

INTRODUCTION

Toward Professional Status in Technical Communication

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The technical communication field lacks the status, legitimacy, and power of mature professions. Most leaders in the field seem to agree with that claim despite persistent disagreements about our prospects for gaining professional status. Most also agree that we are not much understood or recognized outside of the field as a specialized field of practice. Opinions range widely about our identity, our knowledge domain, the fundamental nature and scope of our responsibilities, and the need and possibility for certifying or licensing practitioners. Within the field, the significance and relatedness of these issues may not be well understood: unless we are able to define our field, we are unlikely to be recognized as a profession—we cannot be recognized by others if we can't even recognize ourselves.

As Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber insist, “Our field will not achieve the status of a mature profession until it can come to grips with a coherent body of disciplinary knowledge” [1, p. 408]. People who attempt to outline a body of disciplinary knowledge needed for technical communication do not call for a narrowing of scope. But we are far from consensus about the exact content and the ratio of the interdisciplinary mix. The perennial skirmish line of theory/practice is one site of disagreement—whether skills or conceptual knowledge are more important. Another debate concerns whether so-called “content” knowledge—knowledge of technical subject matter—should be a significant part of the education of technical communicators, or whether expertise in communication principles and practices is enough.

Many people in the field believe we will not be able to achieve professional autonomy unless we are able to require certification for practitioners. Such gate-keeping authority is part of what Randall Collins calls “market closure,” the ability to prevent other professions from providing services that are specific to our field [2]. Collins and other professionalization theorists argue that without autonomy, it is impossible for a profession to mature; that is, it must be able to limit practice to people who have completed profession-certified programs of education, often including certification by an independent or state-authorized certifying body made up of members of the profession. Otherwise, as is certainly the case in technical communication, people with little or no professional training can be hired to perform the work of the field. People continue to be hired as technical communicators whose only credentials are basic aptitudes or backgrounds in technical subject matter. Such people have little or no specific educational background in technical communication but they may have tool skills such as Web-design and desktop publishing software. Others may simply “like to write,” or may have formal degrees in English literature, journalism, or in a technical or scientific discipline. It might be argued that this would be the equivalent of allowing people to perform surgery who are “good with their hands,” or who have formal degrees in biology, or who perhaps have worked as engineers designing surgical instruments. Such characterizations may seem nonsensical, but in fact a number of people now working in the field are strongly opposed to certification or otherwise regulating practice because they would not be able to pass the certification exams or to show the formal credentials that would qualify them. Moreover, we are in contention with other professions for many kinds of technical communication work. The software interface is one currently contested domain. Technical communicators seek greater influence in designing interfaces because they see it as a fundamentally rhetorical domain, and therefore more appropriately in our control than in the hands of programmers. Grice and Krull mention this among several important examples of other fields in which technical communicators believe they have a territorial stake. Grice and Krull raise the question,

whether other fields will accept technical communicators moving onto their turf. Will usability testers who were trained in university psychology programs and who identify with psychology-based professional associations accept writers who dabble in testing? Will trainers who identify with university or industry education and training programs accept writers who dabble in training? Both psychology and training are older and larger than technical communication. They are also ahead of us in formalized accreditation. They may not let us play on their field [3, p. 136].

Many people may be put off by the hegemonic nature of accreditation and market closure. Professionalization is an exclusive process; it requires the undemocratic presumption that, as the basis of expertise, certain kinds of knowledge should not be freely available to everyone. Whether or not professions are ultimately good for employers and clients, for practitioners, and for society as a whole is a question that troubles people within and outside of many professions. Because of such concerns, emerging professions almost always articulate a social commitment and a set of guiding ethical principles. Yet, at the same time, they are likely to be struggling to establish the terrain of their practice against opposing market interests. The emphasis upon technical communication ethics and our responsibility to society beyond our employers or our own interests have reflected this aspect of professionalization. A field must demonstrate that it has fundamentally altruistic goals and demonstrate as well that it is in society's best interests for professional practice to be regulated by those who understand its complexities. At some point in the professionalization of a practice its social value may seem obvious, but this is usually not the case in the beginning.

The problem of professional identity goes beyond identifying characteristic skills and knowledge of the field. It also involves prioritizing such competencies. The arguments about the importance of instrumental skills—knowledge of particular tools—for defining our practice are well known, although apparently not settled. Prioritizing kinds of knowledge and skills involves defining a set of professional values and beliefs, determining what constitutes knowledge, what methodologies are acceptable for the research that produces the knowledge of the field, and what ethical principles apply to the application of our knowledge. Identity also concerns the range and appropriate sites of acceptable practice. Although procedural documentation for complex technologies is often considered the paradigmatic form of practice, we commonly include documentation for service industries such as banking and insurance, health industries such as pharmaceutical companies and medical service providers, environmental and natural resources agencies, and the list could certainly be extended.

If we have learned one important lesson from Marxist and critical theory it is that no practice, no set of institutional or social arrangements, no body of knowledge, values, or beliefs is an essence. All have histories and arise from historical exigencies. In this sense, no identity is "necessary." Our identity seems to be tied to the modern origins of the field, that is, to practices emergent in those industrial settings that virtually defined the twentieth century. Thus, our identity is deeply rooted in our history, whether we are familiar with it or not, or even whether it has been written or not. Indeed, we would argue that, as a

field, we are as yet largely ignorant of our history. An examination of established professions reveals that professional identity is closely tied to a developed professional history. Many practitioners, and even many academics in our field, might dismiss historical research as a purely academic exercise privileged by the liberal education tradition within which our scholars must survive. According to such thinking, historical research in an applied field such as technical communication has no value for practitioners and contributes very little to the advancement of the profession. We argue, however, that historical identity provides a foundation for contemporary identity. The history of technical communication is in the very early stages of being written. Indeed, it has only been within the past 15 years or so that historical work of any substance has been done in technical communication.

Thus, without a mature understanding of our history, it is likely that most of the members of the field will perceive technical communication as necessarily tied to the corporate or organizational setting. Because through historical circumstances our field has emerged in industrial contexts in which the technical writer is a corporate employee, it may seem simply natural—an unalterable fact of life—that technical communicators will always be subordinate to the sources of production of technology. Yet, as Savage has argued, professional autonomy may never be achieved without creating opportunities for technical communicators to work for clients rather than employers. This will require identifying and developing alternative sites of practice for technical communication [4, 5]. The near inability to imagine other realities for our practice is, in part, a consequence of our ignorance of our professional history, and this inevitably limits or delays the prospects for professionalization and the attainment of the status and power we desire.

In order to achieve the goal of professional status, most would agree that change must occur. We must more deliberately influence social and economic forces that have been controlled by agencies that likely do not share our interests and would not support our goals of status, legitimacy, and power. The difficulty—what is not at all obvious—is who exactly shall we mean by “we”? The field all too persistently divides into two often opposed groups: practitioners and academics. Practitioner and academic perspectives are usually considered to be represented by one or more professional organizations (see Carliner’s and Savage’s essay in this collection). Although several of these organizations have made some efforts at coordinated action, it is not clear that they will actually achieve consensus on issues such as certification and unifying the knowledge base of the field.

Technical communication is also influenced by groups outside of the field whose interests are not entirely compatible with academics and

practitioners of the discipline. In the realm of practice, our efforts to move into the areas of interface design, training, and usability testing have already been mentioned. In general, technical communicators are trying to join development teams, arguing that the documentation is part of the product and developers of documentation are no less developers of the technology itself than are engineers and programmers.

Less recognized, perhaps, is the struggle between the fields of management and technical communication. In this case, some technical communicators currently assume they must learn to think in management terms and according to management values, rather than in rhetorical terms according to social values. We see evidence of this management perspective in the “value-added” movement, in which we attempt to prove, generally by economic measures, what documentation adds to the value of products. We see it, as well, in the increasing emphasis upon management aspects of technical communication—documentation process management, information management, knowledge management, and the like.

Arguably, recognizing the ways documentation processes are inseparable from the management contexts in which they occur may demonstrate our field’s increasing maturity. But management perspectives may be taking precedence over concerns for effective communication. See for example, Deborah Rosenquist’s report of an on-line discussion among members of “the Advisory Council for Information Development Management (CIDM), which is composed of directors, managers, and CEOs from corporations and a consulting firm” [6, p. 194]. The managers in this discussion approach information as a product to be managed efficiently and communication to be a practice that must be “disciplined” and technologized. One of the participants in the discussion, for example, advocates “modeling technical communicators after their engineering counterparts. . . .” This includes, among other things: “Developing effectiveness and efficiency metrics, tracking and reporting them regularly, and improving them over time.... Ruthlessly streamlining, improving, standardizing, and enforcing development processes and procedures . . .” [6, p. 195].

In the academic sector, the field is often defined not simply by the teachers and scholars whose credentials come from education, research, and occasionally industry experience, but also by the culture created by the academy. We have little choice but to work within the contemporary university tradition where knowledge is divided into autonomous disciplines represented by colleges and departments, each with its turf to protect. We must work within the long-established traditions of scholarship and the tenure system that largely define academic careers and reputations. These conventions and traditions result in difficulties that

seem ludicrous to many people, especially those outside of academia. One example is the necessity for some programs that reside within English departments to use the term “technical writing” instead of “technical communication” because departments of communication have declared “communication” to be unique to their discipline.

The number of academic programs preparing people to practice technical communication is increasing annually. Indeed, the demand for qualified teachers greatly exceeds the output of doctoral programs in technical communication. But this may actually be contributing to the problem of unifying the field. Because of the field’s lack of consensus about our knowledge and professional identity, as academic programs proliferate, so do iterations of what constitutes the knowledge of the field. What gets taught in our programs is a concern not only of the multiple perspectives within academia, but of professional organizations representing practitioners, of industry managers, and various advocates of university “reform” within and outside of academia.

In one respect, the topic of professionalization in the technical communication field is anything but new. It has been implicit in journal articles in the field for decades. Scholars and practitioners of technical communication have been asserting our field’s status as a mature profession since at least the 1960s. The question of the legitimacy, the status, and the power, or authority, of technical communicators arose as the main topic or in conjunction with other topics of numerous essays. A growing number of historical studies, particularly those written by Robert Connors [7] and Teresa Kynell [8], focused on the emergence and the struggle for recognition of technical communication as an academic discipline in this country. Beginning in 1997, Gerald Savage began to use studies from the sociology and history of the professions in an effort to determine whether or not technical communication really is, or is likely to become, a mature profession [9, 10].

In 1999 the editors of this book along with Dale Sullivan presented a panel for the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference addressing issues of status, power, and legitimacy in technical communication. Because of the interest shown in the topics of that panel, Kynell and Savage decided to bring these ideas together in a book incorporating a range of perspectives from people across the technical communication field. Our goal from the beginning was to seek contributors who could address professionalization issues from both the practitioner and the academic perspectives—positions that are often divergent if not outright opposed. As Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber point out, “In most professions, academics and practitioners differ in numerous and real ways. . . . These differences, though, seem particularly pronounced in technical communication” [1, p. 407]. Such differences in perspective

are evident in some of the essays in this collection. Indeed, the polarization of academics and practitioners is a critical aspect of professionalization. Many people in the field lament the perceived opposition between practitioners and academics, believing that some kind of final reconciliation—whether real or perceived—is a prerequisite to becoming a strong, fully mature profession. Certainly the hostility between these camps indicates problems we need to address, but we also agree with Johnson-Eilola and Selber that “we should not allow the goal of remediating the binary to close off the important tensions that can allow the field to advance. This very gap is actually one of the few sites in which new ideas and approaches can be forged” [1, p. 403]. We believe more dialogue among people with diverging and opposing points of view is necessary, though at present such dialogues seem to occur primarily within either the practitioner or the academic camps, rather than between the camps. One of the goals of this collection, admittedly only partially realized, is to provide a forum for such a dialogue between practitioners and academics. We have not looked for conciliatory positions alone, but voices that clearly articulate the concerns and points of view that divide us on the issue of professional status.

We believe that the essays in this collection, and in the volume to follow the present one, offer scholars, teachers, students, and practitioners new ways to understand the field as a social, technical, and rhetorical practice arising from a complex history, manifesting itself in application and in theory. And although it is a field with problems, schisms, and vital questions urgently needing to be addressed, we believe that the vision of technical communication emerging from these essays reveals a field that is, if anything, even more dynamic and exciting than we had ever before imagined.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSAYS

Part I: Historical Roots of the Struggle for Status

In the first section of this book, essays by Katherine Durack, Bernadette Longo, and Teresa Kynell-Hunt address a number of historical dimensions of the field that productively complicate our understanding of where we have come from. They help us understand the historical circumstances out of which contemporary practices and values in our profession have emerged. Katherine Durack’s study of efforts by the Butterick pattern company early in the twentieth century to patent a new approach to dress pattern design reveals an issue that helped to define the way technical communication is practiced today. Durack makes a distinction between creating instructions and ultimately receiving credit

for an invention, while also evaluating the inevitable gender-related issues that arise when a woman during the period initiated the argument. Her study raises the question why a set of instructions with graphics merited protection by patent law, whereas instructions for other assembly procedures were and are protected by copyright laws. The differences between the two kinds of law prove to have been important in defining the authority of technical communicators because those differences call into question the nature and subject of expertise – who defines it and who creates it? The historical situation recounted by Durack contributes to our discussion of disciplinary legitimacy by presenting what may be one of the earliest cases of an “intellectual property” dispute involving technical communication in the United States.

Bernadette Longo’s examination of Rudolph Flesch’s contributions to the professionalization of technical communication at a critical period in our twentieth century development shows Flesch in a different light from that in which most of us familiar with his work tend to regard him. Longo evaluates the contributions of Flesch who, she argues, helped to establish technical communication as a legitimate discipline through his research-based method for teaching “readable” science writing. She frames her discussion of Flesch against the backdrop of World War II computer technology, including the coining of the word “cybernetics” to denote thinking and communication in the context of humans and computers. Flesch took a multidisciplinary approach to what he called “scientific rhetoric.” His approach was, in part, a means of responding to the increasing need for informal, practical English. Although we needed to move beyond readability formulas at a particular juncture in our field’s emergence, Longo argues that Flesch’s work marked a significant advancement in terms of understanding and addressing the needs of readers, an advancement that continues to resonate in contemporary usability research and user-centered design.

Teresa Kynell-Hunt explores the emergence of the engineering profession, a field to which our own has strong connections. Though the fields of engineering and technical communication would ultimately follow different paths to professionalization and legitimacy, Kynell-Hunt reminds us of the vision of an early theorist and teacher of technical communication, Samuel Earle, and his insistence that engineers should define their practice not in terms of other, longer established disciplines, but in terms of what their own field has to contribute to society. She suggests that the same vision – a kind of disciplinary cultural vision – first articulated nearly a century ago by a pioneer technical writing teacher, should apply as well to our effort to define ourselves professionally. She argues for a social approach to technical communication, a combination of Earle’s ideas about disciplinary identity coupled with

contemporary calls for the empowerment of the technical communicator. Such an approach, she suggests, will result ultimately in relying less on either the workplace or the academy to define our status—and more on our own community of scholars and practitioners to establish the parameters of that identity.

Part II: The Contemporary Struggle for Status

With a historical context established in the opening section of the book, the second section addresses current dimensions and problems of the practice of technical communication. One purpose we had for this collection was to provide a space for practitioner perspectives. Three of the writers in this section, Carliner, Hayhoe, and Anderson, represent that viewpoint. Carliner and Hayhoe span the practitioner-academic divide; both are active as consultants and leaders in professional organizations as well as serving in university teaching positions.

Saul Carliner evaluates technical communication organizations, drawing upon his own experience to provide observational and anecdotal information about the discipline. As a past president of the Society for Technical Communication he has been particularly active in helping our field move toward professional status. He discusses how professional organizations contribute to the legitimacy, status, and power of technical communicators, and he points out the limitations of our organizations to empower us. He assesses, among other things, the ways professional organizations in technical communication contribute to power, status, and legitimacy by supporting programs, exchanging information, providing forums for discussions, and addressing issues vital to the discipline. Carliner also looks at the impact of these organizational roles at both the individual and community levels, arguing that while individuals tend to feel that professional organizations have assisted in creating prestige for the discipline, prestige at the academic and workplace community levels is not so fully realized. He concludes by suggesting some new directions for our organizations in order to meet the needs of a field struggling to achieve professional stature.

George Hayhoe is a consultant, a university program director, and has been editor since 1996 of the STC journal *Technical Communication*. In the latter role he has constantly advocated for professionalization of the field. His essay addresses that most persistent problem of our field, common to virtually all professions, tension between industry and academia. Hayhoe is concerned about what creates rivalry between workplace practitioners and academics and looks for places where both “camps” can find consensus. Through statistics and anecdotal information, he discusses how the divisions were established and second, how

those in differing camps might agree upon the intersections between practice and theory, the workplace and the academy. Hayhoe points out that despite certain obvious differences, practitioners and scholars have much in common and proposes ten ways that we can further erase unproductive differences.

In an unusual collaboration, two academics, Dale Sullivan and Michael Martin join forces with a young, recently graduated industry practitioner, Ember Anderson, to explore ways that practitioners might effectively gain status and authority individually. Sullivan is well known for his rhetorical scholarship in technical communication and his broad teaching experience. Martin was a doctoral student at the time this chapter was written, preparing to enter the academic side of the field. Drawing on rhetorical and sociological theories, as well as on examples from personal experiences of practicing technical writers, these authors map out a theory of individual strategy for attaining recognition for their expertise and acceptance into the local culture of the organization. The authors first describe the problem of status for newcomers to an organization, establish definitions of status and authority in terms of rhetorical theory, and finally focus on social theory as a means for technical communicators to establish authority in the workplace. If all technical communicators understood this kind of approach and were adept in its application, argue Sullivan, Martin, and Anderson, the field as a whole would benefit.

If the technical communication field ever achieves status, power, and legitimacy it will surely be through recognition as a formal, mature profession. Gerald Savage, in an essay that was previously published in 1999, draws upon studies in the history and sociology of the professions to examine the prospects for professionalization of the technical communication field. Savage applies three dimensions of professionalization—market factors, sociopolitical factors, and ideological factors—to explore the struggle toward professional status in our field. He concludes that technical communication is not yet a true profession but identifies five reasons to hope that the field will eventually achieve full professional status and four ways of hastening the process.

Part III: Envisioning Empowered Practice for Technical Communication

In the last section of the collection, Jennifer Daryl Slack, and Brent Faber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola look at current and emerging practices and offer ways of reconceptualizing and repositioning technical communication. Jennifer Slack provides two essays for this collection. We are

privileged to reprint the influential essay, “The Technical Communicator as Author,” which she wrote with David Miller and Jeffrey Doak in 1993. The use of articulation theory in this essay provides a way to understand the technical communicator as a position having power, authority, and responsibility. Slack has added a “postscript” to that essay, problematizing the earlier essay’s emphasis on the technical communicator as an “identity.” She suggests that identities can never be fixed, that the status and authority of technical communicators is unlikely ever to be settled. Instead, drawing upon the work of Deleuze and Guatarri, she argues that we must understand our practice as participating in the “flows and affects” within which experts and users are constituted. Slack’s postscript complicates the relationship of identities and the practices within which they are articulated (whether or not that situatedness is understood or acknowledged) to ethics and politics. She proposes that we abandon the notion of a fixed professional identity; instead, she offers the notion of the techcom assemblage, which incorporates the technical communicator as an identity role with technical communication as a continually emerging field of practice, but she also wants “to differentiate the assemblage from both.” In this concept, professional status, power, and legitimacy are continually negotiated and there can be no prospect of arriving at a fixed identity for either the practitioner or the field.

Faber and Johnson-Eilola investigate the rise of corporate universities, pointing out how they challenge the hegemony of the traditional university as institutions of higher education. They also extend Johnson-Eilola’s earlier arguments that technical communicators are members of the new “knowledge worker” class [11]. They argue that such knowledge workers are increasingly cosmopolitan, giving allegiance neither to a particular nation nor to a particular company. Such knowledge workers are primarily consultants rather than employees, but more than that, they are distinguished by their ability to organize and manage knowledge and to rapidly accommodate new knowledge. Technical communicators of this type constitute what Faber and Johnson-Eilola claim are a new kind of professional that does not conform to the traditional notion of what it means to be a professional. They argue that if our field is to survive and to establish itself as a profession, it must be in these twenty-first-century terms.

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