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Hybridizing the Technical Communication Curricula: The Multifaceted Role of Technical Communicators in Modern Workplaces

Abstract

This paper explores the transformation that has occurred in the field of technical communication (TC). The role of a technical communicator has grown from documentation-focused to an essential part of a corporation's strategy and operations. As technology rapidly advances and organizational structures change, TC professionals have expanded their influence to include content strategy, user experience (UX) design, project management, and other technical roles. This study not only traces the expansion of TC roles from their historical roots to the present day, but also highlights the growing disparity with practical applications in TC education. Drawing from existing scholarships around this topic and my college experience, this paper advocates for a balanced, practical curriculum that prepares technical communicators to address contemporary industry challenges while also adhering to the foundational principles of TC, which are rooted in critical and theoretical approaches.

Introduction

During my internship as a technical communicator, I had to reflect on my dynamic role in the organization I was interning. Considering the traditional role of a technical communicator, which was focused on documentation and creation of user manuals for equipment, as highlighted

in the *Brass Age: Technical Communication and War* (Kimball 6), it dawned on me that the responsibilities are far more expansive. As I switched through tasks that ranged from developing content strategies and content design to implementing feedback mechanisms for user experience, it became evident that a technical communicator's role is indeed multifaceted, and there is a need to enrich the current TC curricula with practical approaches.

This reflection was a turning point for me. It made me question whether the curriculum in technical communication adequately prepares us for the work environment. Is the curriculum fixated on basic practical knowledge with a focus on foundational principles without considering the evolution of the job market? How can we bridge the gap between what we learn in school and the industry needs? This experience reflects the competence required in corporate technical communication roles and highlights the gap between traditional TC pedagogy and the real-world demands of the industry. New Mexico State University (NMSU), my current academic institution, is indeed bridging this gap with the internship program and other practical courses like the web development class, document design, technical workshop, and interdisciplinary offerings, hence giving me the opportunity to use my experience as a case study.

In this paper, I have identified a gap across TC programs in the United States using my institution, NMSU, as a case study. I argue for a hybrid approach to administering TC courses, whereby the student is better prepared for the dynamic workplace. The contemporary workplace is evolving to become a “responsive workplace” and writers are tasked with several responsibilities, hence evolving to the role of “multimodal editors” (Lauer and Brumberger 637). I acknowledge the critical and theoretical approaches as foundational principles of the field. I also recognize the practical efforts being made by several institutions offering the TC programs. I

intend to join the ongoing conversation on bridging the gap between theory and practice within TC education. By identifying areas where current TC programs may fall short, I aim to contribute meaningful insights into how these educational frameworks can be further developed. The model I introduce in this paper is called the Hybrid Curricula Model. This includes exploring ways to integrate more hands-on, technology-based projects and real-world applications that mirror the fast-evolving demands of the industry.

A Glance Through the Historical Advancement

Technical Communication as a discipline has evolved with the dynamic and increasing demands of organizations in the 21st century. At first, it was based on the need for clear documentation as industries grew rapidly in the early 1900s. The Renaissance period also greatly influenced this field. According to O'Hara, it sparked off knowledge dissemination, further aided by inventions such as print media, among others (1). This means that various factors have shaped its development, including evolving demands at workplaces due to emergent technologies.

The digital revolution transformed our world in the late 1900s. Personal computers and the Internet altered how we accessed information, requiring Technical Communicators to develop new skills beyond translating complex data. Kimball describes this era as the Beige Age of technical communication, a term inspired by the beige-colored computer casings of the time (8). The primary role of Technical communicators was to create extensive manuals for these beige devices. Their skills evolved to meet workplace demands in the digital era. However, as technology advanced rapidly, there was a need to reevaluate these roles. The role of traditional technical communication transformed, and skills had to align with new intricacies. Conklin discusses how technical communicators transitioned from translating complex data to architects of information,

such as project leaders in collaborative teams (219). Technical communicators have become facilitators of seamless communication across diverse teams and stakeholders.

Throughout history, technical communication has advanced with new technologies and organizational changes. Every change has enlarged the field's extent. Now, technical communicators are not only writers or editors, but also important partners in innovation. They are present from scratch with a product up until it is delivered (from design to delivery). By reviewing past events, we can see the progress made over time, which will guide our analysis of the current roles and future challenges.

Current Roles of Technical Communicators

The role of technical communicators has evolved over the years to encompass dynamic and multifaceted functions. Brumberger and Lauer's analysis of industry job postings reflects the dynamic nature of technical communicator roles (228 – 238). Their findings indicate today's job market demands a broad range of competencies beyond traditional writing, including project management, content strategy, user experience design, and proficiency in various digital and multimedia tools. This aligns with my experience during my internship search. Most technical communication positions require individuals with some high level of technological competence or expertise in specific software and tools, highlighting the need for technical communicators to be well-versed.

Shalamova et al.'s findings indicate that technical communicators are increasingly involved in complex aspects of design and production (16, 17). Their study reveals that a significant number of technical communicators now engage in “Jack of all trades” roles in different organizations, such as user interface design, software testing, content marketing, etc. This is indeed prevalent in

organizations to date. Brumbaugh and Lauer highlight the growing importance of visual communication in technical communication (236). Today, technical communicators must be conversant with visual content design that complements textual information. During my internship as a technical communicator, I created multi-modal content for social media and internal communications. These tasks required competencies beyond proficient writing skills. Translating text into visually appealing format is an in-demand skill in the industry.

Bhattacharyya emphasizes the need for technical communicators to engage with content management systems, single-sourcing, and XML, which signifies a shift that suggests the skills required in the past are now being redefined (2). In recent years, The role of the technical communicator has become increasingly dynamic and integral to the functioning of the corporate industry. Technical Communicators are not just writers; they are strategists, designers, project managers, educators, etc. So, yes! We may be the “Jack of all Trades” profession, and with properly tailored learning, we can be masters of all. This expansion of roles demonstrates the need for a curriculum that prepares students not just to write and edit but to think strategically, design intuitively, and collaborate across functions.

Identifying the Gap in TC Programs

Have you ever wondered how technical communicators keep up with changing job duties? As innovations grow, so do the skills needed for this career. Many TC curricula offer classes in the theoretical aspects of user experience design, management systems, digital methods, etc. However, they often miss key pieces in aligning these educational programs with the evolving demands of the workplace, particularly in the area of practical application and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Bourelle's research highlights the importance of connecting classroom learning with practical workplace experiences. She argues for a "linked class" approach, in which TC service-learning pedagogies are linked directly to internships (185). This insight points to a crucial gap: the disconnect between classroom learning and the practical skills demanded by the workplace. While internship opportunities are available in the TC programs, there is a need for a more structured integration of these internships with academic curricula to ensure that the skills taught in the classroom are directly applicable and reinforced in real-world settings. Such a curriculum model engages students in projects with societal impact and relevance, enhancing their technical proficiency and social awareness simultaneously.

There's a pressing need for teams that work well together in most organizations. However, many Technical Communication (TC) programs aren't quite up to the task of preparing students for these kinds of collaborative industry demands. Brumberger and Lauer emphasize that technical communicators should be adept at collaborating across various professional fields like IT, marketing, and design (237-239). The issue I'm addressing isn't just about borrowing courses from other disciplines, a common practice in many TC programs, such as the TPC program at New Mexico State University, where graduate students can take courses from other departments as electives to fulfill their requirements. My point is more about fostering intentional collaboration. How effective are these interdisciplinary approaches in readying students for the intensely collaborative roles in industry? I asked a fellow graduate student from the TPC program who had taken an introductory Python course in the computer science department about her experience. She found it quite challenging and was relieved once it was over. This feedback leads to an important question: Do such interdisciplinary approaches truly prepare TC students for roles in the industry?

This gap in collaborative interdisciplinary training might leave graduates unprepared for the collaborative efforts required on modern corporate projects.

Another gap lies in adapting to technological changes. While TC programs may introduce students to current tools and technologies, there is often a gap in teaching students how to learn new technologies at the required pace. Adapting to new tools and platforms as they emerge is crucial. Yet, as Shalamova et al. suggest, current TC curricula may not sufficiently emphasize the critical thinking and adaptive learning strategies necessary for staying relevant in a field that is continuously evolving (17). This gap highlights a crucial deficiency in preparing students for the dynamic and ever-changing landscape of technical communication. As the industry evolves, educational approaches must also progress to incorporate not only current technologies but also the skills needed to master future innovations.

Hybridizing the TC Curricula

I suggest that the Technical Communication curriculum should focus on adding courses that teach students how to use technologies they'll encounter in the workplace, like project management software, content management systems, data visualization, and analytics platforms. Some classes introduce students to these tools, but we must look beyond the basic knowledge. It is not enough to show students how to use these tools; the courses should also teach them how to integrate them into real business processes and communication strategies. A great way to make sure students get both the theory and the practical skills is to adopt the “linked class” model (Bourelle 185). If a student makes use of data visualization tools during the internship program, such an assignment can be replicated in the class to ensure there is a connection between class assignments and internship duties. Class assignments and internship duties should be in synergy.

By adopting this approach, students will be well-equipped to transition seamlessly from academia to the fast-paced and tech-driven environments in most modern workplaces.

In school, computer science students are taught how to code. They learn this through a curriculum combining conceptual programming skills and theoretical learning; eventually, among these students, there are programs to implement their skills. This means they have learned how to apply theoretical knowledge; thus, schools provide their graduates with relevant programs. The same model may be applied to technical communication programs. A project that involves hands-on usage of tools and technologies that are significant to technical communicators would present a clear pathway from the classroom to practice. Thus, this would set up TC students with the capability of meeting the minimum demands of the industry just as the students from computer science meet.

The modern workplace requires more than writing simple and clear documentation from technical communicators. As the corporate world grows more dependent on digital platforms, the technical communicator's role has evolved to include curating social media content, pushing SEO, and developing content strategy. These roles require a working knowledge of digital marketing and analytics, as well as strategic foresight. This expertise should be integrated into TC curricula to allow students to handle these responsibilities hands-on. With a growing dependence on digital platforms in the corporate world, it would be necessary for TC curricula to offer extensive modules on digital communication. This would cover social media management, content strategy, SEO, etc. The modules should be designed to teach students the technical aspects of using these platforms and motivate them to think strategically about how digital can be used to push a corporate agenda. I encountered some of these tasks during my internship, and I believe integrating these aspects into the TC curricula will prepare students for the working environment. Balancing the practical aspects

of digital communication with the theory ensures that graduates have the integrated skillset necessary to flourish in the job market.

These few minor changes in the curriculum are designed to make the educational experience of TC students more dynamic and better responsive. Integrating corporate contexts does not suggest a deviation from its foundational humanistic roots. I use the term “hybridizing” to suggest a mixed-method approach to TC pedagogies. These changes will make TC programs more attractive to prospective students and more relevant to the needs of the modern corporate sector.

Conclusion

This study has shown the imminence of integrating corporate elements into TC curricula. When I refer to the corporate element, I am talking about the hands-on experience that the vibrant corporate industry apparently calls for. The objective here is to respond quickly to the changing demands of contemporary labor markets without forfeiting the humane aspect of the discipline. In doing so, students who find themselves faced with career-specific challenges build on an already robust academic foundation garnered from abilities like digital literacy and virtual teamwork, as well as the other emerging technological competencies that are taught by Technical Communication Programs.

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