
Reviewed by Sam Clem (Utah State University)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (December, 2022)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

In *Transnational Research in Technical Communication: Stories, Realities, and Reflections*, Nancy Small and Bernadette Longo start by recognizing that the collection’s content and focus is “unusual” for the field of technical and professional communication (TPC), as it centers on processes and narratives rather than products and generalizable results (p. 1). Shifting the focus away from traditional understandings of validity and rigor, the editors and authors offer personal, vulnerable stories about their experiences, successes, and—perhaps most important—failures when engaging in transnational research. With this explicit focus on narrative and storytelling, along with the variety of fields that the authors of the collection represent, the book serves as a resource for scholars across disciplines who are interested in transnational work and, more specifically, who are interested in questioning the ethics and power dynamics that come into play in transnational work. In particular, the book does excellent work in setting up the exigence for and validity of storytelling as evidence, and it will interest scholars outside of TPC who are looking to connect their fields with narrative-based scholarship.

True to their “unusual” description, the editors do not provide chapter previews in the introduction. Rather, they apply the storytelling approach to their introduction, guiding the reader through the genesis of the collection and the editors’ personal ties to the topic. Importantly, they deconstruct terms like “validity” and “rigor,” which might otherwise undermine the acceptance of stories and narrative as evidence, and they build space for narrative as a reliable, valid form of scholarship. Their introduction does important work in preparing the reader to approach the collection with an ethics of care. They do this by explicitly inviting the reader to recognize how this collection breaks from more traditional scholarship, to empathize with the authors’ extreme vulnerability in describing their often-tenuous relationships with transnational research, to ponder rather than judge the extreme complexity of transnational work, and to “open up rather than shut down conversation” (p. 17). As someone who
engages in social justice work and scholarship, I deeply appreciated how the editors set up the introduction to advocate for the authors and their work and to facilitate dialogue rather than critique.

In line with the storytelling approach to this collection, the chapters are detailed descriptions of mostly academic experiences with transnational research, though one chapter is written from a practitioner’s perspective. The collection breaks from traditional scholarship in many ways, one being that the authors of the chapters do not draw conclusions about their experiences but rather invite the readers to form their own opinions and interpretations. Particularly in a field like TPC, which has made a turn toward social justice, these kinds of moves are necessary for greater inclusion. That said, as readers, we must learn how to respond to such breaks from the norm. At times, I found myself wondering what I was supposed to do with the information being provided since it was intentionally non-generalizable. In the introduction (which I really must reiterate does important work in setting up the exigence and criteria for evaluating the book), Small and Longo propose an expanded idea of validity, which—as opposed to a Western construct of scientific “truth”—would deem narrative as valid research “if it prompts ongoing interest in the object of inquiry” (p. 9). When I found myself unsure of what to do with a certain chapter, I came back to this idea, to what kind of questions the chapter might open up for me. As fields push the boundaries of what counts as scholarship, as readers, we must also do the work of innovating how we read and how we respond.

The authors of the chapters often describe moments of tension and uncertainty in their research. For some of the chapters, like “Planning and Pivoting: Archival Work in Botswana and South Africa,” “Grappling with Globalized Research Ethics: Notes from a Long-Term Qualitative Research Agenda in India,” and “Importing Lessons from Qatar: Toward a Research Ethic in Transnational and Intercultural TPC,” that tension takes the form of concerns about reproducing colonialism when entering transnational research spaces as White women trained by Western education. In others, like “Nuestra vida en el medio oeste, USA: Listening to Mexican Immigrants,” “Syrian Refugee Women’s Voices: Research Grounded in Stories and Recipe Sharing,” and “Relearning Your Knowledge: The Loud Silence,” tension comes from determining how best to research underrepresented communities of which the researchers themselves form a part. From this variety of perspectives, the reader comes to understand how complex transnational research is, regardless of whether you are an insider, an outsider, or somewhere in between. There are no universally right answers, only stories and reflections about how transnational research has been done and how it might continue to be done.

Having eschewed previewing the chapters in the introduction, Small uses the conclusion to summarize and synthesize the unique chapters’ stories. I found this shift in convention hugely useful as a reader, because, having already read the chapters, I could understand the connections and cross-pollination between them much more thoroughly. Small draws on the themes among the chapters’ narratives and her own research to propose (for discussion) four principles for an ethic of transnational and intercultural research: accountability, responsible preparation, responsive adaptivity, and accountable representation and reception. True to the form of the rest of the book, the principles are framed as generative questions a researcher might ask themselves rather than a prescriptive to-do list. People looking for concrete suggestions or a step-by-step guide on how to develop and implement transnational research projects in technical communication would do best to look elsewhere. But those looking for thick descriptions of the processes and nuances of transnational research, and those questioning the greater implications of this kind of work, will find
Small and Longo’s collection useful in reflecting on and guiding their research philosophy and values. I would particularly recommend the book in the budding stages of research planning so that researchers can more deeply consider the ethics and power dynamics inherent in transnational research before engaging in the research site.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


**URL:** [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58423](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58423)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.