Introduction. Examples of Components of Technical and Professional Communication's Identity

Lisa Melonçon
Clemson University

On January 29, 2025, The Society for Technical Communication (STC) ceased all activities when they filed for bankruptcy. This is a moment that needs to be archived, to be noted because it closes an important chapter for both the professional and academic fields of technical and professional communication (TPC). The STC has been the professional organization of practitioners and academics since 1953 (e.g., Malone 2011, 2013), but as they noted in their email to members, "financial liabilities coupled with falling membership numbers" led to the need to dissolve the organization. As a long-time member—dating back to the mid-1990's when I started my technical communication consulting firm—STC provided vital opportunities to gather in community as professionals interested in technical and professional communication and to share information related to the work of TPC.

In the early days of STC, there was a closer relationship between the professional organization and academics working in higher education. Since the earliest degree programs were created in the same era (ca. 1950s), there was a greater synergy between working practitioners and those academics creating programs. This synergy was in some ways based on the common approach to what technical communication was during those early days of the professional field. The earliest work on academic programs was even sponsored by STC because there was a commitment to connect academic preparation to work being done in the professional world. The first recording of programmatic data can be found in *Academic Programs in Technical Communication* (Pearsall & Sullivan, 1976), and it detailed curricula of 18 programs in TPC. Three subsequent editions of this text were published (Geonetta et al., 1993; Kelley et al., 1985; Pearsall et al., 1981) and the follow-up to these four texts was Michael L. Keene's (1997) collection on "academic programs that work." Using programmatic concerns as a lens to chart the relationship between the STC and higher education also points to when that relationship started to break down.

In the late 1990's and early 2000s, STC experienced its highest membership numbers because of the rise of the Internet and related technologies, and this also marked a period of time when the relationship between the professional

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/TPC-B.2026.2869.1.3

organization and higher education began to wane. Part of this was not only the rise in membership at STC but the related growth in academic programs where faculty's interest and attention had to be focused on the task of program building and increasing research outputs that always correspond with the maturation of an academic field. (Refer to Connors, 1982; Kynell, 2000; Adams 1993 for more historical information.) The economic crisis ca. 2007–2008 seemed to enhance the disconnect between STC and academics teaching and researching TPC. Some efforts were made to bridge the academic and industry divide with STC pre-conferences held at the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication during the 2013–15 conferences. The latter of which even generated an edited collection aptly titled, *Academy-Industry relationships and partnerships: Perspectives for technical communicators* (Bridgeford & St.Amant, 2015). All of this is not to say that academics did not remain connected to STC. Some maintained their membership to ensure access to the journal *Technical Communication* or to access the annual salary survey. Others (like myself) continued to attend and to present at the conference and stay connected through committees and professional networks. But I can attest to the fact that, for sthe last everal years before closing, there were only a handful of academics—and the same ones—that attended the annual STC Summit.

Like any historical documentation, it's important for the future of TPC in higher education to have this history documented to look back to it when we consider ways to move forward as an academic field. Because without a doubt both the academic and professional fields are in a moment of liminality. The most common definition of liminality is one of change that has something existing between two distinct stages, identities, or conditions. While originally used in anthropology in connection with people, academics have expanded this definition to include other cultural or social changes. In TPC, Joseph Jeyaraj (2004) argued that technical writers themselves are "liminal subjects" (p. 15) because liminality is a "state of flux that emerges at a particular stage in temporal process of community" (p. 15). Jeyaraj goes a step further by also noting that rhetoric is a "liminal discipline" because it works alongside other discourses "so that new ideas and fresh knowledge of these discursive practices may emerge" (p. 17). What I appreciate about Jeyaraj's use of liminality is that it opens up new avenues to reconsider the field's identity and its relationships, such as with professional practice.

For too long, TPC has held a too limited view of what a practitioner of TPC actually is and does. The field has relied too heavily on its historical connection to engineering and computer science (e.g., Connors, 1982; Kynell, 1999; Malone, 2015). Both fields are connected to the rise of the Internet and the plethora of practitioners that work to keep the myriad of applications and websites working. Historically, Paul Anderson (1984) attempted to create a model that addressed the typical work done by technical and professional communications across organization types. His work was one of the first I found to directly consider what TPC meant by practitioner. In another example, Mark Haselkorn et al. (2003)

described the range of their current research projects and suggested that technical communication was expanding far beyond traditional areas of writing, editing and production. One can also see this expansion in the increase in research in user experience (e.g., Brumberger & Lauer, 2016; Hunter, 2024; Gonzales & Walwema, 2022; Rose & Turner, 2023) or content management (e.g., Andersen & Batova, 2015; Bridgeford, 2020; Getto et al., 2019). Both of these research trends expand the work of TPC by broadening its definition to include other components, yet keeping the field closely aligned to its historical roots.

One can also see the expanded work of technical and professional communication in some of the workplaces where research has occurred. For example, TPC has solidified work in non-profits (e.g., Hopton &Walton, 2018; Melonçon, 2023), government agencies (Williams & James, 2008; Williams, 2010, 2022) and more traditional technical organizations such as software and coding organizations (e.g., Friess, 2019; Rea, 2021), and health organizations (e.g., Gerdes, 2023; Renguette, 2016). In 2014, Emily January (2014; formerly Petersen) explicitly called on TPC to redefine workplace when she studied mom bloggers. I found resonances of January's call for using households as a site of research similar to other scholars, such as Hannah Bellwoar (2012) and Prashant Rajan (2021) and complementary synergies with Laura Allen's (2022) examination of Black family reunions. Other scholarship that moves boundaries beyond traditional workplaces are small businesses such as an auto repair shop (Cushman, 2015) or worker cooperatives (Edenfield, 2017). All of these expansions to what it means to do "workplace" research are necessary to keep TPC vital and researching areas where the work of TPC occurs. The scholars who expanded where research occurred contributed to expanding what we consider technical and professional communication. It is true that not everything is technical communication, but the field was overdue for recognizing that specialized writing and communication occurs in a large swath of locations beyond more traditional workplaces and organizations.

TPC also has notable examples that explicitly consider practitioners and what practitioners could mean. For example, Matthew B. Cox (2019) considered practitioners in his workplace case study at a national discount retailer's headquarters to directly address LGBTQ practitioners, while Stacey Pigg (2020) also focused on practitioners and their mobile work strategies and practices. Taking a complementary approach to examining workplaces and practitioners need to be noted, Yvonne Cleary (2021) took a global approach. In her book, Cleary discussed the future of technical communication in broad terms, and when read alongside the work mentioned here, an expanding picture of the work and those who perform the work of technical and professional communication begins to emerge. Relatedly, Jeremy Rosselot-Merritt (2020) found from his interviews with practitioners that there was confusion and a sense of outdated ideas of what practitioners do. Moreover, Eva Brumberger and Claire Lauer (2020) collected data on job types and responsibilities to "provide a picture of how typical roles in the technical communication field are likely to operate" (4). They ended creating six

personas that encapsulated the everyday work of different types of practitioners. All of these examples complement and support my insistence of the necessity to expand what TPC means by practitioner.

Expanding what TPC considers to be a practitioner opens new avenues to recognize tacit and everyday knowledge from more diverse locations and peoples. For my purposes in this chapter, practitioner simply needs to be more expansive than it ever has been. Why? Because the majority of students graduating from TPC programs in the US are not working in industries related to hardware or software; most are not working in engineering; many are not landing user experience jobs; most do not need some of the specialized skills (like DITA or programming languages) that they may have needed 10 or even five years ago. Though, of course, they gain a specialized subject matter expertise in these or other technical disciplines! Students graduating from TPC programs are working in expansive positions called everything from technical writer to social media manager to grant writer to copy editor, and even broader titles such as communications manager, project manager, web developer, content writer, promotional writer, distance learning director, and/or medical writer. All these titles are ones that alumi of TPC programs hold.

Thinking of expanding practitioners considers the word's association with practice, and as an "exercise of tendencies to activate greater capacities" (Boyle, 2018, p. 5). If as Casey Boyle claims, practice creates greater capacities then reconsidering what a practitioner is and can be creates greater capacities for TPC's understanding of the work that it does. My aim of expanding practitioner runs complementary to Temptaous Mckoy and her collaborators (2022), who made similar claims about wanting to engage more stakeholders in public feminist projects. Binding together multiple views of practitioner knowledge from different and diverse "organizations" means that TPC has the potential to expand existing knowledge structures with those that are more inclusive. TPC can maintain its connection to practice by expanding what TPC means by "practitioner."

The need to expand what TPC means by practitioner works alongside with the need to reconsider what TPC is and does. Although a number of classic works exist (e.g., Allen, 1990; Dobrin 1983; Faber, 2022; Henning & Bemer, 2016; Miller, 1989), TPC has not recently engaged in sustained conversations about defining, or not, the field. Joanna Schreiber and I (2022) argued that TPC needed to move beyond definitions because definitions exacerbate existing tensions—like those between industry and the academy—without offering ways to address those same tensions. Instead of a definition of TPC, we proposed a shift to thinking about what components make up the field's identity because "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" (Melonçon & Schreiber, 2022, p. 6). Identities then return to the idea of liminality and what it means to change an identity or in this case, to expand it. Further, "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). Schreiber and I (2022) used assemblage theory to bring together the different identities, the different component parts that make up the full range of TPC and to more specifically answer the question, "How can TPC understand its identity to account for the past, present, and future demands of always in flux communication work?" (p. 7). Through Manuel DeLanda (2016), who expanded the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), we came to understand that 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). The ontological emergence recognized "how at any given moment different facets of identity may need to be emphasized over others" (Melonçon & Schreiber, 2022, p. 8). The need to highlight or emphasize facets of TPC's identity aligns with the notion that the field is a liminal one, particularly at this moment. For example, current trends of graduating students landing jobs in UX does not change the definition of the field, rather, it expands TPC to include UX as one of its components. The same is true for recent conversations about social justice and its role in TPC (e.g., Jones 2016; Jones et al., 2025; Walton & Agboka, 2021). Thinking in terms of components that make up identity means there is an expansiveness and inclusiveness to what TPC has been, what it is, and what it may become.

The in-betweenness, the liminal space that both the academic and professional field currently finds itself only points to the previous instantiations of where the field had to pivot, expand, shift and change. If one had to use a single word descriptor of technical and professional communication, it would have to be resilient. The field and its identity and what have comprised that identity has always been responsive to change in industries and practices. The resilience of the field is a testament to its ability to be flexible and adaptable, which has always been one of TPC's hallmarks. The chapters in this book illustrate a range of topics and approaches that are all essential component parts of TPC's identity that includes both professional practice and the academic field. The chapters all point to the resilience of the field as they take old concepts and new concepts and place them firmly within the auspices of the work of technical communication.

Overview of the Chapters

The volume opens with two chapters on the newest facet, or a new interpretation of one of the oldest facets, of the field's identity: technological literacy through the lens of artificial intelligence (AI). Alisa Bonsignore reviews the limited data available on the environmental impacts of AI technologies and the substantial carbon footprint. It offers TPC its first field-specific look at the costs of this energy- and emissions-intensive technology. She calls for TPC to consider these costs on a case-by-case basis when balancing the merits and drawbacks of incorporating AI in technical communication. Hers is a much-needed pragmatic view to assist TPC teachers and practitioners to think through AI.

In the collaborative chapter written by Amber Hedqust, Mark Hannah, and Heidi Willers, they take on the topic of using AI within the process and practice of research. They report on the experiences and responsibilities of an AI Facilitator: a member of a collaborative team responsible for integrating AI in research workflows. Outlining the responsibilities of an AI Facilitator demonstrates the substantive role that a technical communicator can play in managing and shaping human-AI interactions. While their study offers insights into how to integrate AI into research, Hedquist and her collaborators also affirm the centrality of managerial oversight in human-AI collaboration, while highlighting how TPC researchers can expand their facilitative roles to support such collaborations

We have a trio of chapters that take existing components of TPC's identity, and they provide an update, of sorts, to them. Tim Giles completed an integrative literature review to work toward an answer to the question, should readability formulas be included in TC research, or in the TC practitioner's toolkit? Using literature in TPC and in accounting, Giles works through the current debates of readability formulas.

Building on his previous research, Yoel Strimling considers a theory to practice approach to improve technical documentation. Using a pilot study looks at documentation quality (DQ) by applying the Kano Model of customer satisfaction to it. The aim is to develop a more reliable way to collect DQ feedback and metrics, as well as provide evidence-based resources for teaching students how to write quality documentation. Strimling concludes with a foundation for developing robust feedback mechanisms, metrics, and teaching resources to apply the Kano Model's well-established methodology to DQ.

Prioritizing content is an important part of developing a content strategy. As a research method for websites, card sorting has most frequently been used to categorize content and create an information architecture. In this chapter, using a user experience/user-centered design methodology, Nicholas Carrington investigates how useful card sorting would be for prioritizing topics as part of developing a content strategy. The results suggest that web writers, content strategists, and technical communicators who have identified appropriate topics can use card sorting to help them prioritize their content

The next two chapters both contribute in meaningful ways to TPC's long standing emphasis on visual communication from two different perspectives. Joanna Wolfe, Juliann Reineke, and Karen Stump focus their attention on how best to encourage presenters to adopt new slide design models. Using presentation slides created by students in a senior capstone Chemistry course over three iterations of presentation design workshop, the research team compared different approaches that encouraged students to revise their slides following effective practices.

Nicole St. Germaine examines the Norwegian use of wayfinding design and to explore ways in which technical communicators can learn from this style of design to create more effective visuals. St. Germaine examines 451 examples of Norwegian wayfinding and compared them with equivalent signs in the US for

reference. Then, St. Germaine examined how the Norwegian signs matched up with the principles of effective wayfinding, and she recommends that American and Western technical communicators and graphic designers could utilize many of the techniques utilized by Norwegian wayfinding designers to make their signs more recognizable and readable.

The next two chapters take different linguistic approaches to gain insights into two common genres of TPC's identity. In both cases, the authors use student work from a TPC classroom to gain insights into effective practices in writing specific TPC genres. Looking at the linguistic features of popularized science texts, Jordan Batchelor and Jordan Smith compare the lexicogrammatical features of student-written scientific reports with science press releases (SPRs). They compared a corpus of SPRs with a corpus of student-written scientific reports, and the features identified as key for both corpora were grouped according to their functional themes. They present six recommendations for teachers, students, and practitioners who want to mimic the style of SPRs as a form of science popularization.

Using the final report assignment in a TPC service course, Mike Duncan, Ashleigh Petts, Jillian Hill, and Andy Hill study how paragraphs function in technical report genres and reflect student notions of persuasion. They used a corpus of 1937 paragraphs from 74 student-authored recommendation reports coded at the sentence level by position (heading, sentence, list item, table, and image) and structure (the rhetorical function of the sentence within the paragraph). Their findings point to recommendation for instructors and practitioners alike

Breman Vance and Erica Stone offer a text mining analysis of job ads that focus on examining the expectations and perceptions of work in the field of technical writing. They created a corpus of 4,597 unique advertisements using the search terms *Technical Writing* and *Technical Writer* during their study's time frame, and they analyzed the corpus using distant reading and text as data methodologies. Their findings point to several implications for professional development, higher education, and job seekers, and it highlights several opportunities for reflecting on and studying the practices, priorities, and opportunities in technical writing.

In a case of last, but definitely not least, the volume ends with Ed Malone's chapter that does magisterial archival work to illustrate the vital history of Black technical communicators from the 1940s through the 1960s who worked in U.S. government and industry during the profession's formative decades. Employing the antenarrative method of *microstoria*, the study emphasizes the individual stories of practitioners who have been largely invisible in the field's recorded history. The project offers the first attempt to compile a registry of mid-20th-century Black technical communicators, presenting reconstructed historical and biographical details that shed light on their professional lives and experiences

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One of the practical results of STC's closing was the simultaneous closing of the organization's journal, *Technical Communication*, which has long been
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considered one of the key journals in the field (e.g., Boettger & Lam, 2013; Carradini, 2022; Friess & Boettger, 2021; Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019). That meant work that had gone through peer review in the journal, but not yet published, did not have an immediate home. In a conversation with *Technical Communication*'s last editor-in-chief, Miriam F. Williams, I offered to move those pieces into this collection. The WAC Clearinghouse accepted the existing peer reviews, and we moved the project into the first stages of publication. I was delighted that authors agreed with this solution because the chapters in this collection highlight the breadth of what is technical and professional communication in our current moment.

The liminality of this moment reminded me of Williams' (2021) editorial, *"To Pen Bridges"* where she envisioned *Technical Communication* as a bridge between practitioners and academics—an outlook shaped by her own career trajectory as both a practitioner and a scholar. Before entering academia, Williams worked in policy implementation, managing large-scale plain language and regulatory writing projects, and she credited *Technical Communication* with helping her navigate that work. That dual perspective fueled her call for more lesson drawing and genuine collaborations that treat practitioners and academics as co-researchers rather than separate audiences. She also emphasized that the journal must advance social justice and inclusivity by widening participation and adopting equitable review practices. This collection carries forward Williams' vision, bringing together chapters authored by practitioners, academics, and practitioner–academic teams, and demonstrating that the future of technical and professional communication depends on embracing liminality itself—the productive spaces between traditional boundaries where new knowledge emerges. The chapters are examples of different components of TPC's identity, and they serve as instantiations of the diversity of topics, locations, and approaches to what technical and professional communication is a quarter way through the 21st century.

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