Introduction: Promoting a Sustainable Collective Identity for Technical and Professional Communication

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Building from its early history and connection to engineering, computer science, and scientific fields, technical and professional communication (TPC) now addresses a range of industries, organizations, sites, and locations including everything from technology to healthcare to nonprofits. TPC practices are central to facilitating complex communication concerns, with increasingly specialized subject matter, delivered and circulated through sophisticated emerging technologies. These ongoing changes are matched by the field's long-standing commitment to building flexible and ethical communication knowledge and practices. TPC is both a growing range of career opportunities and a thriving academic field represented by a growing number of degree programs and teacher-scholars across the country.

This range of interests and stakeholders is both a strength and a challenge for our field. Some 20 years ago, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber (2001) cautioned,

> The diversity of perspectives found in and across technical communication contexts enriches the field in important ways. But as the field matures, the distance between these positions increases, then the tensions among different perspectives threaten to divide rather than reward us. (p. 432)

What Johnson-Eilola and Selber observed reminds us that what makes TPC dynamic is also what makes it difficult to delineate and to describe. TPC does not have clear boundaries and pathways found in other fields, such as engineering disciplines, which leads to different types of frustrations. New scholars and students often struggle with trying to find a satisfying definition of TPC. On the other hand, more experienced scholars know all too well that defining the field has been an ongoing challenge and have in some ways accepted the uncertainty of a definitional stance. Brenton Faber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola (2002) observed the dangers of an ongoing "fragmented field." They observed that "technical communication . . . is not yet capable of addressing in a systematic way the

question of our collective identity" (p.140). It is our intention in this introduction to engage with the idea of TPC's "collective identity" by focusing on *component parts* that make up this collective identity.

Instead of advocating for a new handy definition of the field, we are arguing that the field is comprised of various components that must be reflected upon from time to time in order to maintain a sustainable and flexible identity. We propose a method of reflection and maintenance for the field's identity. It is in that work that new components, e.g., UX and content strategy, are brought in, and established ones, like procedural knowledge, are reimagined. Our chapters include emerging topics like biomedical writing, a chapter that reimagines the rhetorical situation as socio-technical situation, a chapter that focuses on a framework for transnational work, and a chapter that revisits the role of professionalism in professional writing. The chapters are not intended to pinpoint or bracket every aspect of technical communication, but to illustrate a range of knowledges and practices that comprise important components of the field. The method we share here, we think, both creates space for new knowledges and approaches as well as establishes a "collective identity" that moves us beyond fragmentation so that the various aspects of the field may work and grow together.

In what follows, we provide an overview of some key scholarship devoted to definitions of the field and illustrate the limitations of those definitions. We then move to theorizing TPC's collective identity by discussing how a collective identity functions through its component parts by drawing on assemblage theory. We then introduce each entry in this volume as an instantiation of a component of the field's collective identity. We conclude by describing how this move to a collective identity made up of component parts can perform the reflection and maintenance work for a sustainable field.

▮ The Challenges and Limitations of Definitions

TPC has a long tradition with definitions, and there is no shortage of essays devoted to the practice of defining the field or to advocating for a particular definition. From nearly every major collection and a list of classic articles (e.g., Allen, 1990; Dobrin, 1983; Harris, 1978; Lay, 1991; Sullivan, 1990), TPC has consistently tried to define itself. This need for flexible definitions is what has led to the wide diversity of approaches that have included defining TPC as humanistic (e.g., Miller, 1979), as instrumental (e.g., Moore, 1996), and as rhetorical (e.g., Salvo, 2002). We've defined TPC according to the courses offered in its programs (e.g., Melonçon, 2020; Schreiber et al., 2018b) and according to competencies required in industry (e.g., Blythe et al., 2014; Brumberger & Lauer, 2015; Carliner & Chen, 2018; Henschel & Melonçon, 2014; Stanton, 2017), as well as trying to define itself by the research that TPC does (e.g., Carradini, 2020; Friess & Boettger, 2020; Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019; Rude, 2009, 2014; St.Amant & Graham, 2019). The field's ongoing attempts at definitions bring forth the ever-present

tensions described by Johnson-Eilola and Faber(2002). These tensions include relations between industry and the academy, a range of industry stakeholders with overlapping and sometimes competing interests, and tensions within the academy itself.

As Jo Allen (1990) points out, definitions in the field have largely been either too broad to offer the field a sense of structure or too narrow to allow for diverse perspectives and emerging practices. Faber's (2002) critique of professionalism illustrates how a term can be applied so broadly that it becomes meaningless. Miles Kimball's recent attempt to scope the field seems to fall into this trap. Kimball (2017) describes TPC as "an activity that manages technological action through communication technologies, including writing itself, in a particular setting and for a particular purpose" (p. 346). The problem with a more ambiguous definition, such as Kimball's, is that in an attempt to provide much needed flexibility it becomes too broad to be helpful at all.

Previous research tells us that there was a brief era, in the early 2000s, where scholars described TPC as having an identity crisis. In at least three well-read and cited collections (Kynell-Hunt & Savage, 2003, 2004; Mirel & Spilka, 2002; Scott et al., 2006), authors and editors brought attention to the ongoing need to create a common identity for the field. The two-volume *Power and Legitimacy* (Kynell-Hunt & Savage, 2003, 2004) argues for strategies for gaining recognition from other disciplines as well as tensions between industry and the academy, and *Critical Power Tools* (Scott et al., 2006) seeks to expand the theoretical frameworks from which TPC traditionally has drawn. By drawing connections between rhetorical traditions and cultural studies concepts and frameworks, *Critical Power Tools* embraces the important role academic research and scholarship has to play in critically engaging TPC disciplines and artifacts. Barbara Mirel and Rachel Spilka (2002) address changing technologies and workplace practices as something with which TPC must contend, and emphasized the connection between academia and the workplace. While the three collections came from three distinct perspectives, they all described TPC as having an identity crisis.

More recently, scholarship has taken a different approach. As Kirk St.Amant and Lisa Melonçon (2016) described it, TPC has "yet to adequately define ourselves in a way that has brought satisfaction to the field in general . . . . As a result, any sustained attempt to engage in dialogic conversations around definition has been essentially nonexistent in recent years" (p. 269). Rather than outright saying the field is having an identity crisis, these newer collections acknowledge the necessity of identities by calling for what they feel the field's identity should be. For example, Godwin Agboka and Natalia Matveeva (2018) built a collection around their claim that TPC needs to undertake advocacy work in all its various forms.

TPC scholars have begun to address the field's identity from research and programmatic perspectives. Joanna Schreiber and Lisa Melonçon (2019) proposed a continuous improvement model to encourage administrators and faculty to consider programmatic and curricular identity in sustainable ways. By contin-

uously examining programs and the multitude of parts of programs (such as the faculty, administrative constraints, community partners, and the courses themselves), Schreiber and Melonçon's model offers a flexible approach to account for shifts in programmatic identity. In much the same way Schreiber and Melonçon provided a programmatic identity model, we want to broaden that work and offer a field-wide identity model that can flexibly account for the different scholarly areas of TPC, the changing nature of work, and the dynamic contexts in which technical and professional communicators work.

So if we choose not to think of TPC identity through definitions, then the question becomes how can we consider it? We argue that we need to move to questions and concerns of identities that in turn will provide more opportunities for sustainability. We use *identity* traditionally, that is, as the identification of belonging to a specific group based on shared qualities and understanding of the group's beliefs and foundational principles. Thinking in terms of an identity gives TPC a way in which scholars with diverse and varying research and teaching interests can still feel as though they share a common goal. An "identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group . . . . A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as a member of the same social category" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). However, considering the diversity and "fragmentation" of the field, thinking in terms of a collective identity that has space for a range of diverse concepts, practices, methods, and theories that contribute to a sustainable identity.

We are not aligning identity with structural or political positionality because to do so conflates and collapses two distinct positions that do not further an understanding of identity or of structural/political causes. Does this mean that we do not take structural or political issues seriously? Absolutely not. But it does help us focus an argument specifically on the issue of professional and field identity. Establishing a sustainable identity as a framework for collecting and unifying various parts of the field, we hope, will create a sense of shared understanding across the field and the workplace that will help support the important structural and political work the field and profession need to engage.

While we think these efforts have produced several useful definitions, we do not think any of them effectively provide a way to address the fragmentation of the field and its identity crisis in a sustainable way. Further, we also don't think that definitions, as genres respondent to situations, can effectively address identity. Instead, we came to the realization that a definition, or even a series of definitions, was limiting TPC's capacity of a professional and academic entity. We agree with Jo Allen (1990) that we need an extensive and flexible approach to consider the field and the work it does, but we are insistent for the need to move away from definitions. We suggest that a sustainable approach to TPC identity might be better achieved by critically reflecting on what these fragmentations mean *collectively as an identity*. In the next section, we begin to do this work by theorizing an identity of TPC through articulation and assemblage.

Component Parts: Envisioning a Collective Identity of TPC

What we wish to bring forth in this collection is a dynamic and adaptive identity for the field that is sustainable. Recent work (Johnson et al., 2018; Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018; Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019) has emphasized the necessity of thinking about the field's present and future in terms of sustainability. Extending this work, we turn to Robert Johnson's (2004) advocacy for sustainability in program development. He argued that sustainability was an apt metaphor because it "suggests growth/life but it also invokes the inevitable problem of limits" (Johnson, 2004, p. 102). Johnson's balancing of growth with an appreciation for limits brings a cautious vitality to merging sustainability with the field's need for a more flexible identity. Moreover, Johnson (2004) argued that ongoing reflection and maintenance are keys to sustainability. Thus, in considering TPC's collective identity, we have chosen a flexible framework that promotes this sort of "reflection and maintenance" Johnson suggests for sustainability.

To get TPC to consider issues of sustainability in more deliberate ways, we wanted to think through a collective identity that provides an over-arching framework that can be reflected and maintained. Reflection and maintenance are Johnson's two steps of sustainable practices. Acknowledging a more complex notion of identity as one that is articulated means TPC can embrace the dynamic nature of communication work broadly construed, which is vital for sustainability. Identity has a unifying factor: "Identities are thus contingent; they are dependent on particular elements that could change, thereby changing the composition of the identity" (Slack & Wise, 2015, p. 152).

Our turn to assemblage theory (below) was a deliberate move to work through the following question: How can TPC understand its identity to account for the past, present, and future demands of always in flux communication work? Jennifer Slack (2003) calls for a "cartography of the affective terrain of techcom" (p. 205), which allows for a different reading of the role(s) of technical communicator. More importantly, the technical communication assemblage calls for scholars and practitioners "to understand, though not resolve, the complex work and status of the technical communicator" (Slack, 2003, p. 205). Slack's work, like that of many scholars who have used assemblage theory, is indebted to that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). Their work on assemblage was part of a much larger and complex philosophical project.

We want to focus more narrowly by using part of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work that explains assemblage as an ontological framework. Ontology, of course, invokes a consistent and ongoing state of becoming or coming into being, which is necessary for a flexible, but stable, collective identity. Collective identity is a form of assemblage that is continually coming into being—stabilizing and re-stabilizing—as the field shifts and changes, offering a body of knowledge from which to draw definitions and make claims. Expanding on Deleuze and

Guattari's (1987) ideas, Manuel DeLanda (2016) makes clear that emergence, this idea of becoming, is essential to the assemblage. With an aspect of emergence, the assemblage can never be reduced simply to its parts. Rather, since it is always in a state of becoming—a state of emergence—the "whole depend[s] on the interactions between its parts [to] ensur[e] that these are not taken to be either necessary or transcendent" (DeLanda, 2016, p. 12). This ontological and emergent emphasis also aligns with the need for TPC to recognize the different nodes of its identity and how at any given moment different facets of identity may need to be emphasized over others.

DeLanda's emphasis on the interactions of the parts and the combination of these parts is not in situ, but contingent. The emphasis on contingent should remind those in TPC of the field's focus on the context. Assemblage theory's strength is that it emphasizes emergence and multiplicity while simultaneously emphasizing the relationship between the parts. Assemblage theory's relational approach has the potential to make room for the multiple identities and shifting identities of TPC scholars and workplace practitioners. The interactions between concepts and theories and practices can be selected at different times based on different contexts for different stakeholders. For example, a technical and professional communicator may need to draw on visual skills to solve a visualization problem one day and make a cogent argument to explain the need for greater attention to equity the next day. Within the TPC assemblage, different components would be necessary to respond to these distinct and different situations, that is, different parts of TPC's identity. Also, both scenarios illustrate the dynamic, contingent, relational, and emergent nature of a collective identity and how it can be used.

Assemblage allows articulated identities, like TPC, to connect to other identities. It territorializes identities. For instance, there is a lot of overlap among the identities of technical and professional communication, business communication, rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM), and user experience (UX). Assemblage allows for this necessary overlap and distinction among various identities; it allows identities themselves to have contexts and relations. As we discussed, definitions are often too static, which limits the force of TPC, but at the same time, the field does need a unifying identity that can bring the diverse parts of the field together. DeLanda explains this phenomenon of components and their use in forming identities:

> One and the same assemblage can have components working to stabilize its identity as well as components forcing it to change or even transforming it into a different assemblage. In fact, one and the same component may participate in both processes by exercising different sets of capacities. (DeLanda, 2006, p. 12)

In other words, at any given time, components of TPC's collective identity may be working to stabilize the field's identity for a specific situation, while simul-

taneously creating a space for another identity to emerge. A recent example of transforming can be seen in TPC embracing issues of social justice where the social justice has now become a key component of the field's assembled identity (see Jones, 2016).

One of the strengths of assemblage theory, particularly for the way we are using it here as a collective identity, is that "a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 10). In thinking about TPC identity, knowing that pieces can be moved or brought to the forefront at different times is important and continues the historical trajectory of TPC being diverse with the ability to step into a variety of communication situations and draw on a multiplicity of skills and knowledge. We want to leave this more theoretical section with a concrete example of the necessity for a collective identity with multiple component parts. Consider this scenario:

> Imagine you are at a university majors fair. An associate dean of liberal arts stops by your table and complains that engineering students aren't required to take any humanities courses. You remind him that engineering programs do require a technical communication course. He scoffs that technical communication isn't really humanities and that it is basically a writing in the disciplines (WID) course. At this point, you describe the humanistic qualities of technical communication and value of the assignments and concepts you teach in the class. At this same majors fair, you also encounter parents and prospective students. Parents ask you questions about career options related to the degree and your response favors the practical aspects of technical communication and what students can do with the degree in the world.

This example explicitly shows that neither of the definitions used is right or wrong, but they each highlight a different aspect of the field. We specifically position definitions as genres that tailor knowledge *drawn from a larger identity* for particular audiences and situations. Definitions are situated, and in this case, the situation warranted two distinct approaches to allow two different stakeholders a better understanding of TPC as a field. Like other genres, definitions are malleable and respondent to particular situations. They are used to frame knowledge effectively for audience and situation. As teacher-scholars, we know that we need to consider different audiences and contexts, and when considering how to discuss TPC as a field, a collective identity with multiple component parts gives scholars, teachers, and practitioners a way to invoke different components depending on the situation.

The collective identity can simultaneously stabilize and diversify knowledge making and practice, while emphasizing the micro and the macro and trying to make sense of how they fit together. Most crucially, different components can

be invoked, moved, changed, and altered at any time, making and re-making a flexible and adaptable collective identity for the field.

Building a Sustainable Collective Identity: Reflection and Maintenance

The method we propose here is sustainable collective identity through reflection and maintenance of components of TPC. This reflection and maintenance method are the cornerstones of sustainability, and this process involves recognizing stable features of the assemblage as well as emerging in order to build and to maintain a sustainable and rich TPC collective identity. The chapters we present here represent both stable and emerging components of the field. They represent component parts of a collective identity.

Part One: Exigency for a Sustainable Identity

The first chapters of this collection illustrate the exigency of both building an effective and stable identity as well as being flexible enough to bring in new ideas. They illustrate a range of ways to reflect on the field, the ways it is growing and changing, and the consequences of not effectively addressing identity. This book begins by illustrating where we are and what issues we (continue to) face.

Sara Doan's chapter foregrounds underlying tensions and challenges to TPC's identity when it is collapsed with other disciplines like composition. In "What Are We Really Teaching? Revisiting Technical and Professional Communication's Pedagogical Training," Doan reminds us that TPC courses, particularly service courses, have a range of stakeholders that include industry and disciplines like engineering. Doan deftly explains that understanding industry as a stakeholder does not mean pandering to industry, and that TPC has a long history of situating industry needs ethically and rhetorically. She has carefully culled data from syllabi, learning outcomes, and assignments to compare pedagogical practices and concepts in the TPC service course and first-year writing. Doan compares the different aims and scopes and histories of TPC and composition, focusing on issues such as audience and genre. She argues that composition approaches are unsuitable for the TPC service course and advocates for pedagogical training specific to TPC.

Looking to the future, Stephen Carradini presents a meta-research study of stable and emerging concepts in the field. In "The Ship of Theseus: Change Over Time in Topics of Technical Communication Research Abstracts," Carradini conducts a keyword analysis of abstracts from technical and professional communication journals. His study, grounded in previous attempts to understand the field through keywords, seeks to answer questions about prominent, stable, declining, and emerging topics in the field. It illustrates how much and how quickly the field is changing as well as the need for a sustainable identity for the

field. After dividing his 2000 to 2017 corpus into three main eras, Carradini identifies keywords that are increasing and decreasing in usage, pointing to possible emerging trends. Keywords with some of the sharpest declines include *ethics*, *rhetoric*, and *scientific* from the first era to the second and from the second to the third. *Content*, *experience*, *projects*, and *social* are among those with the strongest increase from the first era to the second and from the second to the third. *Justice*, *UX*, and *entrepreneurs* emerged as keywords in the third era. Carradini's keyword analysis illustrates shifts in the boundaries of TPC as well as changes in disciplinary values.

In "Mapping Technical Communication as a Field: A Co-Citation Network Analysis of Graduate-Level Syllabi," Michael Faris and Greg Wilson present a systematic analysis of graduate course syllabi for courses purporting to provide foundational knowledge in technical and professional communication. Building from previous analyses, they argue that two major scholarly trends continue to heavily influence the reading list: a focus on the value of practitioners in the workplace and a focus on the value of the discipline in the academy. Their map of citations from 60 syllabi illustrates heavily cited core texts and some emerging texts as well as the frequency of texts being assigned together. Using community detection algorithms, they observe emerging communities of texts strongly linked to anthologies and argue that texts that were not identified as core texts in earlier studies have likely become core texts because of edited collections. Faris and Wilson argue that data overall shows that the field has gained a level of coherence.

■ Part Two: Reflection and Maintenance of Major Concepts

Next, we turn to major concepts and knowledges that constitute our field. The entries here conduct the necessary reflection and maintenance to move the field toward a sustainable identity. The entries in the second section illustrate an internal reflection on the individual elements (joints and nodes) within technical and professional communication.

Brenton Faber's chapter continues to remind us of the issues that arise with the development and mishandling of broad definitions and labels. In "'Visualize a Triangle': What's Professional About Professional Communication?" Brenton Faber revisits his foundational 2002 work, "Professional Identities: What is Professional About Professional Communication?" Faber's groundbreaking argument that the concept of professionalism has been applied so widely that the term becomes meaningless remains relevant. In this entry, he provides some additional guidance for the field of technical and professional communication to better define professional communication practices by distinguishing various domains of professional communication as well as explaining why professional communication and business communication ought not be considered interchangeable terms. Faber explicitly narrows the purview of professional commu-

nication and argues that, properly understood, it provides important strategic checks and balances.

In "Procedural Knowledge and Discourse in Technical Communication: Easy as 1, 2, 3?" Marjorie Rush Hovde revisits the foundational and enduring importance of procedural knowledge to the field. From a historical perspective, Hovde reviews and situates important concepts related to procedural knowledge, including system, task, and user orientations. Providing a range of examples, she illustrates effective documentation practices over time. In doing so, she both provides an important literature review and pushes procedural knowledge as essential to building effective and ethical practices in a changing landscape.

Michael Albers' "Technical Communication Reimagined Through a Socio-Technical Problem-Solving Lens" asks us to rethink one of the most common theoretical frameworks—the rhetorical situation—from the perspective of complex situations. Using examples from service design to software, he invites readers to rethink relatively mundane features of technical and professional communication—writing, communication, and audience—through socio-technical theory. Albers provides a framework for problem-solving and decision-making for increasingly complex environments. Drawing from concrete examples and historically situating concepts, he provides recommendations for both pedagogy and research.

In "Applied Rhetoric as Disciplinary Umbrella: Community, Connections, and Identity," Jennifer Veltsos, Matthew Sharpe, Jacob Rawlins, Ashely Patriarca, and Rebecca Pope-Ruark theorize increasingly disparate TPC components as applied rhetoric. Using several examples, the authors illustrate ways in which applied rhetoric productively brings together sub-disciplines like business communication and science communication, without collapsing their aims and scopes, into a praxis approach that actively engages subjects beyond critique. Using concrete examples, the authors illustrate how these relationships will help TPC address complex issues and build more effective practices.

▪ Part Three: Reassembling with Emerging Relationships

The chapters in the final section of this collection illustrate the range of assemblages and identities with which TPC needs to interact. Part of TPC's identity needs to allow for such interaction and development of effective practices across identities. These entries are looking outward, across identities and assemblages. They illustrate emerging relationships and practices and new roles for technical and professional communication.

As scientific and technological disciplines and practices become increasingly specialized, TPC needs to be able to deftly build practices across disciplines and specializations. Lisa DeTora's "New Ways of Reading: Making Sense of Complex Biomedical Writing Using Existing Guidelines" examines how scientific discourses have shifted over time, requiring updated methods. Using biomedi-

cine as an example, she advocates a new approach to critically engaging scientific discourses and appropriately incorporating existing professional genres and guidelines as they affect knowledge and authorship.

TPC is the place to effectively incorporate disability studies, user experience, and accessibility. Sushil Oswal and Zsuzsanna Palmer argue that TPC scholars need to proactively incorporate disability studies scholarship into usability and accessibility methods and analyses. Through critical analysis of recent scholarship, they illustrate how TPC has neglected to effectively incorporate scholarship and methods from disability studies. Advocating for a participatory action model, Oswal and Palmer specifically connect how disability studies can help build more effective and ethical practices, and they provide strategies for better integrating disability studies into TPC research and practice. Using examples from the classroom, they illustrate how to center disabled users in both technical and professional communication research and pedagogy.

TPC needs to be able to both develop and critique effective methods in global contexts. In "Localize, Adapt, Reflect: A Review of Recent Research in Transnational and Intercultural TPC," Nancy Small presents an integrative literature review of intercultural and transnational communication practices in the field. From a corpus of 143 articles, Small draws out issues of conflated terminology and localization practices, including intercultural, transnationalism, localization, and culture. Additionally, she draws from several specific examples to advocate for an ethical model to address transnational work in a more effective and responsible way.

▪ Assembling and Sustaining TPC

A collective identity will always remain despite the changing of the component parts. These parts include concepts, technologies, practices, workplaces, social issues, ethics, industry changes, genres, audiences, and methods. TPC is always changing, as it should, in response to changes in workplace places and innovations in technology, as well as shifts culturally, socially, or politically. Critical reflection that considers the component parts allows TPC to acknowledge the shifting and changing of its collective identity over time. This is the work of sustainability, as argued by Johnson (2004), to reflect and maintain the components of technical and professional communication's collective identity. We hope the readers of this volume will consider their research as part of a larger TPC collective identity—unique but still connected to larger goals and aims.

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