

Book Review Editor

Russell Kirkscey, *Penn State Harrisburg*



User Experience as Innovative Academic Practice

Kate Crane and Kelli Cargile Cook, Editors

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Reviewed by Imari Cheyne Tetu

Michigan State University

Both programmatic assessment and curriculum development are key to technical and professional communication (TPC) administrators. Kate Crane and Kelli Cargile Cook's *User Experience as Innovative Academic Practice* is an edited collection on the value of applying user experience methodologies and methods to curriculum design and programmatic assessment. The authors connect UX to TPC's history of user advocacy and share insights about user experience in/as education: UX should function within programs as a means of better understanding student needs and program applications (Crane); UX is a method of transformative co-production, not just trouble-shooting or problem-solving (Masters-Wheeler & Fillenwarth); and UX-driven advocacy aids in recruiting new students, supporting current students, and supporting faculty (Howard). Students are valuable assessors of a program (Bay et al.); and bringing students into the design process as users builds interest, engagement, and success (Pihlaja). Rather than a single data collection to be interpreted by researchers, UX should involve community and

cultural lenses that speak to rather than about communities (Gonzales & Walwema). Further, and perhaps more pragmatically, not having student input may lead to more labor for instructors and missed insights from students (Clark & Austin).

The chapters of this collection include specific case studies from a broad range of institutional contexts and design stages. While specific data from UX methods is often contextual and localized, the principles are broadly applicable (Cargile Cook).

This edited collection models a user-centered approach by offering four possible journey maps to explore the chapters. "Focus on Student-Users" discusses situating user experience, understanding users, (re) designing with users. "Focus on Goals" explores the design of activities/lessons, courses, curriculum, and extra-curriculars. "Focus on Methods" is sorted by understanding, looking, and making, based on methods used. Finally, "Focus on Design State" is ordered based on project design stage.

Crane's introductory chapter, "Out of Industry, Into the Classroom," provides a framework for understanding why user experience is relevant to pedagogy and program design. Program and curriculum designers, per Crane's argument, should model the work they ask students to do post-graduation. TPC professionals have a rich history of involving users in the design process, and the development of user experience methodologies is a natural outgrowth of that focus. Crane uses a syllabus usability study to show how UX is key to designing complex course materials from a student-centered perspective.

Cargile Cook and Crane further situate user experience as a means of developing data-driven research that actively involves the users. Teachers have always been iterative designers, often through the practice of reflection-in-action. Iterative knowledge-making is important, but lore lacks methodological rigor. This collection moves students to the center of instructional design and assessment.

Sarah Martin explains user profiles as a means for developing awareness of student needs. Following a 16-week introductory undergraduate TPC course, this chapter provides two concepts for TPC instructors to apply in their own teaching: developing and iterating student-user profiles and understanding how student-user profiles can inform curricular design.

Laura Gonzales and Josephine Walwema document how using a familiar concept (transliteracies) can introduce students new to UX to its relevance and purpose. Transliteracy provides an entry point into UX that centers user research and ethical technology design. Through various feedback loops, researchers and students collaborated on

iterative course development throughout the semester.

Tharon W. Howard explores journey mapping through two case studies: a graduate seminar's client-based UX project, and faculty's use of journey maps in curriculum design. The first case study was a seven-stage project with three project teams. Howard acknowledges that few TPC program administrators could assemble the resources needed to conduct in-depth journey mapping research and offers the second case study on student needs around time to degree completion as a model for light journey mapping.

Beau Pihlaja discusses involving undergraduate students in design decisions about the syllabus and course learning management system. Pihlaja notes that many instructors are not taught pedagogy so much as subject expertise, and that adjustments to courses occur often as a way to head off negative evaluations. Instead, involving students through a UX approach early in an instructor's career can improve instruction and benefit students. This process could be accomplished in every course and every iteration of a course, which acknowledges that student cultures and needs are ever-changing.

Lindsay Clark and Traci Austin describe how UX can inform successful design with students as co-creators in a low-budget oral communication lab. Clark and Austin describe how their assumptions about user needs and priorities were challenged throughout the design and implementation process. Methods include cognitive walkthrough, observation journal, and surveys. Evidence-based inquiries led to getting students more involved with feedback and input on the design of the lab.

Luke Thominet discusses design thinking for student learning outcomes. UX methods applied to Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLO) development makes an iterative, robust, user-centered process. Design thinking acknowledges that programs occur in messy spaces with complex interests and diverse stakeholders and works to make those things strengths rather than limitations.

Kelli Cargile Cook shares early methods and data from a four-year longitudinal study in a new professional communication program. Course-level assessments, exams, and capstone projects are common ways to assess programs. Student involvement in curricular assessment typically occurs only at exit points (from a class or from a program). Students in this study assessed degree plan, internship opportunities, and job opportunities through five UX methods: surveys, focus groups, user profiles, personas, and journey mapping. Their research will inform program stakeholders, such as faculty and administrators, and enhance student knowledge of the program.

Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, Ann Hill Duin, and Emily Gresbrink share the development of a mentoring program. The authors used a UX perspective to examine a mentor-mentee relationship between technical communication advisory board members and technical communication students. The mentor program seeks to bring together academic and industry understandings of tech comm outside of traditional internship experiences. This case study was based in community of practice theory and included questionnaire, survey, and interview methods.

Mark Zachry outlines the issue of double binds in UX research using course assessment data from a senior capstone. Double binds go beyond constraints and competing interests; they are experienced personally as conflicting aspects of our identities (e.g., institutional employee and student advocate). This chapter is not meant to solve double binds but to open discussion about their existence and the roles they play in our activities as designers.

Jennifer Bay, Margaret Becker, Ashlie Clark, Emily Mast, Brendan Robb, and Korbyn Torres differentiate between usability (assessment of an end product) and user experience (interaction between users and a holistic, changeable, interconnected environment) and argue for a UX approach to programmatic assessment. The chapter is cowritten by Professional and Technical Writing undergraduates who served as experts on being in the program while learning UX principles and practices through programmatic assessment.

Christine Masters-Wheeler and Gracemarie Mike Fillenwarth situate program-as-product and students-as-users through two case studies. Thinking of students only as learners in classrooms limits their true role. Instead, thinking of them as users can help advisors, faculty, and admin improve the student-user experience. The authors surveyed current students and alumni with questions focused on identity, value, usability, adoptability, and desirability.

This edited collection delivers both the theoretical value of user experience as a framework for understanding programmatic development and a close look at applied methods of UX through multiple case studies. The content of these chapters can be taken as a model for future curricular development and refinement for all TPC programs.

Author Information

Imari Cheyne Tetu is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures at Michigan State University, where she has taught in the Experience Architecture program as well as in first-year writing. In addition to teaching, Imari works with the Enhanced Digital Learning Initiative, a collaborative of educators focused on the research, evaluation, and implementation of digital learning technologies. Her research areas include user experience research and design, web and classroom accessibility, and educational technology.