with an empty piece of land. Academically, this idea evolved from, and was inspired by my coursework in environmental rhetoric, rhetorical theory, and research theory. Studies in environmental rhetoric provided familiarization with environmental subject matter related to agricultural concerns. Specifically, research in these courses pointed to aspects of harvesting food that ultimately demanded more resources than they

produced, suggesting that they are unsustainable in part because of massive infrastructure (Giampietro 1997; Saltveit 2003). At the same time, on a personal level, I had recently purchased my first house with a small piece of urban land around it: it was bare dirt and needed a landscaper. I thought that my bare yard was a viable alternative to large-scale agriculture, and I intended to grow some of my own food.

In trying to make the most of my small piece of land, I considered that my spare time was minimal. On top of a full time job I was working on a master's degree, and if I was going to put money and time into a yard I wanted something in return besides cosmetic appeal; I wanted it to be useful. I thought that if I have to pull weeds, at least I could pull weeds in a food-producing garden.

At nearly the same time, I read two technical communication articles describing basic technical communication theory. One article was by Steven Katz (1992) and the other was by Alan Manning and Nicole Amare (1997). These articles, while having nothing to do with yard work, food systems, or agriculture, illustrated to me that like a piece of technical communication, a piece of land could fulfill simultaneous roles; it could be utilitarian and it could be aesthetically pleasing.

I have zero experience on a farm, and I began to realize I was at a three-way intersection: my own ignorance, an absence of relationships with people who knew how to grow food, and an absence of support and infrastructure for starting my own garden. I didn't know where to find agricultural knowledge about soil or viable crops for the ecological region I am living in. I wasn't even sure who to approach with my questions,

so I just began searching stores and the Internet for books, and I searched libraries for research articles about home-scale, urban, and community food systems.

By studying technical communication, I am afforded a unique perspective. Since technical writing can lead to action (Katz 1992, 259), I decided to investigate how a technical communicator could enable participation in a community food system, especially if participants are devoid of agricultural knowledge and experience. Because this paper represents my exploration, not implementation of the activity, I discovered from a theoretical perspective how technical communicators can participate and improve participation in community food systems.

Is this Subject Matter Appropriate for Technical Communicators?

Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan authored an article titled “Conservation Writing: An Emerging Field in Technical Communication” (2009). It provides a history of technical communication related to conservation, and they describe that agricultural subject matter is a subcategory of conservation writing and technical writing. Although conservation writing and its sub-areas dealing with food systems (agriculture) are typically outside of more commonly studied areas like website usability and designing manuals, Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan discuss ways for technical communicators to become familiar with genre conventions in conservation writing so that they can function in the midst of activities such as agriculture. However, much of their discussion is broad, and their recommended reading list includes titles like the 1970 Clean Air Act, which is a national policy document. Since the food system issues related to my yard

and my community are quite limited compared to national policy, I was seeking smaller scales where a technical communicator could participate.

Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan again provide recommendations: they advise seeking out local conservation boards and government officials. They also suggest participating in service-learning projects to gain a sense of the environmental priorities of a community (2009). While their guidance might help build a broad sense of a community's environmental priorities, it still doesn't tell me about agriculture or community food systems and how technical communicators can play a role. Even in seeking academic research in agricultural or social science journals, articles about small community food systems are rare. Perhaps at best, community foods systems like I will describe in this paper lie somewhere among research about home gardens, small farmer's markets, and one example of a large university agriculture program.

My Experience Starting Out

In my own yard, I started designing a layout that was to embody the ultimate in environmentally favorable food practices, abundance, and minimal labor. It was going to be an Eden in Eastern Washington. After at least six different designs based on several books about gardening, agriculture, and landscaping, I took my ideas to a local urban homestead and natural living store. To my dismay, the employees recommended hiring a landscape designer. The landscape designer wanted over a thousand dollars to draft a plan and was not even going to visit my lot. But, she was going to use my measurements

and diagrams. I took my ideas to a local nursery as well, where they said my plans weren't ready for the services they offered.

There were other issues. I had no idea if the vegetation in my plan was correct for the region where I live. My designs were clumsy and complex in some cases. I had no idea what type of soil I had, or if my designs met civil codes and covenants for my neighborhood. I didn't know what an extension service was either. I was operating under the assumption that as a technical communicator with a stack of agriculture and gardening books, I could discern the necessary actions to create paradise on my lot. I assumed I could read my way to an abundant food supply, and that any extra would go to neighbors and family.

It hasn't happened this way. Rather, a few important events did occur, both on academic and personal levels. On a personal level, many people told me my landscaping plans were not good. Also, I finally found subject matter experts (SMEs) at a nearby university extension service. Their resources were focused on the problems I was dealing with on my lot. Compared to books from commercial sources, I found the products from the extension services to more accurately fit my needs as a user. The most fruitful document they provided actually came from an extension service in another state. It was a landscape design book that walked me, the user, through the process of designing an entire home landscape plan. It came with rulers, graph paper, tracing paper, French curves, and an assortment of simple design tools. It sets a fantastic example as a technical writing document because it is clear enough to help a user produce a viable design, but general enough that it could apply to the majority of

urban lots in America. While not necessarily focused on food systems or agriculture, it facilitates this possibility if the user wants it (University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service 2004).

Next, after some networking, I found a local master gardener who realized I was in need of guidance, and she provided me with consultations and a promised supply of seeds. In other words, I was starting to build relationships with other people who had similar interests and priorities, and who were willing to provide direction. As these events began to unfold, I realized the value of building contacts with people who shared similar priorities and who had the knowledge to do something with those priorities.

In addition I discovered research and resources about community food systems. I noticed that although formal research about community food systems is not nearly as abundant as more common food systems (like large farms), there are a few academic and non-academic resources that provide excellent examples of the systems I was seeking. I also began to realize that community food systems can be varied and complex; perhaps this is why Eames-Sheavly and Wilkins' definition is so vague (2012).

Examining Community Food System Structures

Although looking upward and outward from my own yard provides a good starting point, there is very little research about community food systems based on individual yards. Research about community food systems may work better by examining a few broad concepts embodied in larger, successful community food systems. These

principles can then be applied to smaller examples; this also allows the opportunity to see broader framework that already exists in many places, but that I may miss in my own food system experience.

Gail Feenstra, a food systems analyst at the Agricultural Sustainability Institute at University of California (UC) at Davis, provides a comprehensive explanation of community food systems (Agricultural Sustainability Institute at UC Davis 2012). Her explanations provide a framework for examining nearly any community food system, and also for examining how a technical communicator might fit into the larger picture. She also works with SAREP, the Sustainable Agriculture Research Education Program. SAREP helps administer grants for research on sustainable agriculture, develops and distributes information via publications and on-farm demonstrations, and supports long-term research and sustainable farming on UC farmlands (UC Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education Program 2008).

This is of note for technical communicators because SAREP is a wealth of practical and academic information, and they have demonstrated the benefits of public scholarship in the “arena of food systems research and practice” (Feenstra 2002, 101). In the midst of organizations like SAREP or among public scholarship and knowledge-intensive operations, technical communicators may be able to find niches that allow their expertise to benefit a community. For example, SAREP joined with members of Placer County in California and effectively linked “campus-based academics and the Placer County community in a long-term research project embedded as community based praxis” (Clancy 2008). The organization that evolved as a result is called

PlacerGROWN, and it provides food system information for community members, distributes an agriculture guide for the county, and the operators of PlacerGROWN maintain a website that promotes the county's farmers, ranchers, and people interested in buying local food (PlacerGROWN 2012).

Feenstra provides principles, like those embodied by PlacerGROWN, that can help a technical communicator gain a sense of the resources needed to enable successful community food systems. She states that in addition to the obvious resources (land, labor, and flora, etc.) needed for growing food, four somewhat abstract resources are required. Specifically, Feenstra calls these resources "spaces," and asserts that four types of space must be created when attempting to integrate environmental, economic, and social health components into a food system: intellectual space, social space, political space, and economic space (2002). Further, she cites a requirement for a shared medium in community food projects: a common language (2002). As I explain, technical communicators may find a role in constituting each of these requirements, and therefore in community food systems. Each of these spaces facilitates a basic concept: establishing new connections between people and knowledge. These new connections help enable new food systems.

Intellectual Space

This is where ideas are created. For intellectual space, Feenstra highlights that in almost every successful case, at least one individual possessed a lucid vision of the goal,

and that this individual could communicate the goal and the ““big picture”” to other participants (2002, 103). This helped anchor projects when participants faced economic, personnel, or policy changes. SAREP has played a role in facilitating intellectual space by helping to conceptualize programs that communities voiced interest in. They did this by linking community members to published work and a network of similar projects. For example, in 1996 SAREP held a conference to strengthen their network and “build intellectual rationale” for food system networks (Feenstra 2002, 103). Freenstra writes, “a lot of education and justification was and continues to be necessary to show the connections between the biological and social sciences, between food production and food consumption, and between research projects and community demonstrations” (2002, 103). Although the SAREP website doesn’t describe if technical communicators were utilized to help document and eventually propagate this information, the skills of technical communicators could have hypothetically been used to increase the fidelity of the “intellectual rationale,” or to manage the information in ways that allowed for improved access and usability.

Just in developing the intellectual space within a community, visionaries will likely benefit from a technical communicator’s expertise in documenting their idea, distilling it, communicating it to others, and reinforcing the intellectual rationale for such ideas. Even in the absence of Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan’s explicit genres, I can find theoretical openings for technical communicators based on my own experience as a technical communication student: articulation of an originator’s idea (Doak, Miller, and Slack 1993), record keeping and management of technical information, instrumental

discourse (Moore 1996), and rhetorical awareness and proficiency (Miller 1979, 1984, 1994). I address these last two elements in other portions of the paper.

The intellectual space in a food system can be quite varied. In SAREP's case, many contributors come from backgrounds in nutrition, sociology, philosophy, community development, economics, agriculture, and pedagogy (Feenstra 2002). Linking these specialties to community members and finding a common language among these participants can be a challenge (Feenstra 2002; Giampietro 1997; Jay and Lewis 2000), but establishing links between these specialties is important because of the value added by bringing multiple disciplines and community perspectives together (Feenstra 2002; McNeely and Scherr 2008). SAREP has provided the means to establish these links by holding conferences, as described earlier. Also, any medium that allows for the exchange and distribution of information under a specific subject, community food systems in this case, also allows these varied specialties to come together. Although there are several journals about agriculture, I couldn't find one that focused exclusively on community food systems. Other resources like SAREP's research records and website, and City Farmer News (City Farmer News July 7, 2012) provide a means to bring together varied contributors under common food system and agricultural subject matter.

There is another challenge in intellectual space that fits my own situation. Many people simply aren't able to contribute to a food system because of their lack of knowledge. In many of these cases, they are only separated by one or two generations from someone in their family with agricultural experience. A lack of information and

knowledge about farming or gardening is a significant obstacle to participation in food systems (Jay and Lewis 2000).

Agriculture as a viable small-community option favors information and knowledge rather than industrialization (Ikerd 1996; Kortright and Wakefield 2010). Through genres provided by Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan, or through outlets like PlacerGROWN, SAREP, and City Farmer News, technical communicators might be able to play a role in reconstituting some of this now obscure knowledge into the general population.

Personally, I have struggled over the period of a year to establish enough knowledge just to design an acceptable food-producing yard, which says nothing of the act of growing food once the design is in place. (The challenge following that will be figuring out what to do with the food, assuming I can grow enough to fill a small pantry.)

This perspective probably qualifies me as an end user, since I am the one in need of the knowledge to accomplish a task. However, it is not just end users who need to gain knowledge. Any participants, technical communicators included, that are involved on different levels of food systems also need to absorb knowledge about issues related to agriculture, political structure, science, and the places where they are employing their skills. Technical communicators can learn more about food system subject matter by volunteering their time with organizations that can facilitate intellectual space or some type of education such as conservation boards, government officials, extension offices, and groups tied to food systems (Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan 2009).

Social Space

Finding and associating with extension offices and people involved with food systems can begin to establish the next type of space: social space. This includes physical spaces like farmers markets, city halls, or gardens where social interaction occurs. It includes opportunities for people to gather and talk, listen to concerns and views, plan, problem solve, question, argue, arrive at agreement, and learn “to get to know and trust one another in the context of a common purpose or vision” (Feenstra 2002, 102). As social space, a farmer’s market is a place where people sell their food and other products, where they socialize, volunteer, advertise, consult on policy for the market itself, and support local farmers financially and socially (DeLind 2011).

Like intellectual space, Feenstra writes that social space demands a common language (2002). While there is a chance that people in a community’s social space are literally speaking different languages, perhaps Feenstra is also asking for a common lexicon, or the means to allow SMEs and non-SMEs to communicate effectively. The common language (or lexicon) may exist in marketplace conversations or other public forums, but it will also need to exist in the content of media that captures agreements, explains policy, becomes law, contains information, and provides instruction. The genres that contain this information will likely have their own audiences and their own formal requirements. For example, if a technical communicator is working in a political, legal, or civil policy realm (which I explain later), he or she will certainly need to meet requirements associated with documents in that specialty. In contrast, producing an informational pamphlet will probably have its own audience and less formal

requirements if it simply exists to advise community members that a food system is in place. For example, an organization called Green Bluff Growers built a pamphlet that describes approximately forty small family farms, all within a few miles of each other. The pamphlet describes what each farm grows, times when visitors can pick their own food, the dates for festivals, quantity information for food storage, phone numbers for a local extension service, and a map to each of the farms (Green Bluff Growers 2012). There is little need in this document for a specialized lexicon, and with its pictures and diagrams, the designers further reduced the reliance on text.

Possibly, a single lexicon for community food systems does not exist, especially if we are searching for one that fits across all genres, communities, media products, and rhetorical situations. What is an alternative? Perhaps some effort may be needed to educate participants and bring them to a minimal level of familiarization with the subject matter pertaining to community food systems. Perhaps we can expect participants to ask questions when they don't understand the language or a concept, or perhaps we can expect participants to educate themselves to some level. Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan discuss pedagogy for equipping technical communicators to participate in conservation efforts (and thus agriculture), and their ideas may also apply to informally educating the willing participants of a community food system (2009). Newsletters, press releases, websites, and brochures are sources that can help reveal basic vocabulary and discussions occurring in the realm of community food systems, and they are easy outlets for informally educating new participants (Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan 2009). Participants with more experience might be more apt to work with

analytical reports, natural resource inventories, and environmental management plans associated with different elements of community food system projects (Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan 2009). In other words, rhetorical situations also might drive lexicon: a consumer probably only needs a pamphlet, but an agricultural SME enabling a food system might need a more technical approach.

By providing theoretical, practical, or conventional framework for media that can be adopted by fledgling communities seeking to create a community food system, organizations with more experience—SAREP for example—may be able to fill the gap where the desire of a community is present, but knowledge and experience is absent. If a technical communicator were in charge of facilitating this body of knowledge by providing documentation or instructions, his or her considerations would likely fall into categories related to identifying rhetorical situations, usability, and defining the needs of the audience. In other words, a community from Arizona probably has different ecological needs and priorities than a community from the Pacific Northwest, but each requires help enabling their projects. Additionally, two communities in the Pacific Northwest may have similar needs, but dissimilar knowledge and experience, indicating yet another way in which a technical communicator needs to discern characteristics of users. As mentioned above, a consumer will probably need different information than a food-producer or a person who organizes farmer's markets.

One example of providing the means to gain knowledge about practical application exists on a website called City Farmer News. City Farmer News has “encouraged urban dwellers to pull up a patch of lawn and plant some vegetables, kitchen herbs and fruit”

(City Farmer News July 7, 2012). Their mission statement is misleading, because the website provides much more. The website contains stories about individual yards, changes to civil policy, industrial-sized rooftop farms, guerrilla gardening, and organizations who create opportunities for new food systems. It is not just a news site either: the administrators of the website have made it functional. In one story about a community food system in Portland, Oregon, they provide a hyperlink that takes users directly to the website of Portland's official city planners (City Farmer News February 2012). This city planning website contains project news, project documents, and ways to contact the people associated with city planning. Effectively, the hyperlink on the website is a functional bridge between two bodies of knowledge: the record of a community establishing a food system, and the civil body needed to support the activity. The administrators of the website are under no obligation to link a news story with the actual means for the reader to implement his or her own ideas, but they do it anyway. If another interested person reads this article, the hyperlink can lead to another food system or to greater participation in one that already exists. As technical communicators viewing this article, we can identify a relationship between documentation (the story and the link) and the organization that will enable community food system action (the city planners and their website).

Political Space

Civil bodies such as city councils or city planning organizations are examples of political spaces that can play an important role in establishing community food systems.

At some level, a community will likely come to an agreement or disagreement on action, and they will seek legal support. This can be mediated in political space with the goal of arriving at an agreement to institute a community's proposals in some form of policy document.

Some community food programs described by Feenstra have started as farm worker councils, youth programs, and church programs that were organized to help manage aspects of food production. The programs enacted by these organizations eventually led to opportunities to effect policy changes in communities, and this is a major benefit of political space: it can help institutionalize and stabilize a community's efforts (Feenstra 2002). It does this by using laws and policies that sustain food systems after the people who created the programs are no longer participating or leading.

Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan write that it is important for technical communicators to "study the political and legal systems to understand how stakeholders negotiate conservation-related issues" (2009, 24), which I extrapolate to include food systems as well. This should help technical communicators "learn the language of policy makers," (Feenstra 2002, 103).

Learning the language of policy makers will likely demand some amount of enculturation (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993). As mentioned in intellectual space, participants can volunteer with conservation boards, government officials, extension offices, groups tied to food systems, and environmentalists (Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan 2009). Having a technical communicator who is experienced in food system literature, processes, or conservation writing may benefit a policy-making body since

many policy makers are unfamiliar with opportunities in conservation and food systems. This is important because policy makers will likely be required in mainstreaming the endeavor (McNeely and Scherr 2008).

A prime example of political space comes from the Berkeley Food System Project. This project integrates locally grown organic food into a school's meal program, integrates gardens into local schools, and creates food-system-oriented curricula while producing a citywide food policy council to address food security issues (Feenstra 2002). The Berkeley Food System Project has a memorandum of understanding with the city's health department to provide staffing, and it drafted a district-wide school food policy, a citywide food policy, and it passed a ballot measure allotting funds for necessary equipment in school kitchens. Its programs were essentially generated in intellectual and social space, and then transferred to political space where participants produced written documents that a community can reference and use. The ideas are now institutionalized.

Though the Berkeley Food System is quite ideal, many disagreements and issues had to be addressed along the road to its creation. This can probably be expected in trying to reconcile the perspectives of disparate specialties such as nutrition, sociology, philosophy, community development, economics, and agriculture. Participating members in these movements can still retain portions of their independence, ideas, and programs, however, they must adapt these components "to the framework of the established system so that they are compatible with it" (Campbell 2001, 354).

A great example of this adaptation is again occurring in Portland, Oregon. Citizens of Portland, not the city's zoning officials, have drafted an update to zoning codes that support community gardens, farmers markets, food buying clubs, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) "at a scale that is appropriate to neighborhoods" and that helps build communities (City Farmer News February 2012). A project staff has worked with Portland's Code Development Advisory Group to move the concept into the appropriate zoning code language for public review.

In this example alone, there are three opportunities for a technical communicator to participate. First, he or she can participate as an author that helps articulate the citizens' ideas about zoning codes. Second, the technical communicator can participate as a member of the Code Development Advisory Group where they help adapt the citizen's proposals into formats that fit with the city's policies, both in terms of document design and language. Finally, he or she can be part of the public review of the zoning codes. A technical communicator can bring his or her unique skills to bear on the proposed policies to ensure the city and the citizens have communicated their ideas accurately to one another, and that these ideas are captured in the zoning document.

Economic Space

Economic space is the final type of space needed for community food system projects, and SAREP provides an example. Most of the projects involved with SAREP were tied to the local economy. In all of SAREP's projects, some outside funding was required to help their projects start. This funding came from grants, county boards, city

governments, or the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Technical communicators can participate in developing economic space by authoring grant proposals or other means for securing capital. Grants are also one of the genres emphasized by Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan because government and private organizations are increasingly spending money on research related to conservation and environmentalism (2009), and this can mean that they are also investing money in agriculture.

Within the grant proposal process are opportunities for technical communicators to demonstrate their rhetorical expertise. A technical communicator's experience in basic rhetorical appeals such as logos, ethos, or pathos, can be the means for securing funding for community actions and improvements. Economic space embodied in grant proposals allows a technical communicator to examine why community food systems, in all their various forms, are worth the expenditure.

What are the appeals of community food systems? Under the category of logos, some community food systems are alternatives to industrialized agriculture that uses more resources in producing and moving food than is actually harvested as a yield (Saltveit 2003). If a person can grow, harvest, and sell food within the confines of a town of 10,000 people, or at the farmer's market in the big city fifteen miles away, they use fewer infrastructures than if the fruit had to be grown, shipped to a distribution center, and then placed on the shelves of a chain supermarket (Associated Press 2009). Indeed the former hypothetical situation may be less efficient economically (the food may cost more money), but there are ecological, environmental, and agricultural costs to consider

in the mass production and harvest of food. Research by authors like Mario Giampietro (1997), Lewis, Olson, and Rains (2011), and Marion Jay and W. Joe Lewis (2000) provide a multitude of quantitative reasons that a technical communicator can use to support arguments for community food systems.

Again from the City Farmer website, we can glean a pathos appeal. More specifically, it comes from a book title in one of their articles. They report on a book by Jeremy N. Smith titled *Growing a Garden City*. His book and the article discuss “...*How Farmers, First Graders, Counselors, Troubled Teens, Foodies, a Homeless Shelter Chef, Single Mothers, and More are Transforming Themselves and Their Neighbors Through the Intersection of Local Agriculture and Community – and How You Can, Too*” (quoted in City Farmer News, *Growing a Garden City*, July 5, 2012). They are probably correct in citing individuals who benefit from community food systems since “growth originating in agriculture, in particular the smallholder sector, is at least twice as effective in benefiting the poorest people as growth from non-agriculture sectors” (FAO 2009). However, the book in the City Farmer News article didn’t overtly cite this fact in such a quantitative way. Rather, the City Farmer News article captures an emotional appeal by indicating that certain types of community agriculture are helping people who may be in less-than-ideal situations. This is a good contrast to examine: the website makes a pathos appeal, and the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) quote makes a logos appeal. Hypothetically, both statements could be about the same events.

The greatest ethos appeal for community food systems might be that people are able to build relationships over a common need for sustenance. Getting to know a person who contributes to a food system can occur simultaneously with learning how that person grows food. For example, some orchard operators not only sell their products at farmer's markets, they also open their orchard for visitors who can pick their own apples and "learn a little something in the process" (Sweetland Orchard 2012). The website for Sweetland Orchard describes their techniques for pest management, their variety of crops, and the employees and their pets (that are anthropomorphically portrayed as active members of the Sweetland Orchard staff). Their blog also carries a personal tone, mentioning the owner/operators by name and describing things like issues with their dogs and comical trials about burning weeds that won't seem to die. It can make the orchard appear quite personal and approachable. Such communication strategies can help to personalize the relationship of customer to local producer.

The owner/operators and customers participating in the Sweetland Orchard food system are not only getting some amount of sustenance, they are also learning about the orchard and the people who interact at the orchard. They are building relationships with one another. This is evidenced by customer responses on various Sweetland Orchard blog pages. The orchard exhibits the priorities of the people who operate it and the people who acquire the orchard's food. Indeed, people feel some level of comfort in buying food from people they know on such personal levels (Ikerd 1996).

Examining Technical Communication Theory

Community food systems seem ready for increased involvement from technical communicators, especially with each of the following playing roles in Feenstra's spaces that are needed for community food systems: community scholarship tied to action, knowledge and training, the involvement of multiple SMEs with non-SMEs, and rhetorical appeals.

This involvement, as discussed, can occur in many ways. It may be a technical communicator's job to simply transmit information to a user by copying recommendations verbatim from an extension service employee, farmer, master gardener, or SME. It may also be a technical communicator's job to translate complex scientific discourse into language accessible by non-scientists or to collect data and draft a grant proposal to secure funding. The most significant contributions made by a technical communicator may come in another form: a technical communicator might be able to help articulate comprehensive versions of new food systems to various participants in those food systems. This comes from Doak, Miller, and Slack's ideas on communication, where a technical communicator's efforts are "not simply a transmission or a translation but an articulation of voices" (1993, 31). In trying to create new community food systems where they do not exist, the voices articulated by technical communicators will perhaps belong to scientists, citizens, SMEs, city council members, and other participants. Because these different members of a community are all seeking an unconventional or previously nonexistent idea to be put into action, it could become a technical communicator's role, based on his or her training and

expertise, to constitute that vision by reconciling the necessary pieces of disparate technical data into descriptions of the new food system. As mentioned, these descriptions can take various forms depending on the user: pamphlets or newsletters for customers, city zoning code or environmental impact statements for city officials and planners, and instrumental discourse for users in the endeavor who would benefit from guidance about executing tasks like planting and harvesting. These new ideas about food systems are already coming to fruition in places where we'd expect intellectual space to be plentiful: in the midst of collaboration facilitated by universities and organizations like SAREP.

In contrast, people are also creating these systems in some unexpected places. A collaborative New York City (NYC) store recently opened, and its employees provide seminars, window boxes, planters, soil, and plant seeds (among many other resources) aimed at facilitating urban gardening. To quote from their blog, it took a lot of “daydreaming an [sic] conceptualizing” to create NYC’s first urban farming shop (City Farmer News June 2012). The owners and patrons envisioned a “tight-knit community pooling resources so that the materials and information needed to start an urban farm or productive backyard garden were easier to access” (City Farmer News June 2012). Although their website has a fairly topical blog and they offer some classes, they do not advertise the use of newsletters, handouts, pamphlets, or instructional guides that users can retain in their own homes and that Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan suggest as typical genres (2009). Although they’ve realized their ideas in the form a store that supports certain types of food systems, they could do more to offer improved services to their

patrons by articulating food systems in genres mentioned above (newsletters, handouts, etc.). I'm not saying that technical communicators should necessarily relegate themselves to such simple products, but these products may help initiate or solidify non-SME-participation in a local food system by articulating clear information to interested parties.

The examples of new community food systems in New York City continue to expand. Chefs at the North End Grill have begun farming on the rooftop of the Conrad Hotel. On top of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Manhattan, 250,000 bees have taken up residence in manmade hives, which is part of a larger effort to plant one million trees in the next decade (City Farmer News July 5, 2012). The bees can provide honey, and if city dwellers/gardeners started using window boxes or growing food on balconies within reach of the bees, the bees could also pollinate their food-producing plants. Also in New York, but this time in the Bronx, members of a housing project have covered their roof with a greenhouse that provides food for a local co-op (City Farmer News July 5, 2012). These NYC food systems are varied, and they don't provide a comprehensive, integrated, or self-sustaining city food system. They do, however, show that food systems are being articulated, documented, created, and practiced in new ways.

The aspirations of New Yorkers for community food systems are not just coming from the public. The movement has also gained interest from city officials. The City of New York sent out a request for proposal (RFP) for an urban farmer to run a 200,000 square foot rooftop farm on one of the city's major food distribution centers in the Bronx. This possible food system offers multiple opportunities for technical

communicators. The first is the RFP, which is probably an undertaking that demands a partnership with the farmer who will meet the needs described in the RFP. This is also a chance to articulate several “voices.” The farmer, the City of New York, and the building owner can have perspectives that are reconciled into a unified vision. This vision, however, can be represented in several written documents: crop and soil information for the farmer, laws and regulations for the city, and a contract for the building owner. This approach is probably over simplified, but it illustrates that a single vision will likely be represented in multiple ways to multiple users.

Second, a technical communicator can document the endeavor. He or she can document and propagate the lessons learned, successful and unsuccessful farming techniques, and document any array of information that would contribute usefully to the knowledge base for community food systems.

A third opportunity has not yet been addressed in detail in this paper, nor explicitly addressed in Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan’s paper about conservation writing. This third opportunity for technical communicator participation in the large Bronx rooftop farm is associated with the actual tasks of producing food, like sowing and harvesting. Some portion of technical communicators’ education is spent on creating products that users need to execute a task. Common examples in technical communication pedagogy include assignments to write a help manual for software, or constructing a document that tells a user how to execute a task. Though this type of writing—instrumental discourse—may be the source of some debate in technical communication, I’ll address it

in terms of Patrick Moore (1996) who uses the term “to mean non-persuasive, task-oriented discourse” (Warnick 2006).

Will a farmer on the Bronx rooftop be experienced enough to sow and harvest in this unusual setting? Probably to some degree, but he may not have all the required information, or he may not have it in a usable and centralized form (like a manual). The endeavor may be successful and other people will want to repeat it, or they may want to know what didn't work. If technical communicators can write manuals for software, or manuals for complicated equipment like aircraft, farm implements, or manuals for the medical community, why can't they write detailed descriptions about how to sow and harvest food in certain environments?

I acknowledge the complexity of answering this question and addressing the numerous variables I may not be aware of like weather, ecology, biology, soil types, seasonal demands, and the skill and knowledge of farmers. This probably requires that technical communicators who write agricultural manuals, like authors who write aircraft or medical manuals for example, have some knowledge of the subject matter pertaining to the task.

Perhaps I should address this on a smaller scale. Many books are already published that tell people how to grow gardens, but they generally tend to be quite broad. As a result, they might incorrectly instruct a user to sow plant species that do not grow naturally or easily in the region where the user lives. Extension services, master gardeners, and experienced farmers or gardeners can fill this gap and can direct users how to address attributes of a local area. Additionally, extension services usually have

their own gardening books that are cheaper and more focused than commercially available books. They are comprehensive and include directions for site planning, garden evaluation, soil amendments, planting techniques, and several other emphases that help enable planting and growing (Washington State University Extension 2012). The documents exist in multi-volume sets as well, and the extension service website contains many more sources about agriculture and food production. This body of knowledge is extremely valuable (Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan 2009).

Absent from my local extension service website, though, is guidance for projects described above, like the 200,000 square foot rooftop farm. This is probably no surprise. Extension services have been traditionally focused on farms or gardens that are in the earth, not above it. But with changes in available arable land (Giampietro 1997; McNeely and Scherr 2008), perhaps they would benefit from new areas of study such as community food systems in urban environments.

Supporting this idea, some research suggests that documentation of food systems—regardless of location—should include landscape-scale outcomes and specific interventions or agricultural techniques (McNeely and Scherr 2008). In other words, documentation of food systems should describe how participants solve problems. The City Farmer website accomplishes this on a somewhat anecdotal level, but agricultural institutions and extension services can perhaps benefit from collaboration with a technical communicator whose sole focus is documenting successful projects. A technical communicator can facilitate this by allowing SMEs to review, comment on, correct deficient areas, and eventually work to disseminate relevant information in

usable forms. Documentation that addresses how people solve food system problems should be usable in the sense that successful food systems can be repeated or adapted to multiple ecological and community settings. Information captured in this way could be mentioned on websites like City Farmer News, with links that direct interested parties to extension services' resources, much like links take a user from a news article to a city planning website.

Technical communicators can construct this type of discourse if they become knowledgeable in food systems or if they consult subject matter experts. Doak, Miller, and Slack might agree: they appeal for a comprehensive skill set and involvement by technical communicators in projects. They cite "nearly ubiquitous calls for technical communicators to learn more about the technical content of their work...even to participate" (1993, 32). Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan cite a similar demand for technical communicators, suggesting that they should be fluent in biological, environmental, and scientific knowledge and issues. They also favor a technical communicator with knowledge of politics (Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan 2009). This is not an assertion that a technical communicator must become an SME in all of these subjects, but that technical communicators trained in a technical specialty can make exceptional contributions to that specialty. A technical communicator may be limited in their abilities to contribute usefully if they lack technical knowledge (Doak, Miller, and Slack 1993; Portewig 2008).

Shifting the Meaning of "Food Systems"

This paper points to many examples of community food systems. A necessary part of the discussion, perhaps, is a theoretical perspective on what is occurring as technical communicators help enable these systems. In many people's minds, food production happens on modern, efficient, large-scale farms. With the help of visionary community members and technical communicators taking up roles to provide documentation, persuasive strategies, and informative documents, local small-scale food systems can also gain prominence. The idea that food systems can change only after we articulate new possibilities would probably be supported by Doak, Miller, and Slack, who examine technical communicators by gauging their ability to shift meaning (1993). I have shown the role that technical communicators can play in shifting interest in local food systems.

Marilyn Cooper writes in "Model(s) for Educating Professional Communicators" that communicators work "together to create common interests, to construct the ideals of our society, [and in light of these ideals] to examine the ends of [our] action" (quoted in Doak, Miller, and Slack 1993, 13). Doak, Miller, and Slack, provide an analogy by addressing the characteristics of a dictionary: "dictionaries define the most widely accepted (or acceptable) identities [of a word], but there are frequently different, alternative articulations that are either archaic or emerging" (1993, 28). As the most widely accepted identities of food systems continue to exist, a technical communicator can be part of emerging, alternative types of food production that also help to redefine the venture: NYC's urban garden store, the Bronx's roof-top farm, Berkley's Community Food System, Placer County's community food system, and Portland's evolving zoning

and planning that facilitate community agriculture at a neighborhood level.

Rearticulating the meaning of agriculture and food systems along with the goals of a community affords the chance to empower new possibilities.

So, Can I Contribute as A Technical Communicator?

From a theoretical point of view, yes. There are numerous opportunities to participate in food systems as a technical communicator in my local area. Would I have a steady employment like a technical writer at a large, high-tech company? Probably not, because while there are opportunities to help, they exist in so many locations and forms that nailing down a single employer might be a challenge. The exception may be working for larger organizations like SAREP or UC Davis, who consistently focus on studying and enabling food systems. Perhaps contract work is a more realistic option for technical communicators in this area. In any case, using Feenstra's four types of space (intellectual, social, political, and economic) can still be applied to my own experience of trying to get involved with community food production, and to help establish a sense of the resources needed to facilitate community food systems in my local area.

To generate ideas about community food systems, websites and organizations like SAREP and City Farmer News have provided ample inspiration for ideas. While sources like these may provide good examples from all over the world, I emphasize a focus on smaller community food systems. It doesn't matter if a technical communicator were to help build a food system in someone's yard, in a community garden, or on ten acres of city land, I recommend choosing the same primary source for agricultural information: a

local extension service. This is not to say that as a technical communicator, I would relegate myself for eternity to one ecological region, but rather that resources like extension services, farmers, and master gardeners tend to focus on the attributes of their local area.

Though I recommend seeking products from the local extension service, it is also important to incorporate feedback from a master gardener (SME) in the area (or any experienced person who would help by actually being present at the piece of land in question). If the extension service or SME direct me to other resources, I would accept that, but it would be beneficial to focus on a central hub of knowledge (the extension service) and work outward. As a technical communicator involved with a single source of knowledge I could dedicate my services reciprocally towards improving their information flows, documentation, and instructional documents while simultaneously facilitating their products to community users.

To facilitate social space in my local area, I have identified three farmer's markets within fifteen miles of my house and approximately forty additional small farms within thirty-five miles. Adding to this social space, I've developed working relationships with the local master gardener, employees at a local nursery, and employees at a local store focused on homesteading. Also, I've established relationships with no less than four local families who have full time jobs not related to agriculture, but who grow their own food in some capacity. Finally, I've identified a service-oriented program from a local church that donates their time explicitly for the purpose of building gardens and helping with similar outdoor projects.

These resources seem to constitute at least a starting point for social space. As a technical communicator though, I must ask, what can I contribute? First, it is probably likely that the people at the three farmer's markets are already aware of the other markets. However, a cursory search of the Internet shows that there probably is not a single source that lists all markets available in my local area. The forty-plus farms are definitely aware of one another and have already organized themselves into a tight community of growers who facilitate a food system open to non-growers (Green Bluff Growers 2012).

Second, I'm not sure the people in my area are aware of who else grows their own food. In other words, driving around my town, I see other food gardens but I don't know the people who own them. Perhaps I can provide a forum for this.

Last, many people probably do not know about local programs, like the church's community service organization, that can help set up gardens for making food. Some people are probably unaware that there is a local master gardener, and that there are resources like the City Farmer News, CSAs, and a local extension service with many products focused on growing food. Or they may not be aware of how many people already grow their own food, or how to get access to farmer's markets to buy and sell food. One forum to bring this information together and make it available could probably exist as a website. This theoretical website could be an instrument in improving social connections and increased social space among people who are interested in participating in food systems.

There are other ways of getting information out to members of the community, and it exists partly in political space. For example, if I want support in the form of policy, finances, city land, or even a spot in the town's newsletter, I now know when and where the city council meetings are held in my town, and I've also reviewed city project proposals and construction projects available to the public, just as Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan recommended. With these, I am gaining a sense of my town's priorities (Sherry Pratt Van Voorhis Landscape Architects 2012), and I can cater rhetorical appeals to the civil bodies that can help establish community food systems. Even if the priorities of my local community do not result in establishing a food system as ambitious as Berkeley's, or as simple as a small community vegetable garden, social and political space still facilitate the means to establish connections between interested parties and build relationships. A website, a pamphlet, an article, and a phone number in the town's newsletter, or a link on the town's website can inform gardeners, farmers, and consumers that while an official policy might not exist, a community food system might exist as friendly relationships between a few citizens and the local food bank or homeless shelter. In fact, this is almost exactly what happened in my small town (City of Cheney 2012).

Economic space is available, but I have yet to formally apply for any grants or organized rhetorical appeals. The USDA website did not explicitly provide funding for community agriculture projects, but working through an organization like SAREP might facilitate this possibility. Websites like Foundationcenter.org provide many funding sources for projects tied to community development. Sustainable Agriculture Research

and Education, located at Sare.org, also provides opportunities to apply for grants directly related to community agriculture projects. Even websites like Kickstarter.com offer the chance to secure funding for food-related projects. Because this paper represents an initial survey exploring opportunities for a technical communicator, I have yet to pursue actual funding. Suffice to say: opportunities for funding are numerous.

Conclusion

In efforts to start my own isolated food system, I've found tangible, accessible resources in each of Feenstra's spaces and discovered that community efforts seem much more accessible, productive, and even necessary. I could not grow food on my own just by reading a few books. Additionally, participation as a technical communicator in community food systems is certainly feasible. The next step in research could take various forms, and one of those forms could be a qualitative or quantitative investigation of actual participation in a community food system where a technical communicator tries to employ his or her skills. Other research might include gathering data about how SMEs in agricultural communities, like extension service employees, design their resources for users.

Carolyn Miller supports the collective action of a relationship like technical communicators and local food systems. She discusses collective action, suggesting a community acting together can have "common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes" while giving participants "a common substance, which reciprocally,

enables and enhances our common actions” (Kenneth Burke quoted in Miller 1994, 72).

In the common action of producing, distributing, and consuming local food, technical communicators can strengthen relationships in a community or enable new relationships with instrumental discourse, articulation of a community’s new ideas, and by helping to envision, document, and propagate information about community food systems. In some cases they may even persuade people to support and participate.

They can contribute to these tasks among varied technologies, sciences, and social settings under an umbrella of conservation, agricultural, and food system subject matter. It is a venture that is abundant in technologies, disparate subject matter, and social relevance. It affects everyone, and there are few technological topics that can have both individual and widespread effects to the degree afforded by participation in food systems.

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