

# Engaging in Mutual Mentoring: A Heuristic to Transfer Knowledge as a Technical and Professional Communication Administrator

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**Abstract:** This article describes a new technical and professional communication program director's experience transferring prior knowledge into a new role. The author shares challenges faced and presents a heuristic that aids in transferring knowledge.

**Keywords:** administration, transfer, program, WPA, curriculum

In Fall 2022, I accepted my first tenure-track job as a "lone ranger" (Sapp, 2006) Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) program administrator: the only tenure-track TPC faculty member in a traditional English department. This Commentary piece tells the story of how I turned to CPTSC and *Programmatic Perspectives*, among other resources, and generated a heuristic to transfer my prior program administration knowledge to my new role.

I have two aims: 1) to describe the importance of CPTSC, *Programmatic Perspectives*, and other resources for new TPC administrators, and 2) to offer other new administrators a heuristic to aid in their knowledge transfer. I engage in what Karla Saari Kitalong (2009) calls "mutual mentoring" or co-mentoring (p. 211), an approach in which junior and experienced faculty collaboratively construct TPC program administration knowledge. More experienced scholars, especially leaders at the helm of CPTSC and *Programmatic Perspectives*, may use this article to further consider how to foster mutual mentoring among TPC administrators. Meanwhile, junior scholars may use the tool to apply their knowledge to their TPC leadership roles.

## Background: Becoming a Program Administrator

I entered my position with two years of administrative and teaching experience outside TPC. In my new position, I would collaborate across disciplinary lines to build a TPC program. I had previous experience doing similar work, albeit in a writing center (WC) and writing across the curriculum (WAC) context. The transition from WC and WAC to TPC demanded that I increase my knowledge of TPC program administration and my institutional context. Put simply, I needed to read, network, prototype, and write my way into my role.

Challenges abounded. Most notably, I entered my new institution as an assistant professor tasked with the program director title and duties. The only TPC specialist in my department, I felt overwhelmed and isolated. Surely, I was not the first junior, tenure-line faculty member to direct a TPC program. As I turned to the TPC field's literature, I found scholarship illustrating that other novice administrators experience similar challenges to mine as they developed new TPC programs and steered existing ones (e.g., Gonzales, Leon, & Shivers-McNair, 2020; Sapp, 2006; Simmons, Moore, & Sullivan, 2015). When Laura Gonzales, Kendall Leon, and Ann Shivers-McNair interviewed TPC program faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), one participant described the challenge of adapting to a new institutional context. Even though the participant had taught in culturally diverse settings, moving to a new setting required learning a new context and student population. Further, Michele Simmons, Kristen Moore, and Patricia Sullivan's (2015) editorial in this journal shared their observations that women serving in administrative roles sometimes lack time to publish for promotion and "to articulate administrative work as service or scholarship" (p. 287, 289). They emphasize the importance of mentorship to avoid "having program administrators who may not be adequately prepared to navigate the institutional processes and practices of the university, nor adequately prepared to sustain programs over time" (p. 278).

## Mentorship for New TPC Administrators

It quickly became clear to me that I needed mentorship, just as Simmons, Moore, and Sullivan (2015) articulate, to navigate my new institutional context and sustain a TPC program and career. I turned to *Programmatic Perspectives* and CPTSC for such support. Early in my discovery process, I found Karla Saari Kitalong's piece in this journal entitled "Mutual mentoring: An editorial philosophy for a new scholarly journal." Kitalong defines mutual mentoring, or co-mentoring, as constructing "what is meant by the scholarship of program administration" (p. 212). Unlike a "conventional mentoring approach" that positions journal editors as "the experienced 'insiders,'" mutual mentoring enables editors, authors, and readers to co-construct knowledge (p. 212). As Kitalong notes, mutual mentoring in the pages of *Programmatic Perspectives* is so necessary because, "Aside from Writing Program Administration, the WPA journal, very little scholarly work about—or interest in—the topic of academic program administration has been manifested in the rhetoric-related disciplines" (p. 215). Mutual mentoring as it occurs in *Programmatic Perspectives* enhances the TPC "community's sense of the importance of program administration work as a scholarly endeavor in its

own right" (p. 215). In other words, mutual mentoring means that we all have something to contribute. We do not leave prior knowledge at the door when we change jobs or institutions. I started to view the task of adapting to my new professional role not as about absorbing a completely new way of being, but as about transferring my existing knowledge and experience into a new space. I began to understand mutual mentoring as a meeting place of ideas, and the pages of *Programmatic Perspectives* as a space where TPC program administrators can work through the particularities of administration in their field, which shares similarities and differences with other WPA work.

## **Article Preview**

Here, I contribute my own process of converging my prior WC and WAC knowledge and my emerging TPC administration knowledge. I begin by sharing knowledge I developed in prior professional spaces, under the capable mentorship of my doctoral advisor, Dana Driscoll, a writing center administrator and writing transfer researcher, and my first supervisor, Laura Brady, a WPA at West Virginia University. By bringing forth this scholarship, explaining how it helped me to adapt to my TPC director role, and articulating how other TPC administrators can benefit from it, I hope to engage in the kind of mutual mentorship that Kitalong outlines.

## **Models for Transfer**

As I described above, a primary challenge I faced as a new TPC administrator was how to transfer my prior WPA experiences and knowledges into a new role and context. Familiar with scholarship on learning transfer from publications like *WPA Journal*, I sought to identify transfer models that could be useful for my own situation. In this section, I discuss two such models for transferring knowledge: Carolyn Wisniewski's (2018) detect-elect-connect model of transfer (which she adapted from David Perkins and Gavriel Salom) and Kara Poe Alexander, Michael-John DePalma, and Jeffrey M. Ringer's (2016) adaptive remediation model of transfer. As I share these models, I discuss their affordances for me and other TPC administrators.

### **Transfer Model #1: Detect-Elect-Connect**

First, I will review the detect-elect-connect model of transfer outlined in Carolyn Wisniewski's (2018) study of novice graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) navigating teaching-related problems. Although Wisniewski's study involved a different context than mine (graduate teaching assistants versus novice TPC program administrators), several aspects helped me to transfer knowledge to my new context. Wisniewski interviewed graduate teaching assistants about challenges faced, asking participants to narrow down, or define, specific teaching-related problems and explain their problem-solving approaches. Participants narrated the changes they made to their teaching after encountering the problem, how they decided to make changes, how they felt about the experience, and what readings and knowledge sources they returned to throughout. From their stories, Wisniewski identified challenges faced, resources GTAs had, and how they applied

these resources to the challenges. Among Wisneiski's many findings, one in particular stood out to me: GTA participants often failed to adapt their approaches to the context. Rather, they tended to apply experiences without modifying the approaches to the context. From this, Wisneiski argued that successful transfer requires adaptation, not replication.

## **Transfer Model #2: Adaptive Remediation**

Another useful transfer model is adaptive remediation. Alexander, DePalma, and Ringer (2016) describe adaptive remediation in context of multiliteracy writing centers as "a set of strategies" to "adapt or reshape composing knowledge across media" (p. 34). In other words, adaptive remediation does not involve reusing knowledge; adaptive remediation involves reshaping knowledge for novel situations (p. 34). Adaptive remediation offers four strategies for transfer:

1. Charting: Study a text and map the rhetorical moves, describing each move's function.
2. Inventorying: Take stock of available resources and consider how those resources can help achieve a goal. Resources may be semiotic or language-based, relational, cultural, etc.
3. Coordinating: Match resources and strategies to the situation.
4. Literacy linking: Consider available literacies (whether visual, rhetoric, critical, etc.), and use these literacies to achieve a rhetorical purpose.

I appreciate that adaptive remediation offers concrete steps to follow when engaging in transfer. Further, I value the model's emphasis on adaptation rather than adoption. As I articulate later, I found that adaptation was far more effective than adoption as I navigated my new context.

## **My Transfer Heuristic for TPC Administrators**

In the spirit of adaptation, I will now combine the two models above to create a new transfer heuristic. The heuristic remixes the transfer tools outlined above, borrowing aspects from both the detect-elect-connect model and adaptive remediation model. My aim in sharing the heuristic is to engage in mutual mentoring, as outlined by Kitalong. I personally have been using this heuristic to facilitate my knowledge transfer into my new role, and I hope that other TPC program administrators will find it to be useful.

The model involves six sequential steps:

1. Identify administrative challenges faced.
2. Chart each challenge's context.
3. Inventory available resources.
4. Coordinate ways to use resources to address challenges.
5. Apply resources to the challenge.
6. Reflect on the efficacy of the transfer attempt.

The above steps heavily rely on the adaptive remediation model's charting,

inventorying, and linking steps. However, I have added two additional steps. First, I broke adaptive remediation's "coordinating" step into two discrete steps: coordinate and apply. Doing so allowed me to consider possible ways to use my resources to address challenges (coordinate) prior to applying those resources to the challenges (apply). Second, I added a reflection step. Although reflection is not included in either of the source models, I incorporated this step since a threshold concept in writing studies is that reflection is key for writers' development. According to Linda Adler-Kassner, Irene Clark, Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey (2016), reflection facilitates transfer as it requires writers to "recall, reframe, and relocate their writing knowledge and practices" (p. 29). Reflection allows writers to consider what worked well, what could be improved, and what should change. Furthermore, the reflection step is a nod to Alexander, DePalma, and Ringer's premise that strategies that work in one context do not necessarily work in another. Reflection helps administrators consider how well their choices transfer across contexts, and reflection opens the door to further adaptation and modification. In the next section, I reflect on my experience using this heuristic.

### **The Heuristic in Action: An Example**

In this section, I provide a working example that illustrates the transfer heuristic in action.

#### **Identify**

First, I identified administrative challenges. The challenges I faced were multiple.

To illustrate, I focus on the challenge of developing the TPC certificate curriculum as my institution converted from quarters to semesters (which I'll refer to as semester conversion). Semester conversion created an exigence for program reform, as I had to decide which courses to maintain, modify, sunset, and introduce. Semester conversion also required me to decide which courses, if any, could be submitted to the General Education (GE) Governing Board (GEGB) for inclusion in our university's GE curriculum. I had to determine the appropriate prerequisites and modalities, write TPC program learning objectives, draft course learning objectives, and map course learning objectives (CLOs) onto program learning objectives (PLOs) (as well as, where relevant, aligning CLOs and PLOs with GE objectives). That said, the broad challenge I have identified here is semester conversion, and the specific challenge involved a lack of institutional knowledge at the time that I had to propose a curriculum. For example, I lacked allies on the GEGB, had no prior familiarity with the university's GE areas, and had never designed a program curriculum.

#### **Chart**

Step two of the heuristic prompts me to chart each challenge's context. Here, I provide more details about my institutional and personal context.

I entered California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) during a particularly volatile time for the campus: semester conversion. The last

California State University (CSU) system school to transition from a quarter-system to a semester-system, the Chancellor called for Cal Poly to move to a semester schedule by fall 2026. I arrived in 2022, a critical year for semester conversion, as all program proposals and course proposals were due for initial review by Spring. Within my first six months, I had to learn the CSU system's general education curriculum, the Cal Poly English department's major curriculum, and the existing TPC curriculum. Simultaneously, I was given autonomy to redesign the technical and professional communication program to better align with the TPC field. The challenge? As a lone ranger, no other tenure-track faculty were available to co-author program or course proposals with me. Tragically, the position I entered into was vacant due to the sudden passing of a beloved colleague. Thus, the program lacked documentation that could assist me in acquiring institutional knowledge. Moreover, my PhD coursework included no surveys of TPC literature or program administration.

My situation largely resembled the one Sapp describes in his work on lone rangers working alone in English departments. Sapp notes that lone rangers may lack allies and mentors. They often navigate tensions rooted in elitism, as they interface with Ivy League literature faculty who may view technical communication colleagues, many of whom are trained in state schools, as pragmatic at best and anti-intellectual at worst. For instance, one of Sapp's informal interview participants recalled colleagues noting that technical writing belongs in a community college or the business school. This tension manifested for me during my first quarter on the job, in which a department meeting became heated as my colleagues debated the core English major curriculum, resulting in comments from some that TPC does not belong in the English department at all. Given that I am Cal Poly's only tenure-track (TT) TPC faculty member, the suggestion was that I should not be in the department. Some colleagues acknowledged that students benefit from TPC courses, but the general sentiment was that TPC courses are largely instrumental and diminish English to a position of serving the institution's technical departments. Worse, I got the sense that some faculty felt threatened by TPC. As we revamped our English major curriculum, we created a "create your own pathway through the major" model, which meant that English majors would take courses from 200, 300, and 400 level "buckets," and could theoretically avoid taking any literature courses at all. Some colleagues feared that students would flock to TPC and, given that I am the only TT faculty member teaching those courses, feared that I would have unequal access to majors. Our chair hoped to abate these fears by proposing a "principle of equal access to 400-level courses." The principle passed, codifying that faculty would rotate teaching 400-level courses. The principle of equal access posed a problem for TPC because a 400-level course was required for the TPC certificate. The principle of equal access essentially blocked my ability to regularly offer that course because I am the only faculty member permitted to teach the course. But not all was hopeless. If I was tempted to get stuck at the charting stage, the heuristic prompted me to look beyond my challenges and inventory resources available to me to meet these challenges.

### **Inventory**

Inventorying involves noting resources available to meet the challenge. As I

engaged in the inventory step, I was able to identify several potential resources that could assist me with semester conversion work. These resources included tenured colleagues, lecturer colleagues, *Programmatic Perspectives*, CPTSC, graduate school coursework, and other administrative experiences. Despite being a lone ranger in a literature-heavy English department, I am fortunate to have many supportive colleagues across disciplinary lines. I found several allies, including the following:

- A fantastic, field-adjacent mentor who helped me to navigate department politics.
- Sympathetic junior faculty members with marginalized specializations.
- Savvy faculty members in technical fields like Engineering.
- Highly capable lecturer faculty eager to teach TPC courses.

Some of these relational resources developed informally, while others developed artificially. For instance, to facilitate semester conversion, our department chair formed sub-committees. I chaired the TPC committee, and two tenured faculty members joined my committee. I also inherited a committee of lecturer faculty members. In the university system, most lecturers are part-time with no time allocated for service duties. However, lecturers are responsible for engaging in professional development, so the TPC lecturer committee helps lecturer faculty who teach TPC courses to meet their professional development goals. Further, in the context of semester conversion, the institution provided stipends to faculty working on course proposals, so lecturer faculty rightfully would be compensated for their hard work. Other resources included the following:

- An institutional "Course Inventory Management" (CIM) system, which cataloged course proposals.
- Literature in *Programmatic Perspectives*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and ATTW book series texts.
- CPTSC's program review service.
- My graduate school education, especially taking a writing program administration course.
- My prior WAC experience with interdisciplinary curriculum-building initiatives.

### **Coordinate**

The coordination step involves determining which resources can be used to address specific challenges. At first glance, the TPC sub-committee, on which two tenured English colleagues served, seemed like a critical resource. Both colleagues hold significant institutional and administrative knowledge, as one directs the composition program and the other directs a partnership program between the College of Liberal Arts and College of Engineering. However, given the immense pressures on these colleagues to redesign their own program curriculum for semester conversion, they were available for advice but not co-writing. Still, their input was invaluable.

The lecturer committee seemed more promising. Committee members informed me that they assisted the prior TPC director with writing an open-source textbook

for the technical communication service course, so I knew that they had experience collaborating on curriculum development. Further, as previously mentioned, semester conversion course proposals came with a stipend, so lecturers would be compensated for their work.

In terms of TPC field-specific support, I contacted CPTSC for program review, and I met with Sean Williams and Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, both of whom have extensive experience developing programs. They advised me to leave the program as is in year one and pursue program changes in year two. However, since I did not have the option to delay programmatic changes until year two, I decided to modify the program in the immediate term. The short timeframe for submitting program revisions created a sense of urgency and fertile ground for creative thinking. The result, though, was that I forged a new program without adequate institutional or programmatic context.

At the 2022 CPTSC conference, I met Jennifer Mallette, who shared her work on designing a TPC service course for engineers. Jenn generously shared a proposal she wrote at her institution, and the document helped me to design a similar service class at my institution.

And of course, I used my startup funds to order as many books as possible. For curriculum revision purposes, I read Rebecca Walton, Kristen R. Moore, and Natasha N. Jones' *Technical Communication after the Social Justice Turn* and Meredith A. Johnson, Patricia Sullivan, and W. Michele Simmon's *Lean Technical Communication: Toward Sustainable Program Innovation*. For teaching the existing two 300-level TPC courses, I ordered Suzan Flanagan and Michael J. Albers' *Editing in the Modern Classroom*, Guiseppe Getto, Jack T. Labriola, and Sheryl Ruskiewicz's (2020) edited collection *Content Strategy in Technical Communication*, and Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch's (2019) *Involving the Audience: A Rhetorical Perspective on Using Social Media to Improve Websites*.

### **Apply**

The next step is to apply resources to the challenge. I applied the following resources to the challenge of proposing courses for semester conversion.

- Worked with the TPC lecturer committee to collaboratively write new course proposals.
- Contacted the tenure-track TPC committee for advice about issues that the TPC lecturer committee was unsure about. For instance, I sought the tenure-track committee's advice about whether to change the name of a course titled Corporate Communication to more accurately reflect the course's focus on analysis and critique.
- Used existing course proposals as models for new TPC course proposals.
- Integrated TPC scholarship into course reading schedules.

### **Reflect**

As I reflect on the efficacy of my transfer attempt, I notice that I leaned heavily on local resources such as the TPC lecturer committee and tenure-track faculty in my



department. My approach was somewhat successful, though it also involved several missteps along the way.

Looking back, one of the greatest mistakes I made was not attending to the TPC scholarship that advocates for lean programs. I had read Sapp's piece about the lone ranger, and I was aware of his warning that "One feature of the lone ranger position that is critical for attracting applicants is its relative autonomy" (p. 211). I quickly fell under the spell of autonomy, using my creative freedom to greatly expand the TPC program's course offerings. Rather than a "straight conversion" which would involve expanding existing 10-week quarter courses into a 16-week semester calendar, my team and I proposed multiple new courses. Instead of maintaining a single 400-level variable topics course as we have on quarters, we proposed seven—yes, seven—new 400-level courses. My goal was to enhance the visibility of the program by showcasing our most interesting work through course titles like "Writing for Nonprofits" and "User Experience Writing and Research for Social Impact." However, I learned that writing seven course proposals involves a significant amount of work, flying in the face of the lean technical communication tenant that "lean technical communication promotes efficiency" (p. 28). The process certainly was inefficient. The lecturer committee brought forth extensive experience with assignment design and pedagogical strategies. However, as the only committee member with a PhD focused on TPC, I shouldered responsibility for ensuring currency and integrity in the course learning objectives and readings. Unsurprisingly, I was also motivated by the university's incentive structure: up to \$1,500 stipend for each new course proposal (which I split with my lecturer colleagues). At one point, one of my colleagues joked that I must be saving up for a Lexus. I'm not; more accurately, I was driven by the weight of responsibility for ensuring program success. Without fully understanding the students or the institution and with a short deadline to learn my context, I proposed more classes than necessary in hopes that some of the courses would be useful five years later when the semester-calendar arrived. In a way, my process resembled prototyping, except the administrative calendar did not allow for iteration and revision. Without knowing what would stick, I submitted all my prototypes at once.

Although I disregarded some principles of leanness during my first year, I still found *Programmatic Perspectives* and the CPTSC network to be the most valuable resources in navigating semester conversion. As I've continued to confront new challenges, I continually find similar experiences in the pages of *Programmatic Perspectives*. For example, just recently, the General Education Governing Board rejected my proposals for five (yes, five) new GE TPC courses. The board perceived the courses as skills-based, and skills-based courses are excluded from the upper-division general education criteria. Now in my second year, I've learned to modify my goals, work toward leanness, and look at TPC literature prior to diving in head-first. Indeed, the pages of *Programmatic Perspectives* contain Lu Rehling and Neil Lindeman's (2010) "Including technical communication in general education: The proposal, design, and outcomes of a new course," in which they describe a situation instantly recognizable to me. My motivation for proposing TPC general education courses matched theirs: general education TPC courses can boost TPC program enrollments and help students in high-unit majors access these courses. Further, Rehling and Lindeman faced similar resistance from their GE board. They

write: "Many people may not assume technical communication courses are an appropriate representation of the humanities in general education," yet including TPC in general education helps position the discipline in the humanities (p. 4). I heeded Rehling and Lindeman's warning that administrators proposing TPC courses for humanities-general education would need to spell out how TPC is humanistic. I retitled the course, formerly called "Technical Editing," now calling it "Humanistic Perspectives in Technical & Professional Editing," and I included readings about ethical considerations in technical editing, theories such as translanguaging and feminist theory that inform editing practices and works that firmly position technical editing alongside anti-racist practices. While the specific suggestions found in Rehling and Lindeman's work were helpful, what was perhaps most useful was knowing that they, too, faced significant hurdles getting a TPC course approved to meet a humanities general education requirement. By reading their work I benefited from their mentorship; I learned the significant maneuvering required to approve a single GE course. Readers will be pleased to learn that, with Rehling and Lindeman's help, I decided to remove the GE designation from three of my five initial course proposals and focus my energy on just two proposals. At the time of this writing, both proposals have been approved for GE. For future proposals, I will continue to use the heuristic to identify administrative challenges, chart the context, inventory my resources, coordinate ways to use resources, apply the resources (the hardest part for me!), and reflect on the efficacy.

## **Lessons Learned and Conclusion**

I first delivered a version of this paper at the CPTSC conference in October 2022. It was the best conference I had ever been to; it felt like my admission into a community of technical and professional communication administrators. No longer was I alone in my struggle to apply my knowledge and skills to my new role. As I spoke with new colleagues, I learned that my challenges were shared. Most of us have experienced some form of destabilization within our careers. Even when we stay at the same institution, we experience shifts in chairships and deanships, changes in institutional priorities and funding, waves of new students, and more. Even the fact that TPC administrators and instructors must teach rapidly changing tools and technologies creates a sense of destabilization in our work; we must constantly update our syllabi to meet the demands of ever-changing technological landscapes. Of course, I would argue that change is also what makes TPC work exciting. For TPC administrators to grow in their careers, we can't replicate the past; we must adapt to solve new challenges and problems. Like our students, we accumulate skills, dispositions, and knowledge along the way, but resources do not automatically or neatly transfer to the work we are faced with this academic year, this month, this week, or even this day.

My aim here has been to engage in mutual mentoring, outlining the resources that have helped me navigate my first years as a TPC administrator, and offering up a heuristic that might help readers. As Kitalong outlined, mutual mentoring is fostered in interactive spaces, such as the ability to comment on *Programmatic Perspectives* articles or attend CPTSC conferences. Given how essential the journal and the CPTSC community have been to my own development as a program administrator,

I can only imagine how powerful increased dialogue would be. Therefore, I will offer a few questions for readers and CPTSC to consider as our community continues toward mutual mentoring. What other forums can CPTSC use to promote mutual mentorship? How might CPTSC members dialogue with one another about articles published in *Programmatic Perspectives*? Future scholars might also consider gaps in the literature. For instance, what are the ongoing consequences of lone ranger status on junior program administrators? Anecdotally, I found it challenging to function as a lone ranger, especially an untenured one, because I felt I needed to prove the value of TPC to a skeptical audience. What additional resources can CPTSC and *Programmatic Perspectives* offer TPC administrators to navigate these challenges? I look forward to working alongside my colleague to address these questions and bring the tradition of CPTSC into the future.

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