24. Profession

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Profession and professionalization are concepts that engage scholars and practitioners in the technical communication (TC) field, sometimes explicitly (e.g., through a study of "the profession of technical communication" or through seeking professional certification in TC), but perhaps more often implicitly (i.e., through the daily work of teaching, ***researching***, or producing TC).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that *profession* has had a number of meanings, depending upon the nation using it, but its root meaning is a "declaration," as in declaration of religious faith, a vow upon entering a religious order, or a declaration of property or person as for a public registry (Oxford University Press, n.d.). By the 15th century CE, *profession* could also have the sense of a professional occupation: "An occupation in which a professed ***knowledge*** of some subject, field, or science is applied; a vocation or career, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In the 16th century, the term could also refer to any occupation, ranging from skilled trades to thievery (Oxford University Press, n.d.), although as recent as 1711, the clergy, law, and medicine remained the three traditional professions (Addison, 1891, p. 78).

In the field of TC, *profession* and *professionalization* are terms that can signify key debates or ongoing tensions. For some, the idea of profession is a settled issue: Technical communication simply and obviously is a bona fide profession and is regularly referred to as a profession. For others, profession is a goal the field is still working toward through a process called professionalization—a process that is envisioned or described in various ways upon which all discussants may not agree.

Those who view TC as a profession can point to the facts that it provides regular employment, that it is what practitioners say they do for a living, that it is a term of occupational identity, and (though by no means necessarily) that it may be a formal job title. It is a term that encompasses all of the tasks they perform in their work. That means it isn't something they may do as part of a job that has a different title, jobs like engineer, manager, physician—jobs where the work requires reports, ***proposals***, instructions, and the like but only as aspects of their primary duties.

The existence of national professional organizations for technical communicators is further testament to the professionalization of the field. The largest organization, the Society for Technical Communication has more than 6,000 members according to their most recently available report (Society for Technical Communication, 2014).

Indeed, to some, that technical communication is a profession seemed to be settled over 40 years ago with Robert Connors' (1982) widely cited study "The

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Rise of Technical Writing Instruction in America." Although the study's focus is on the emergence of "technical writing" as a teaching specialization, Connors asserts that, following World War II, the practice of technical writing became "a job in itself" (p. 341) and "the profession of technical and scientific writing grew and matured" in the 1950s (p. 342).

However, Connors' view has been considerably complicated by later studies from the 1990s to the early 2000s (Carliner, 1994; Hayhoe, 1997; Kynell, 1996; Kynell-Hunt & Savage, 2003, 2004; Pinelli & Barclay, 1992; Savage, 1999). Edward Malone (2011), notably, recognizes that professionalization was a deliberate, intentional movement beginning in 1953. Malone finds that professionalization was, and perhaps remains, an ongoing struggle involving establishing professional organizations, defining a body of knowledge specific to the field, codifying ethical standards, developing venues for certifying practitioners, gaining legal recognition for the profession, and establishing accreditation for academic programs (p. 287). These are essentially the criteria defined by Abraham Flexner (1915) more than a century ago.

Malone (2011) documents the work of professionalization leaders of the 1950s who recognized that the field of TC lacked most of the characteristics of a profession at that time. Clearly, these early leaders were not viewing profession in Connors' terms, as simply "a job in itself." Some of them found guidance in theories of profession and professionalization, including Flexner's work. Using those criteria to identify a starting point for professionalization, they formed the first professional organizations for technical communicators, The Association of Technical Writers and Editors in New York, The Society of Technical Writers in Boston, and a year later, the Technical Publishing Society in Los Angeles. These organizations eventually merged to form a truly national organization, the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers (STWP) in 1960 (Malone, 2011, p. 289). STWP changed its name to the Society for Technical Communication (STC) in 1971 and ultimately became the largest professional organization in the field (Society for Technical Communication, n.d.a). Malone (2015a, 2015b) also has called attention to significant roles of women in organizing these professional associations.

A body of knowledge for technical communication has been discussed and debated several times since the 1950s. In 1957, Israel Sweet, a higher education administrator, argued that identifying a body of knowledge was, by nature, the responsibility of academics. This would require ***research*** on multiple fronts, a process that did not actually begin in any concerted way for another 30 years. Although technical communication teachers were being recruited shortly after the war to meet growing industry demands for technical writers (Connors, 1982; Kynell, 1996; Whitburn, 2009), and although some of those teachers began publishing articles and textbooks almost immediately, their publications focused on teaching practices—essentially teaching tips for freshly appointed and inexperienced college instructors (Cunningham & Harris, 1994; Cunningham & Hertz, 1970; Kynell & Tebeaux, 2009). It was not until the 1980s that a need for serious research—theoretical and empirical—was realized, and not, initially, with much enthusiasm. In

fact, the primary motivation was the desire and the necessity for recognition and status of technical writing teachers who were marginalized in traditional English departments. In practical terms, this meant tenure, promotion, and increased salaries. It did not bear much fruit until the 1990s as technical communication scholars made the transition from writing about teaching based on their own experience to learning how to apply or develop theory to address the teaching and practice of workplace writing and to conduct actual research in such matters.

Not until the early 2000s did a body of knowledge become a mission in the field, spurred by a growing concern for certification of technical communication practitioners. Certification, or "recognition or validation by a professional organization (including a college or university) or agency that an *individual* possesses the qualifications for engaging in a specific profession" (Turner & Rainey, 2004, p. 234), is an essential condition for market closure, but it was impossible to develop ***assessment*** criteria and certification standards without a "a codified body of knowledge as the basis for certification" (Rainey et al., 2005, p. 335). A project was organized by STC in 2007 to accomplish this goal. It was called the "Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) initiative" project, with a "task force" of professors from four universities and two industry representatives (Coppola, 2010, pp. 11-13). The task force quickly decided that the body of knowledge and certification were separate concerns and focused their work on TCBOK alone. Over the next two or three years, a web portal was made available to the public. It is operational today at https://www.tcbok.org/, although it is not represented as complete or definitive of the technical communication field or as a basis for certification, even for STC's certificate program, which was established in 2011. Instead, according to the certificate program website, "the body of knowledge STC is using . . . is Johnson-Sheehan's textbook *Technical Communication Today*" (Society for Technical Communication, n.d.b). As of June 2020, a total of 340 certificates had been awarded by STC.

A concern for ***ethics*** is characteristic of established professions. This is sometimes expressed in terms of altruism--a primary commitment to exercising one's professional knowledge and practice not only for the good of clients (or audiences and users in the case of technical communication) but equally, for the good of society at large (Anteby et al., 2016; Evetts, 2006; Noordegraaf, 2015; Saks, 2011; Sciulli, 2005). Flexner (1915) may have been the first to state this idea, and his may be the most eloquent:

> Devotion to well-doing is thus more and more likely to become an accepted mark of professional activity; and as this development proceeds, the pecuniary interest of the individual practitioner of a given profession is apt to yield gradually before an increasing realization of responsibility to a larger end. (p. 581)

Most established professions have, in fact, devised a code of ethics specific to the nature of their practice. In the technical communication field, there are presently three statements of ethical principles: the ATTW Code of Ethics, the IEEE

Code of Conduct, and STC's Ethical Principles, all of which are available on the organizations' websites. These three codes vow loyalty to professional colleagues, clients, and audiences, as well as to the laws of the land. However, none of them call for altruism in the sense of selfless service to others. STC comes closest in explicitly recognizing an ethical responsibility to "respect cultural variety and other aspects of diversity in our clients, employers, development teams, and audiences." This could count as an important step toward Flexner's (1915) ideal of a maturing profession "increasing realization of responsibility to a larger end" (p. 581).

The value of professional status, particularly in the traditional sense most studies have assumed, has not been universally accepted in our field. This is evident in the ways that women, LGBTQ people, and people of marginalized races and ethnicities have been (when not simply excluded) sidelined, exoticized, or closeted in technical and professional communication roles just as they have been in the larger society. Natasha N. Jones et al. (2016) point out that the 1990s feminist movement in technical communication, which they suggest may have begun the ***social justice*** awakening in the field, called attention to the patriarchal values and assumptions about technical communication as a profession. Feminist scholars showed that women had been active, and sometimes leading, scholars and practitioners for well over a century, although with little or no recognition.

With the rise of social justice awareness, several new research methodologies have been making their way not only into research design but also into approaches to teaching and practice. Participatory action methodologies, feminist theories—including Black feminist theories—and queer theory have influenced not only how technical communication is practiced but in what domains of culture and society our field is or should be working. Decolonial methodologies are being applied to expose the ways that colonial and neo-colonial ideologies and practices have shaped and sustained traditional institutions and structures of power, including traditional ways technical communication has been practiced (Agboka, 2014; Haas, 2012).

Probably the first organized effort to address social justice in technical communication began in 2003 with the formation of the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication's (CPTSC) Diversity Committee (Selfe, 2004), which began by questioning the lack of racial and ethnic diversity and calling attention to the racist assumptions and structures in our academic programs and workplaces. Today, we are seeing traditional notions of profession being challenged in multiple ways. Discourse and ***genre*** conventions are being critiqued by scholars like Laura Gonzales (2018) and Cruz Medina (2014). Alternative ***rhetorics***, including nonverbal rhetorics, have been identified by Matthew B. Cox (2018), Temptaous T. Mckoy (2019), Cecilia Shelton (2020), and Brittany Hull et al. (2020).

It is often presumed that professional status confers an exalted identity upon those who have such status. As Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise (2005) argue, "In general, identity affects how a person is placed in culture: how important they are, how they are treated, and what possibilities are open to them" (p. 149). Professional identity is supposedly earned by the acquisition of expertise

certified by academic degrees, professional organizations, and/or licensure. However, one's placement in culture is also conferred by factors in which a person may have no choice, including race, gender, and other, usually intersectional, forms of embodiment. As Hull et al. (2020) argue,

> Because minority bodies are always, already under scrutiny and subject to explanation and qualification, they are often conditioned to be aware of and responsive to the presumed standards of professionalism just to survive. . . . Black women embody dual identities and the pressure to conform to spaces where they were not welcome historically must be negotiated almost every day. (p. 7)

Cecilia Shelton (2020) brings a Black feminist perspective to bear upon the traditional concept of expertise, challenging "the violence of expertise that feigns an apolitical neutrality in service of the status quo" (p. 28).

Our scholarship, teaching, and practice, as Miriam F. Williams (2014) has emphasized, must recognize "those communicative practices used to negatively impact historically marginalized groups and identify new practices that can be used to encourage cultural competence within institutions and communities" (pp. 1-2.) Rebecca Walton (2016) takes up this charge in calling for "embracing human dignity and human rights as the first principle of communication and the foundational value of the TPC [technical and professional communication] field" (p. 402).

The turn to social justice may well be on the way to redefining technical communication as a profession uniquely qualified to guide those who seek its services in designing professional communications that are just, liberating, and accessible to all stakeholders, including those—humans and nonhumans—whose only stake is in the effects and consequences of the rhetorical and material actions that technical communication facilitates.

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