EQUIPPING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

Theories, Methodologies, and Pedagogies

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Introduction

BEYOND IDEOLOGY AND THEORY
Applied Approaches to Social Justice

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Themes of social justice have appeared in technical and professional communication (TPC) scholarship for more than two decades (refer to Blyler 1995; Crabtree 1998; Herndl 1993; Thralls and Blyler 1993; Sullivan 1990). For example, as far back as 1998, Nancy Blyler charged TPC to take a "political turn" to center its research and instructional practices on *social action* (33). However, it was not until the second decade of the twenty-first century that scholars began to explicitly interrogate theories, methodologies, practices, and the institutional and disciplinary challenges of enacting social justice (e.g., Agboka 2013, 2014; Colton and Holmes 2016; Haas 2012; Jones 2016a, 2016b; Jones and Walton 2018; Jones, Moore, and Walton 2016; Leydens and Lucena 2017; Leydens 2014; Walton 2013; Walton, Zraly, and Mugengana 2015; Walton, Moore, and Jones 2019). Williams (2013) describes: "These scholars are taking the traditional description of technical communication as a field that advocates for the user to a new and exciting level by focusing on historically marginalized groups and issues related to race, class, gender, and sexuality . . ." (87–88). This scholarship has spurred a "social justice turn" in the field of TPC in which the focus on critical *analysis* that informed the cultural turn of the 1990s extends into a focus on critical *action.*

In TPC, social justice research "investigates how communication, broadly defined, can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically underresourced. Key to this definition is a collaborative, respectful approach that moves past description and exploration of social justice issues to taking action to redress inequities" (Jones and Walton 2018). Efforts at social justice recognize the historical, economic, and sociopolitical forces that promote injustices and normalize them; but, more importantly, such efforts also support and enact systems that magnify the

agency of oppressed and under-resourced people and communities. This position is echoed by Haas and Eble (2019), who argue that

> social justice approaches are informed by cultural theories and methodologies, but they also explicitly seek to redistribute and reassemble—or otherwise redress—power imbalances that systematically and systemically disenfranchise some stakeholders while privileging others. Using cultural and rhetorical theories to redress social injustices, social justice approaches essentially and ideally couple rhetoric with action to actually make social, institutional, and organizational change toward equity happen (3).

Within TPC, this kind of work is burgeoning, with considerations of social justice informing conference themes, conference roundtables, journals' special issue topics, and award-winning scholarship. For example, the 2016–2019 conferences organized by the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) have featured roundtables or panels on the subject of social justice. It is particularly noteworthy that in 2018, the ATTW conference organizers instituted up to three awards to recognize and amplify the important contributions of underrepresented students and/or non-tenure track faculty presenting at ATTW 2018 in Kansas City, Kansas. Social justice scholarship in TPC has explored, among many other topics, the complexities of navigating and engaging unenfranchised contexts (Agboka 2013, 2014; Durá, Singhal, and Elias 2013; Walton, Price, and Zraly 2013; Walton, Zraly, and Mugengana 2015); issues of race and programmatic diversity (Jones 2014; Jones, Savage, and Yu 2014; Savage and Mattson 2011; Savage and Matveeva 2011); the interstices of gender, sexuality, rhetoric, and technical communication (Cox and Faris 2015; Frost 2015; Petersen 2014); and considerations of translation and localization (Gonzales and Turner 2017; Rose and Racadio 2017; Shivers-McNair and San Diego 2017). The implication is that TPC is a field actively engaged in decolonial, advocacy, and civic work.

While we are excited by this important and necessary scholarship, we are concerned that relatively few resources are available within the field to directly support and inform it. In other words, despite a wave of social justice scholarship in the field, a number of TPC scholars—both emerging and established—have limited understanding of social justice or feel ill equipped to pursue it in their work, wondering, "How do I incorporate social justice into my technical communication courses? How can I uphold principles of social justice in my research? What theories are well suited to framing and informing socially just TPC? How could considerations of social justice inform practices of, say, user experience or crisis communication?"

To address these types of questions, this collection provides action-focused resources and tools (e.g., heuristics, methodologies, and theories) for scholars to enact social justice. These resources are intended to support the work of scholars and practitioners in conducting research or pursuing both local and international projects in *socially just* ways. Each chapter in the collection identifies a tool, highlights its relevance to technical communication, and explicates *how* and *why* it can prepare technical communication scholars for socially just work. The form and purpose of this collection were inspired by some of the foundational works in our field that draw from cultural studies and social justice.

Indeed, we situate our work in—and build on the legacies of—these works that predate ours, which themselves began and shaped important conversations on what has become the "social justice turn" in TPC. For example, *Critical Power Tools: Technical Communication and Cultural Studies*, edited by Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Katherine Wills (2006), helped us recognize our field's complicity in oppression. Although scholarship on cultural studies sparsely peppered the field prior to their collection, *Critical Power Tools* provided the field with a collection of essays that inspired what has been called the "cultural turn" in TPC that, we believe, was necessary to precede and lay the groundwork for the social justice turn. *Critical Power Tools* explicitly embraced critical perspectives that rejected solely instrumentalist identities for technical communication. Similar to our vision for this collection, *Critical Power Tools* equips communicators for critical action by taking up and addressing questions about how viewing technical communication pedagogy, research methods, and theoretical concepts through a cultural studies lens can enhance the work of TPC scholars and students. Published just a few years prior, *Power and Legitimacy in Technical Communication, Volume II*, edited by Teresa Kynell-Hunt and Gerald Savage (2004), offered strategies for changing agendas across technical communication. It envisioned a future in line with the social justice turn of the field—a future in which technical communicators focus their work on the public good (Rude, chapter 7), conduct grassroots-directed research that informs people's efforts to improve their own lives (Blyler, chapter 8), occupy rhetorical roles that focus on social change and boundary crossing (Savage, chapter 9), and refuse to accept or perpetuate myths of technology as panacea (Killingsworth, chapter 10). These big-picture perspectives of the field's future set the stage for the present moment in which we write this collection; a present in which many within our field embrace the social justice turn and are seeking tools useful for taking up this work in their own day-to-day practice of teaching and research.

Many of the arguments introduced by these earlier texts have been taken up, extended, and addressed more directly by more recent scholarship, some of which connects explicitly to social justice objectives. *Communicating Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Technical Communication*, edited by Miriam Williams and Octavio Pimentel (2014), focuses and extends discussion of diversity to include how race and ethnicity shape the practice and production of technical communication, mostly within the United States. Their collection (an extension of their 2012 special issue of the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*) reveals how technical communication can be directly or indirectly complicit in activities that further marginalize historically disenfranchised groups, while also suggesting ways of magnifying the agency of those groups. Their book lays important groundwork by prompting and presenting critical analyses, which the current collection aims to extend by equipping readers for critical action.

Whereas Williams and Pimentel's collection focuses on race and ethnicity, Godwin Y. Agboka and Natalia Matveeva's (2018) collection, *Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication: Scholarly and Pedagogical Perspectives*, addresses civic engagement and advocacy. Addressing both pedagogy and industry practice, the collection prepares teachers and practitioners to undertake advocacy work in local and international contexts. In furtherance of these goals, the collection defines core competencies for advocacy work, provides practical examples and strategies for advocacy involving clients, and conveys teaching strategies for bringing advocacy into the classroom. This book seeks to extend the contributions of the Agboka and Matveeva collection beyond citizenship and advocacy by presenting tools for inclusive community research and teaching across a range of contexts.

A major inspiration for this collection is *Key Theoretical Frameworks: Teaching Technical Communication in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Angela Haas and Michelle Eble (2018). The Eble and Haas collection focuses on ways in which social justice can inform disciplinary, programmatic, and pedagogical practices in TPC. Calling technical communicators to "make social, institutional, and organizational change toward equity" (4–5), their collection is one of the most distinct and direct in its discussion of social justice. Their collection equips TPC teachers to prepare the next generation of practitioners using a range of methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical approaches—a goal we share in this collection and extend into collaborative research as well as pedagogy.

Building upon the important work of previous edited collections in the field, this book seeks to explicitly equip readers, and chapters

often address readers directly, providing guidance, cautions, and suggestions for readers who are preparing to use these tools in their own work. There are twelve chapters in this collection, organized into four parts: (i) Centering Marginality in Professional Practice, (ii) Conducting Collaborative Research, (iii) Teaching Critical Analysis, and (iv) Teaching Critical Advocacy.

In Centering Marginality in Professional Practice, chapters interrogate the concept of inclusivity and how to enact it in our day-to-day professional practice. Chapters 1–3 provoke questions about who we are as a field, how we operate as professionals, and how to enact inclusivity in our work. Chapter 1, "Narratives from the Margins: Centering Women of Color in Technical Communication," shares critical perspectives on how women of color (WOC) in TPC studies navigate structural inequality, including but not limited to microaggressions, in their everyday work. Authored by five WOC, Laura Gonzales (University of Florida), Josephine Walwema (University of Washington Seattle), Natasha N. Jones (Michigan State University), Han Yu (Kansas State University), and Miriam F. Williams (Texas State University), the chapter draws on narratives from the lived experiences of these WOC and shares strategies for WOC in TPC who also experience marginalization. Finally, the authors provide specific "actions that white accomplices can take toward more equitable, inclusive, and socially just practice within and beyond TPC." In chapter 2, Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq (Utah State University) argues that using locally situated value systems as lenses for shifting one's paradigm from an ethnocentristic, dominant-cultural perspective towards a perspective that is established from within marginalized communities is crucial for decolonial methodologies. In "Iñupiat Iḷitqusiat: An Indigenist Ethics Approach for Working with Marginalized Knowledges in Technical Communication," Itchuaqiyaq explores the ethical possibilities of engaging with marginalized communities in TPC practice, research, and scholarship by offering Indigenous virtue ethics as a tool, cautioning that "those who wish to develop 'Indigenist' research paradigms need a framework that challenges default dominant-culture perspectives." Wrapping up this section is chapter 3, "'I'm surprised that this hasn't happened before': An Indigenous Examination of UXD Failure During the Hawai'i Missile False Alarm," by Emily Legg (Miami University) and Adam Strantz (Miami University). Their chapter uses the Hawai'i false missile launch alarm as a case study to demonstrate how user experience design (UXD) approaches can be complicit in oppressive and colonizing attitudes and structures. While acknowledging the role of a poorly designed interface in the missile launch, they

draw attention to how designers ignored the historic and sociocultural contexts of the crisis and the fears of the Hawai'ian people by focusing on surface-level UXD issues. In response, Legg and Strantz argue that UXD must attune itself to local community expertise, especially local communities of underrepresented people. To equip readers for this inclusive work, they introduce an Indigenous framework for UXD that gives designers a praxis-oriented tool to decolonize UXD and to re-center their UXD on inclusivity.

The second section, Conducting Collaborative Research, highlights socially just research methodologies for conducting, designing, and engaging in collaborative research with communities beyond the academy. Leading the section is chapter 4, "Purpose and Participation: Heuristics for Planning, Implementing, and Reflecting on Social Justice Work," by Emma J. Rose (University of Washington Tacoma) and Alison Cardinal (University of Washington Tacoma). Chapter 4 discusses the relevance of heuristics in enacting social justice in on-the-ground research activities. The authors have developed a tool that is made up of two linked heuristics—(i) pragmatism, advocacy, and activism and (ii) participation—that can be directly applied to social justice in TPC work. Rose and Cardinal demonstrate how the tool can be used and discuss associated cautions by sharing a case study of using design ethnography to engage with transit-dependent communities. The next chapter in this section, "Visual Participatory Action Research Methods: Presenting Nuanced, Co-created Accounts of Public Problems," is written by Erin Brock Carlson (West Virginia University). This chapter introduces visual participatory action research (PAR) and its associated methods, participant-generated imagery (PGI) and participatory mapping, as tools for community-based research inquiry. Brock Carlson explains that, while PGI methods ask participants to take and reflect upon photographs over the course of a project, participatory mapping invites participants to create or amend already-existing visuals. To illustrate, she discusses a study with community organizers using both of these methods. The final chapter in this section is "Legal Resource Mapping as a Methodology for Social Justice Research and Engagement" by Mark A. Hannah (Arizona State University), Kristen R. Moore (University at Buffalo), Nicole Lowman (University at Buffalo), and Kehinde Alonge (Rutgers University). Chapter 6 introduces legal resource mapping (LRM) as a methodology for engaging citizens and collecting research about policy-driven problems in TPC. To help readers understand the relevance of LRM, they illustrate its use with a case study of the Citizen Police Oversight Agency in Albuquerque, NM, as

well as describing a workshop on LRM that can be replicated by readers in other contexts.

The chapters in section three, Teaching Critical Analysis, stimulate our intellectual capacity to apply critical analysis in pedagogical contexts and activities. Leading the section is chapter 7: "Social Activism in 280 Characters or Less: How to Incorporate Critical Analysis of Online Activism into TPC Curriculum" by Kimberly Harper (North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University). Chapter 7 discusses how to equip students for critical practice by designing assignments and activities that scaffold students in analyzing online activism. Harper reports how she approached this goal through specific curricular choices in a course titled "Technical Communication in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter," providing tips and cautions for readers interested in teaching courses with similar goals. Chapter 8 is "The Tarot of Tech: Foretelling the Social Justice Impacts of Our Designs" by Sarah Beth Hopton (Appalachian State University). This chapter uses examples at the intersection of technical communication, agriculture, and social justice to illustrate the usefulness of the design resource she presents to readers: a card deck called the Tarot of Tech. Hopton explains, "my farm serves as a site of praxis where students and I attempt design solutions to some of the more 'wicked' problems . . . at the intersection of sustainability, social justice, and technology." Hopton describes how readers can use the Tarot of Tech cards in their own classes to generate more justice-focused envisioning of possible design solutions to a range of wicked problems. The last chapter in this section is "An Intersectional Feminist Rhetorical Pedagogy in the Technical Communication Classroom" by Oriana A. Gilson (Illinois State University). This chapter highlights the promise of an intersectional feminist rhetorical pedagogy to shift students' view of TPC from one focused solely on efficiency and consistency to one both invested in and working toward socially just practices. Focusing on usability as a cardinal competency in TPC programs, she demonstrates how students' interactions with users and user testing, when motivated by social justice objectives, can be an important platform to counteract the ethic of expediency and instead focus on increased user involvement and the elevation of users' status as co-creators of knowledge.

The final section, Teaching Critical Advocacy, demonstrates how pedagogical tools can be used to inspire critical action toward advocacy. The leading chapter in this section is "Election Technologies as a Tool for Cultivating Civic Literacies in Technical Communication: A Case of *The Redistricting Game*" written by Fernando Sánchez (University

of St. Thomas), Jennifer Sano-Franchini (Virginia Tech), and Isidore Dorpenyo (George Mason University). Chapter 10 presents election technologies as a promising topic for integrating considerations of social justice into technical communication courses. To crystallize this recommendation, they describe an example course unit using *The Redistricting Game*, a browser game developed by the University of Southern California Game Innovation Lab that provides a basic introduction to the redistricting system. This unit was incorporated into an undergraduate general education writing course on spatial rhetorics as a way of using the election technology of electoral maps and geographic information systems (GIS) to teach students about the politics of space and spatial representations. Chapter 11 is "Plotting an Interstitial Design Process: Design Thinking and Social Design Processes as Framework for Addressing Social Justice Issues in TPC Classrooms" by Liz Lane (University of Memphis). This chapter uses the interdisciplinary concept of *interstitiality* (or interstitial design) as a tool for "questioning power structures, inequalities, and user benefits of designed materials." Lane demonstrates how she uses an interstitial design process in teaching TPC genres usually common to many introductory technical communication courses such as white papers and recommendation reports. Concluding this section is chapter 12: "*Kategorias* and *apologias* as Heuristics for Social Justice Advocacy" by Keith Grant-Davie (Utah State University). This chapter presents *kategoria* and *apologia*—the rhetoric of denunciation and defense—as useful tactics for building arguments *for* change and to anticipate arguments *against* change. He describes how to develop kategorias (arguments denouncing a harmful act or situation), mapping them to the relevant apologias (arguments defending against kategorias) to demonstrate how to develop social justice arguments. He uses an extended example to illustrate each of these rhetorical moves, ending the chapter with example classroom activities and discussions to equip readers to incorporate kategoria and apologia into their own classes.

Taken together, these twelve chapters present readers with a roadmap for the research, teaching, and practice of TPC, and the collection serves as an invitation to others in the field to enact social justice in their various sites of work. Further, the authors collectively demonstrate that social justice approaches to TPC are practical and applied—not merely theoretical or ideological stances. In demonstrating this point, this collection articulates the strengths of socially just TPC practices and continues the field along a social justice trajectory.

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