

Episode 138: Jason Tham

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host Shane Wood.

In this episode, Jason Tham talks about user experience, design thinking, professional and technical communication, community-based service learning activities, and multimodal social justice advocacy projects.

Dr. Jason Tham is a faculty member in the technical communication and rhetoric program in the Department of English at Texas Tech University. He's interested in design thinking practices and technical and professional communication. He teaches courses in user experience research, information design, instructional design, and digital rhetorics. He currently serves as an associate editor for IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication and book review editor for Composition Studies. He is also vice president of the Council for Programs at Technical and Scientific Communication. He can be reached at jason.tham@ttu.edu.

Jason, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You study rhetoric and technical and professional communication. Can you talk more about your research on user experience and design thinking?

JT: Yeah, I want to say this journey probably started when I was dissertating. I stumbled upon design thinking as a concept, as a methodology when I was looking at, back in the time when it was really popular at universities, maybe at some university today too, the idea of academic making that with the rise of 3D printing technologies and laser cutting and all of these things, fancy stuff that universities were able to find money to buy for their studios and workshops. I brought my technical writing students in and using some of these tools to rethink how we built different documents from a 3D material perspective and have students think about the affordances and limitations of different design approaches and the materials that are involved in design, including the tools. So when I was exposed to it, I thought it was pretty neat that it is not just a workflow. Design thinking is not just a prescribed way of doing things. It's a mindset. It has a set of values and guiding principles. It really zeros in on the idea of empathy. So I like that as a competency to build in students that we are not just teaching them to be efficient writers and critical thinkers, but also to be able to have the capacity to empathize with others, to feel others and to be able to take actions. Empathy is not just sympathy, it's not just having a passive feeling for someone, but rather being able to participate in that shared experience and to take actions to help make this world a better place, even though it sounds a little cliché, but that's what I hope my students can do by taking up design thinking as a framework. So since my dissertation then, I have continued to look into it because I realized there is a space, I don't want to say there is a gap, but there is a space and opportunity in technical communication scholarship to learn from design thinking literature.

So I just sort of devoted myself into learning more from design studies, from architecture, from engineering, from software development to kind of borrow from their ideas of design thinking,

how they have been applied and adopted into the different professions. And I now put on my technical communicator hat and see where design thinking could take us. So I wrote the book, *Design Thinking and Technical Communication*, to showcase some of the academic maker spaces that I visited when I was doing my dissertation, but also some new chapters on pedagogical applications and implications of design thinking, hoping to give readers some ideas on how they can also adapt this for their own courses. I think it is a very flexible framework. Like I said, it doesn't have a prescribed workflow, so you can take it and scale it however you want. I've used design thinking for one particular assignment, one unit.

I've also used it as a semester long project for students in the form of a design challenge project. So it can be scaled depending on the needs of the instructor and the students and the course. And now I'm doing research in tandem with user experience. There's a book that will be coming out called *User Experience Writing*. It's a way of looking at using design thinking as the foundation, but looking at writing as design and design as writing. So the rhetorical aspects of that activity and also the genre, the practice in workplace, and what are some of the skill sets that we need to instill in students in order for them to venture into UX writing to become a UX writer as a career. And I'm very hopeful about that direction. I'm seeing a rise in that trajectory that a lot of companies outside of tech actually, technology, they are really looking into the quality of content, the experience of their consumers and users on various interface from websites to screen base, mobile, wearables, as well as voice interaction interfaces. And now we're talking about AI. There's so much that has come up in the last two years or so that I think has definitely taught different companies the importance of high quality content and good user experience.

SW: Jason, can you talk about how this work informs your teaching? How do you approach teaching technical and professional communication at Texas Tech through a UX or design thinking framework?

JT: I'll start with the global stuff. So I think design thinking gives me this sort of guiding principle that you have to understand people as people and that users are not just a population of individuals who are doing things with technology, but rather they're human beings and they have human needs and people form communities, and different communities have different struggles and different challenges. So with that mindset, I think in my own pedagogy and teaching, I first apply this aspect of design thinking to understand my students as people in the classroom and online, where they're coming from, what their hopes, aspirations, motivations are, as well as their fear in taking courses. And particularly I'm teaching junior and senior level courses. So some of these students are being exposed to very specific topics for the first time. Some of them have never heard about user experience research. I mean, they know what usability might be, some of the methods that they might have been introduced to in their intro to technical and professional writing courses.

But once they get into the higher level, more specific courses, they might be afraid of having to go out there and do proper studies and site visits and things like that. So me coming from an empathy standpoint, I want to know what they feel and I want to investigate that before I even teach them the subject matter. And I do that by either having conversations with them or inviting them to let me know at any point of the semester or the course, is there any confusion or anything that I can do to help them have a better experience in the course. I think of teaching and

learning as more than just learning new content, but rather I think it's a whole experience, right? It's wholesome. So my interaction with them I think counts just as much as the content that they're getting from the course.

So that's one way I think globally how design thinking has kind of influenced my approaches. But in the more specific way, I think comes down to the activities, the assignments that the students would do to help them practice design thinking themselves. So some of the very typical user experience methods are contextual inquiry where the students would go pick a site and they would be a participant observer, they would do interviews, they would talk to people on very genuine sort of level, understanding them in the context in which a product or service it's used so they can see the struggles and the needs and the requirements of those users again, as humans, as human beings and communities and not just subjects. And then there are other sort of design methods that we use like ideation and prototyping, testing. I think those are very useful way to help students think through how to come up with radical ideas and radical broadly defined, it can be just genuinely creative or it can be something that is just an improved version of the current solution.

And again, think of problems as opportunities for innovation and to encourage them to actually innovate. I think a lot of students too are feeling that they're inadequate or they're not in the right space to be the authority in design and having an opinion about design. So I want to encourage them and give them that confidence that yes, you can. You are creative. Someone needs to let you do it, and I want to be that person to offer that space to them. And design thinking again offers a sets of methods and techniques where they can apply to encourage that sort of creativity and innovation.

SW: Jason, you co-direct the UX lab at Texas Tech. What kinds of projects and initiatives are you doing through this lab?

JT: So I stepped in as a co-director with another colleague who was also new to Texas Tech. We entered at the same time in 2019. So with him, we sort of envisioned the lab to be both a teaching but also research space so anyone can use it to conduct projects. We have some software applications and setup in the lab that allows for different kinds of research activities, but it can also be a teaching space where we can demonstrate how, for example, a usability test protocol is run, so students can literally observe in real life the actions involved in that sort of activity. We currently do not have a lot of big projects going on other than these kind of local instructor to instructor teaching and learning activities, partly because of COVID and this kind of lab space really require in-person interaction for its potential to be realized. But we are innovating. I think we are seeing it as an opportunity for us to think about the future of user experience research. Does it have to be physical, right? Do we need to be in presence or there are a lot of other tools, I mean right now virtually that you could also conduct user experience research.

So question is what are the gifts and takes pros and cons of doing a distance moderated or unmoderated study? What are some of the costs involved? What kind of expertise or skills do we need in order to run those tests? So some of those questions, we are thinking about that right now. Last fall, we did a world usability day observation celebration, I guess in the lab. And that sort of brought people in to kind of see it as well. If you think about traditional UX lab, it's

designed to be a two room kind of setup where there's a one-way mirror. So a lot of students get excited about that. They have never seen a one-way mirror before. So that's one selling point typically to just get people in to get traffic into the lab and exposure. And then students now can think about that, "Okay, maybe I can design and actually carry out a study using this space that's available to me." Let's see.

We're also using it to promote a user experience design certificate that we've just launched. It's gaining traction very quickly here. So that's also an indication of the popularity of UX in the field among technical communication students that they really want to know what UX is and have that credential to use at the workplace and to be capable of doing UX work. So that's what the lab is so far. The building is also under schedule construction right now. I'm glad that you can't hear any noise out there, but because I'm on the third floor, they're starting on the first floor and they are also going to revamp some of the facilities, including the UX lab. So I'm excited to see what they put in there.

SW: This is off script, but I'm interested in hearing what your two minute pitch is to someone who's interested in majoring or pursuing a graduate degree in professional and technical communication.

JT: I would say... that's a great question by the way. I would say to someone who is even just remotely interested in technical and professional communication, first I will caveat it with my own background and training comes from the North American tradition of rhetoric and communication and writing. So if you come from a different place, say a European background or Southeast Asian like myself, I was surprised to learn the rhetorical tradition that is so rooted in composition and technical communication here. But I would let the student know that this is where we'll be coming from, the theories and concepts that we use to describe or to understand the practice of technical and professional communication.

But I think it is a very fast-growing field both in academia and in industry, and that because it is so wide and flexible and there's really no job that is called technical communicator, technical communication I think is a practice. But in the field or in industry, you're probably given different titles that are more descriptive like a UX writer or a communication specialist or social media manager. Those are all included in the practice of technical communication or professional communication, but no one is really a professional communicator. So I want to tell that student that you have a lot of different ways to select what you want to do, and plus it's so driven by technology that it can be always new. So ever since I joined the field as a student, I feel like I've been learning so much every year just with new tools and new platforms and new applications that I can use to do my work. It's always just refreshing. So if you're someone who seek that kind of newness, I think this is the field for you.

SW: This is my last question. I'm interested in hearing more about your two year study on community-based service learning activities, specifically multimodal social justice advocacy projects. What were the goals of this research and what did you learn from instructors, students, and community members engaged in this work?

JT: For sure. So I must mention that this is a work that is done with my colleague, Dr. Jialei Jiang. She's now in Pennsylvania with her family. So we were sort of envisioning a project that looks at updating literature and community engaged learning because we saw a huge... a search near the early 2000s where everyone was just jumping in and doing community-based project, especially in technical communication where a lot of our teaching and learning is so applied so that it makes sense to just have a community partnership. It gives students that "real world" exposure to where technical communication takes place and see it in action. But then we started to notice a decline in scholarship. Not to say that people are not still practicing it, we're just not talking much about it anymore in theory and in scholarship. So we wanted to at least revise some of the conversation.

We brought in some older scholarship, like older as in from the 2000s to kind of look at, here are some of the approaches, here are some lens through which we have seen community based work. There's labor based, there's a sort of actor network theory or... So my colleague, Dr. Jiang was very interested in a post humanist perspective and materialism, and given our own background and interest in social justice, we were trying to just think what would be some of the overlaps here if we apply a post-human lens to look at community service learning, what would that look like? What about materialism? So that sort of led us into investigating different layers of labor that is involved in creating sustaining community-based learning. So we interviewed instructors, students, and also community partners. I guess we do have to give a shout-out to NCTE, CCCC for funding us to do this.

The money was really spent just giving back to the community to thank them for the work that they have done and to also give us information, insights about their experience. We did write up an article that has been published in the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication on the instructor site. So we summarized some of these insights from instructors, and we learned that there are different constraints that comes from logistics, that comes from institutional systems that has limited what these community partnership would look like. And that's not surprising to us. We were just, "Okay, the problem is still here, right? 20 years ago we talked about this, and this is still a current problem," but then we realized that instructors started talking a lot more about the technologies that facilitates community-based projects, whether or not they were social justice driven. So a lot of them mentioned like, "Oh, I wanted to do this, but..." and or, "I wanted to do this and this tool allowed me to," right? And students picked this and that. So it was really interesting to see the kind of technology that was mentioned in facilitating, especially during this project, COVID happened. So understandably, a lot of instructors talked about the technologies that facilitated communication and relationship between students and students and community partners and community partners and the course, right? So that was one thing. So if you look at it from the post human perspective, I would say technology as an actor in this process and how it actually actively influenced the shape and the outcome of community partnerships and teaching and learning.

The second thing that we noticed that was maybe haven't been talked about much yet was the affect aspect of this kind of projects, community projects. A lot of instructors indicated their own feelings that are involved in carrying out these labor and relationship building with the community that I think is worth attention. It's not just a labor of love, but there's also a lot other feelings that are involved in doing this kind of work. And in that article, we kind of alluded to it

at the end and say, "Maybe we need to, as a field think more about the affective nature of service learning and social justice work especially, I want to say." It's very involved and it's very taxing sometimes to individuals and to instructors. So I really applaud the instructors who are so willing to do this kind of work on a sustained way, but it's not always easy, and the effort is not rewarded by institutions or by the field in general.

SW: Thanks, Jason, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.