Article

The Technical Communicator as Advocate: Integrating a Social Justice Approach in Technical Communication

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Abstract

This article argues for the need for a social justice approach to technical communication research and pedagogy. Given previous calls by scholars in technical and professional communication (TPC) for an attention to diversity, inclusion, and equality, the author examines the place and purpose of social justice in TPC and provides useful approaches for promoting a more genuine and critical interrogation of how work in TPC impacts the human experience.

Keywords

technical and professional communication, social justice, inclusion, diversity

> It is no longer merely the idealist or the doom-ridden who seeks for some controlling force capable of challenging the instrumentalities of destruction. Many are searching.
>
> —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963/ 2000)

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In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published *Why We Cannot Wait* as an in-depth explanation of the necessity for social reformation as it related to the condition of Blacks in the United States. The work highlighted the political, social, and economic conditions of Blacks at the time, including concerns such as desegregation, voting legislation, mass incarceration, and economic inequity. Although King's text was written over 50 years ago, many of the same problems mentioned earlier represent very real concerns today. In fact, news headlines over the past few years mirror much of what King laments in the 1960s United States: minority oppression, a flawed criminal justice system, strained international relations, and disenchantment with our government.

Scholars in technical and professional communication (TPC) are beginning to recognize contemporary exigencies and acknowledge that they cannot sit idly by in the midst of such sociopolitical and socioeconomic strain. For example, Haas (2012) emphasizes the importance of considerations of race in TPC research and pedagogy and Jones, Savage, and Yu (2014) call for more attention to issues of diversity and social justice, both nationally and internationally, in the field. In fact, more scholars are searching for ways to address social justice from within our field. Work in this area includes Williams (2013), Williams and Pimentel (2014), and Sapp, Savage, and Mattson (2013). As these scholars demonstrate, reconsidering research and pedagogical practices is a grassroots way for integrating considerations of diversity (a focus on the inclusion of varied perspectives and viewpoints) and social justice (critical reflection and action that promotes agency for the marginalized and disempowered) into TPC pedagogy and scholarship. This social justice perspective must not be purely descriptive but actively integrated into the research and pedagogy of our field in a way that promotes social change on a broader level.

One way for TPC to engage issues of power and legitimacy is by taking a critical stance toward social justice and diversity, as it is represented in instruction and scholarship in our field. Specifically, TPC needs to integrate a Freirean perspective into the field's approach to social justice. Friere's (1996) emphasis on oppression, disenfranchisement, and privilege expands Blyler's call for "allying technical communication [instead] with grassroots initiatives for empowerment" (p. 162). A critical approach to diversity and social justice helps to legitimize TPC by providing scholars with a way to acknowledge the impact of communication as a way of mediating the human experience. Further, this approach encourages scholars in TPC to address issues of power and agency as they manifest in communicative practices and texts. I suggest that integrating a social justice perspective is necessary for further legitimizing the field of TPC and interrogating how TPC can be complicit in reinforcing which perspectives and whose experiences are valued and legitimized. To that end, this article:

- Discusses a working definition for social justice in TPC
- Argues for the integration of social justice in TPC theory and pedagogy, and

- Provides a brief overview of approaches that scholars may find useful in facilitating the integration of social justice in the field.

Legitimizing the Field: Social Justice and a Humanistic Perspective

In the introduction of *Power and Legitimacy in Technical Communication: The Historical and Contemporary Struggle for Professional Status*, Savage (2003) notes that the legitimization of our discipline is tied to the historical roots (political, economic, and social environments) from which the field of technical communication was born. Savage asserts that

> [O]ur identity seems to be tied to the modern origins of the field, that is, the 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, even whether it is written or not. (p. 3)

The field of technical communication "emerged in industrial contexts," and these historical roots, which are embedded in theses industrial practices, beliefs, and ideals of the early 20th century do not naturally have a focus on social justice and human rights (p. 4). Within the context of the industrial revolution, attention was focused on efficiency, expediency, and streamlining processes, not the human experience. In fact, the early 20th century was the historical setting for some of the most egregious human rights and labor violations in the United States. However, as Johnson-Eilola (1996) acknowledges, TPC must necessarily move "beyond the technology and toward the social contexts and processes" (p. 270). At this point in history, scholars concerned with the social, economic, and political implications of their work must now consider ways to critique, intervene in, and create communicative practices and texts that positively impact the mediated experiences of individuals.

A move toward integration of social justice into technical communication theory and pedagogy may be challenging, but it is necessary. Fortunately, technical communicators are used to grappling with reenvisioning and refocusing to engage with concepts that become important and impactful in the discipline and to society at large. Similar to the manner in which scholars pushed for the integration of ethics into technical communication research and pedagogy (see Dragga, 1997) that resulted ethics becoming commonplace in TPC studies and instruction, scholars must now encourage a reconceptualization of the field to incorporate contexts of social justice and human rights. Acknowledging the social impacts of communication legitimizes TPC as a field that fully understands, appreciates, and addresses the social contexts in which it operates. TPC scholars entering conversations about diversity and social justice issues

that are important on national and global levels can help to further legitimize our field by providing a basis for scholars to begin to critically examine how texts and technologies have an impact on the human experience. This participation in such conversation can empower members of the field but also help scholars to empower individuals who are disenfranchised and marginalized.

A Humanistic Perspective

So, what must be done on a practical level? How do we move forward to further legitimize our field and empower our scholars but also value and legitimize other perspectives and experiences? Answering these questions calls for scholars to become attuned to what it means to call our field "humanistic" and how such a perspective relates to the human experience (how individuals experience the world in which they live). To be humanistic is to, as emphasized by Miller (1979), understand that technical communication is not neutral or objective. Instead, technical communication is political and imbued with values. Technical communication reflects certain perspectives, viewpoints, and epistemologies. As such, technical communicators must be aware of the ways that the texts and technologies that they create and critique reinforce certain ideologies and question how communication shaped by certain ideologies affect individuals.

A method for raising awareness about the impact of technical communication on individual experiences is to adopt a Frerian perspective as a framework for rethinking the field. Considering the human experience from a Freirean perspective emphasizes the humanistic possibilities of the field. Freire (1996) asserts, "[H]uman beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor" (p. 106). In a Freirean sense, our experience as human "lies in action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world" (p. 107). This means that we are responsible for not only investigating how we and others interact in the world, but we must also reflect and seek to make positive change. Embracing this obligation to make positive change not only empowers TPC scholars, but it empowers others as well. This perspective legitimizes TPC as a field that has pragmatic, meaningful implications that move beyond theoretical and pedagogical approaches to communication by taking up a more human-focused approach. Simply put, such a perspective allows TPC to make a difference in the lived experiences of others.

This recasting of the field should not be a far-fetched ideal for technical communicators. In fact, the human experience has been and should continue to be a core concern for scholars in the field. To be more specific, past technical communication scholarship has addressed issues of power and ideology and has examined how these concepts impact how communication is created (Dragga & Voss, 2001), transformed (Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993), and used to create rhetorical and material conditions (Scott, 2003). For example, in *Ideology and*

the Map: Toward a Postmodern Visual Design Practice, Barton and Barton (1993) argued that "visual signification serves to sustain relations of domination . . . ideology performs such service with a Janus face—it privileges or legitimates certain meaning systems but at the same time dissimulates the fact of such privileging" (p. 49). Slack et al. (1993), in turn, examine the ways in which technical communicators should be considered as articulators of meaning and thus empowered in their work. These texts illustrate some ways technical communicators can seek to understand both how we can be empowered as practitioners and researchers as well as seek ways to empower others—those affected by our work and the work of others.

In essence, TPC can consider the "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols" that promote oppression (marginalization, disenfranchisement, and disempowerment) (Young, 1990, p. 56). We can also consider how hegemonic practices and texts (like regulatory writing and state laws) can reinforce racial discrimination, subordinate, and objectify (Williams, 2010). We must examine the design and dissemination of communication critically with a focus on understanding how oppressive conditions can be rearticulated and reinforced. This approach is important because as Freire notes, "the oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination" (p. 40). This transformation impacts and includes people, language, symbols, and texts.

Deconstructing and dismantling hegemonic ideologies helps to remove the objectifying power of the dominant, enabling focus to turn to human experience. Consider, for instance, disciplines like user-experience, human-centered design, computer-supported cooperative work, and human–computer interaction that are related to traditional technical communication. Each discipline uniquely addresses the human experience in some way. For example, computer-supported cooperative work examines how individuals coordinate to complete work while using technologies and human-centered design places emphasizes on how systems, technologies, and texts can be designed around humans by including stakeholder groups in the design process from conceptualization to evaluation. In addition, consider the theories that scholars and practitioners in our field employ. For example, theoretical perspectives like critical-cultural studies (Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2007), activity theory (Potts, 2013), and rhetorical approaches (Miller, 1991) are all concerned with the human experience—how individuals experience the world, how individuals act in the world, how individuals persuade and are persuaded, and how individuals transform and are transformed by being situated in the world. It should not be surprising then to call for a more nuanced understanding of what it means that the field of TPC is foundationally humanistic. To this end, scholars should now, *at this historical moment*, engage more fully with this humanistic perspective. As Freire (1996) urges, as thinkers and scholars, as "dialogical" individuals, in order to truly transform the human experience to be one that is more just and equitable, we must reenvision what it means to be students and

teachers (p. 72). In this sense, we must think about what we can offer as scholars, seeing ourselves as both students and teachers in our craft and reenvisioning what it means to humanize communication in the 21st century.

If we are truly concerned with the legitimacy of our field (a humanistic discipline), we must also acknowledge that it then becomes necessary to directly engage with issues of injustice, inequality, and dehumanizing forces. To address the practical challenge of integrating social justice, it becomes imperative for scholars within our field to begin from a common starting point: a definition of what constitutes social justice research and pedagogy in technical communication.

Defining Social Justice in TPC

Building from Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996) definition of social justice as advocacy for the underresourced, Jones and Walton (forthcoming) argue that

> social justice research in technical communication investigates how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced. 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.

A respectful approach values and legitimizes the experiences and perspectives of others (especially populations that are often silenced and marginalized). Importantly, this definition also acknowledges agency of the oppressed, which can be considered a rhetorical space of opportunity for subjects to negotiate, resist, and act (Koerber, 2006; Scott, 2003). Moreover, it acknowledges that social justice research, "attend[s] to inequities and equality, barriers and access, poverty and privilege, individual rights and the collective good, and their implications for suffering" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 359). Further, Jones and Walton's definition engages the concept of oppression and the oppressed by acknowledging that agency can be amplified and promoted but not foists upon an individual or groups of individuals. This definition hinges on the Freirean concept of oppression as ontological, but remediable.

Some may view oppression as a strong word. Conceptually, however, this term encompasses those who are disenfranchised, marginalized, othered, and silenced in systemic ways (e.g., through laws, regulations, and ingrained discriminatory practices). It addresses privilege and power and acknowledges that the oppressed can be from any demographic, ethnic group, age group, religious background, or culture. In this way, the concept of oppression directly engages with the notions of power and legitimacy in two important ways. First, oppression assumes a lack of power and challenging oppression (as defined earlier) provides a space for and the enactment of agency (both on the part of the challengers and those who

are oppressed). Second, oppression devalues and delegitimizes the experiences and concerns of specific groups. The aforementioned definition of oppression acknowledges this systemic silencing and devaluing, raising awareness of marginalizing practices, and encouraging critical intervention. By adopting this definition of oppression as a basis for technical communication research and pedagogy, scholars can engage issues of power and legitimacy from within the field.

It is important to note that oppression is not one-dimensional and can occur in many forms and on different levels. Young (1990) posits that oppression is not a singular concept, instead oppression "names in fact a family of concepts and conditions, which I [Young] divide into five categories: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence" (p. 56). Further, often oppressive conditions are intersectional. This means that oppression is interrelational and that an individual affected by one type of oppression may also be impacted by other types of oppression. Defined in this way, oppression impacts a large swath of individuals and "designates [that] the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer is not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (p. 56).

Within this context, Young argues that oppression "is structural, rather than the result of people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (p. 56). This means that it proves difficult for an oppressed individual to transform his or her own lived experience because the individuals' actions and choices do little to change the environment in which the individual exists. Instead, transformation must be collective and purposeful. Along with praxis, agency and advocacy are required. Oppression then is central to the definition of social justice in TPC because understanding that oppression must be addressed collectively by enhancing and supporting the agency of others is foundationally humanistic. Further, if technical communicators are truly advocates (Dawson, 2011), we must then ask ourselves how we should go about teaching our students to question power relations and address socially unjust situations? How should our research address power in socially unjust situations? How can we, as technical communication educators and scholars, *not* concern ourselves with "the unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols" in communication that impacts the human experience on a daily basis? (Young, 1990, p. 56). As I have advocated in other scholarship (Jones, forthcoming), employing the use of Freire's and Young's approaches to oppression can be a valuable starting point for considering how social justice can be addressed in TPC research and pedagogy.

Useful Approaches for Integrating Social Justice in TPC

At this point, in the text, I have reviewed a definition of social justice in TPC. I have also argued that technical communicators must integrate a social justice perspective into their scholarly inquiry in order to further legitimize the field and

empower TPC scholars as well as other. This shift in perspective positions TPC as legitimately and credibly humanistic in focus. It also encourages scholars to perceive their work as advocacy (broadly defined), promoting a more genuine and critical interrogation of how our work impacts the human experience. Technical communicators have the content knowledge, the responsibility, and the power and potential to address issues of social justice and equality through their research and pedagogy (Rude, 2008, p. 268). Next, I discuss approaches that technical communicators can practically implement in order to integrate a social justice focus into their work.

It is important to note that I make little distinction between which perspectives are considered theoretical or pedagogical. This is done with purpose. Freire notes that one of the most damaging ideals to critical approaches of scholarly inquiry is the student–teacher dichotomy. According to Freire (1996), "education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (p. 53). Freire discussed the student–teacher dichotomy in relation to the classroom, but also how it manifests in the world, asserting that "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 53).

To be clear, I do not argue that there is no difference between pedagogy and theory. Instead, I posit that extending a Freirean perspective of oppression and applying a similar lens to both research and pedagogy emphasizes that research and pedagogy are two sides of the same coin. Instead of identifying a particular perspective as exclusively useful to research or pedagogy, or focusing on classroom practice specifically, I encourage scholars to consider ways in which the approaches presented can be used in either facet.

Although the categories that I present are not mutually exclusive, I have attempted to parse approaches even while acknowledging these categories can be unwieldy and limiting. However, they prove useful as a general entry point to consider perspectives that encourage social justice issues in technical communication. For each broad theme, I present a brief description and note specific ways that the theme can be useful in TPC. In addition, I point to at least one scholar in TPC who has implemented a particular perspective in a manner that engages with the concepts of oppression and social justice (even if not explicitly named).

Decolonial Approaches

Decolonial approaches present a way of countering traditional, oppressive epistemologies. One important feature of a decolonial approach is acknowledging that though some scholars are convinced that the goal of their scholarly work is "serving a greater good 'for mankind', or serving a specific emancipatory goal for an oppressed community," worldview, perspectives, experiences, and ways of

learning and knowing vary greatly across cultures and individuals (Smith, 1999, p. 3). In this sense

> belief in the ideal that benefitting mankind is indeed a primary outcome of scientific research is as much a reflection of ideology as it is of academic training. It becomes so taken for granted that many researchers simply assume that they as individuals embody this ideal and are natural representatives of it when they work with other communities. (Smith, 1999, p. 3)

A decolonial approach or developing a "decolonizing framework" supports "taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively do[es] not help people to improve their current conditions" (Smith, 1999, p. 3). Giving voice to the marginalized and deconstructing oppressive conditions requires praxis. Praxis, as defined by Freire, is "reflection and action which truly transform reality" (p. 81). Key to the concept of praxis and oppression is dialogue—a "critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action" (p. 47). Haas (2012) echoes the importance of dialogue in decolonial approaches as she notes that

> decolonial methodologies and pedagogies serve to (a) redress colonial influences on perceptions of people, literacy, language, culture, and community and the relationship therein and (b) support the *coexistence* of cultures, languages, literacies, memories, histories, places, and space—and encourage *respectful and reciprocal dialogue* between and across them. (p. 297, emphasis added)

Thus, decolonial practices seek coexistence and reciprocal dialogue. Smith (2005) and others, including hooks (1994), assert that decolonial methodologies allow for the creation of alternate or new ways to conduct research and scholarly inquiry. Further, hooks (1994) states the decolonial methodologies promote "breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experiences" (p. 5). Employing the use of decolonial research methodologies can aid technical communicators in exposing and deconstructing hegemonic practices and perceptions in texts. Decolonial research perspectives to consider are narrative, historical and archival research, and critical race theory.

Narratives. Narratives are gaining ground as valuable tools for research and pedagogy in TPC. In 1999, Perkins and Blyler contended that narrative "is implicated in politics and power" (p. 7). Further, the authors quote Goodall (1994)

> I have learned that my position in the narrative arena is inherently a *political* one, and that every act I undertake as a teacher, writer, speaker, or researcher is either complicit with the *status quo* or engaged in the struggle to change it. (p. 185)

In this way, narratives not only allow other voices and points of view to be heard and understood, but it pushes the researcher and scholar to examine his or her own positionality and enactment of power and agency in a reflexive manner. This acknowledgement of positionality can aid the technical communicator in embracing his or her political stance and enhancing agency in others in an attempt to bring about social change.

Since Perkins and Blyler's collection, a number of scholars (including Bridgeford, 2004; Bridgeford, Kitalong, & Williamson, 2014; Moore, 2013) have begun to implement narrative into their scholarly work and offer suggestions for teaching and classroom practice. Further, the use of narrative, for data collection, as a pedagogical tool, and as an analytical lens, as well as a way to report research, has important implications for social justice in technical communication due to its (narrative's) potential for eliminating marginalizing silences.

Historical and archival research. Although I have placed historical and archival research in the same subcategory, I acknowledge the nuance of difference between the two. Historical representations, texts, and records can provide a researcher with insight about how, why, and in what way certain populations have been oppressed and map historical contexts to contemporary situations.

I loosely define historical and archival research as investigations of historical texts, documents, events, stories, and artifacts. These investigations can be hermeneutical or rhetorical. As pointed out earlier in this text, understandings of the historical contexts that shape and impact the human experience are important. William's (2010) *From Black Codes to Recodification: Removing the Veil from Regulatory Writing* is a great example of historical and archival research that maps the historical to the contemporary in order to understand how a marginalized and disenfranchised population is impacted by texts in ways that oppress.

Critical race theory. Critical race theory considers how perceptions and ideals about race (socially constructed) impact a broad range of social, political, economic, and material contexts. Critical race theory encompasses six major themes that deal with the acknowledgement (or lack thereof) of racism, the material, physical, and socioeconomic implications of racism, how minority groups are racialized, and assumptions about identity and competencies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 7–10).

In relation to TPC, Haas (2012) employs the use of critical race theory in her scholarship and in her classroom and notes that "critical race theory can work toward more culturally responsible understandings of how race and ethnicity influence technical communication theories, methodologies, pedagogies, and practices" (p. 284). Furthermore, she asserts that "critical race theory helps us to understand that all writing is subjective and influenced by our race as well as

other intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, generation, sexuality, ability and disability, and religion and spirituality" (p. 284).

Other scholars addressing race in TPC include Johnson, Pimentel, and Pimentel (2008). Also, in 2014, Williams and Pimentel published an edited collection, *Communicating Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Technical Communication*. Furthermore, critical race theory allows researchers in TPC to deconstruct how texts are used to empower or further oppress certain racial groups. Haas's (2012) work is an exemplar text that employs critical race theory to engage concepts of justice and oppression.

Feminist Approaches

The theme of feminism encompasses a number of approaches including feminist rhetorics and Black feminist thought. In general, feminist approaches seek to examine and foster ways to promote gender equality. According to bell hooks (1981), feminism should be defined broadly and aims to "want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression" (p. 195).

Feminist approaches are useful to technical communicators because they allow researchers to examine a research question from a variety of entry points. Feminist approaches can best be characterized as a collection of tools that can be applied. As Oleson (2005) acknowledges "feminism and feminist qualitative research remain highly diversified, enormously dynamic, and thoroughly challenging" (p. 235). In this sense, feminist approaches should be understood as diverse and varied. There is no one feminist approach. Depending on stance and paradigm, feminist acceptance of or rejection of certain concepts or ideals vary greatly.

Feminist research and feminist rhetorics. Oleson (2005) asserts that feminist research "problematizes women's diverse situations as well as the gendered institutions and material and historical structure that frame those" (p. 236). Feminist rhetorics integrate a rhetorical perspective into the examination of the structures that Oleson mentions. Moreover, "it refers the examination of the problematic to theoretical, policy, or action frameworks to realize social justice for women (and men) in specific contexts" (p. 236). Feminist research is not only interpretive, but it promotes reflection and action.

Feminist research can provide the technical communicator with a way of interrogating and investigating the human experience from the point of view of those oppressed. In addition, feminist research can inform action and potential ways to redress miscarriages of justice and equality by privileging silenced voices and marginalized points of view. Lay (1991) posits that feminist research has six main characteristics: "celebration of difference, theory activating social change, acknowledgement of scholars' background and values, inclusion of

women's experiences, study of gaps and silences in traditional scholarship, and new sources of knowledge" (p. 350). These characteristics align well with Freire's concept of oppression and identify specific ways to address oppression through critical and careful humanization of the oppressed.

Technical communication scholars have used feminist approaches to examine feminism in the field of technical communication (e.g., Thompson, 1999, 2004), feminism and technology (see Durack, 1997; Koerber, 2000), feminism and pedagogy (for instance, Brasseur, 1993; Crabtree & Sapp, 2004), and feminism and mentoring (e.g., Haas, Tully, & Blair, 2002). As Lay (1991) notes, inclusion of women's experiences is important for feminist and feminist researchers.

Feminism has been critiqued for taking a monolithic approach to gender and how gender impacts questions about what it means to be woman, consideration of the experiences of women, and acknowledgement of culture, race, class, and nationality. To this end, other strands of feminism have also been proven to be useful and provide an alternative way of researching.

> Major strands that continue to sustain complexities in feminist research include work by and about specific groups of women (women of color, gay and lesbian/queer women, and disabled women) and approaches to the study of women (post-colonial, globalization, standpoint theory, postmodern theory, and deconstructive theory). (Oleson, 2005, p. 241)

These other strands emphasize intersectionality and the interrelatedness of class, gender, race, nationality, and other areas in which individuals can be underresourced.

Critical race feminism: Chicana feminism, Asian feminism, and Black feminist thought. These three types of feminism (Chicana, Asian, and Black feminism) and other types of feminism that address both issues of race and gender were all born out of a need for women of color to have a voice in the feminist movement as it related directly to their plight as gender and racial minorities. Garcia (1989) asserts that "social inequality for women of color was [is] multidimensional" (p. 220). Each type of feminism addressed concerns specific to women in ethnic and racial groups:

- Chicana feminism gained popularity between 1970 and 1980 (Garcia, 1989). Garcia notes that, born out of the Chicano movement, "Chicanas began to investigate the forces shaping their own experiences as women of color" (p. 218).
- Bow (2011) notes that for

> Asian American women as for other women of color, one upshot of multiple subject positioning is the often competitive relationship between feminism and cultural nationalism. The 'either-or' view that one's primary identity must be based either in peoplehood or in sisterhood sets up a mutually antagonistic opposition. (p. 26)

- Patricia Hill Collins (1999) characterizes the purpose of Black feminist thought "to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it . . . to empower African–American women with the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (p. 22). Further, Collins asserts that "black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women's particular needs" (p. 22).

Feminism from the perspective of women of color can be a useful lens for technical and professional communicators that seek to understand oppression from the standpoint of the oppressed in order to affect change. Furthermore, it allows scholars to more fully understand the intersectional and interrelation aspect of oppression and how texts can further disempower and marginalize.

Participatory Approaches

Participatory approaches are perspectives that aim to encourage full collaboration among researchers and participants in the design of research studies, scholarly inquiry, and pedagogy. Participatory approaches can be based within academia or within the community. I use the term participatory research broadly and include research methods that have an active social change agenda (like participatory action research and community-based research) and methods that can be used in the classroom (like service-learning).

Participatory action research. McIntyre (2007) posits that participatory action research aligns well with a number of theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, including a Freirean perspective. "Freire's theory of conscientization, his belief in critical reflection as essential for individual and social change, and his commitment to the democratic dialectical unification of theory and practice have contributed significantly to the field of participatory action research" (p. 3). Further, McIntyre notes that the "collaborative process" involved in participatory action research is "aimed at improving and understanding" in order to support social change (p. ix). In fact, the three distinct affordances of participatory action research are:

> active participation of researchers and participants in the co-construction of knowledge, the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change; and the building of alliances between researchers and participants in planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process. (p. ix)

In technical communication, Agboka (2013) uses participatory action research to examine how failed attempts at localization can promote hegemonic practices. Crabtree and Sapp (2005) also use participatory action methods to develop and implement collaborations among international researchers. The authors

> examine different models of global partnerships, and . . . propose eschewing a charity-type model in favor of a more participatory one and believe in being vigilant to avoid neo-colonial relationships characterized by one-way dissemination of knowledge, opposite flow of resources, and manufactured dependency. (p. 10)

Research studies of this nature allow technical communication scholars to engage in critical dialogue and influence action that supports social justice outcomes. Further, technical communicators can find a participatory action approach suitable for encouraging and supporting democratic ideals (Ornatowski & Benkins, 2004) and creating change in local communities and beyond through the engagement in textual activism (Bowden, 2004).

Community-based research. Community-based research allows researchers to pair with specific communities and work collaboratively to address or solve a problem that directly impacts the community. Community-based research approaches acknowledge that the concept of community and the identity of a community are complex and dynamic. For example, Blythe, Grabill, and Riley (2008) reveal the difficulty in defining and mapping a community, its insiders, outsiders, and stakeholders. Despite this complexity, the tenets central to community-based research are straightforward. As Walton, Zraly, and Mugengana (2015) note, "community-based research aims (1) to share power with research participants, a goal based on values of respect and equitable power distribution, and (2) to generate a more complete understanding of participant perspectives, a goal that supports research" (p. 1). Further, community-based research provides the means for researchers to wholly engage social justice issues in their research by "empowering people who are disenfranchised" and "developing a contextualized understanding of enabling unexpected knowledge to be discovered" (Walton et al., 2015, p. 2).

Service-learning for social justice. Service-learning pedagogy has long been touted as a sufficient perspective for technical communicators interested in improving civic engagement among our students. Although definitions of service-learning vary greatly, scholars tend to agree that "service-learning intentionally focuses on both service experience and academic learning and makes connections between these two components through reflective activities" (Wang & Rodgers, 2006, p. 316). Service-learning as a pedagogical approach and as an area of study for research often emphasizes civic engagement in students, encourages reflection about ways of learning and knowing, and attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For example, Scott (2004) examines how a hybrid approach to service-learning (an approach that also integrates cultural studies) can help to help "to develop students' civic awareness and engagement" (p. 290). Further, Scott offers specific suggestions for classroom practice. As Scott notes, there is great value and benefit in such an approach

to service-learning. For instance, service-learning that emphasizes the idea of fellowship and coalitions can "bring together multiple ways of understanding the world and analyzing the oppressive structures within it," enhancing community alliances and interrogating the connections among pedagogy, theory, and practice (Bell, 2007, p. 14). This approach is useful to technical communication because it foregrounds relationships and genuine collaborations and cooperation with other scholars, participants, and communities. In addition, the participatory approaches encourage empathy as a conduit to understanding and advocacy.

Again, the categories and subcategories discussed earlier are admittedly not inclusive and leave a number of perspectives and approaches unmentioned. For example, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) theoretical perspectives can be useful in interrogating how sexual identity or "disruptive normal sexual identities" interrelate with communicative practices and issues social justice and equality (Cox, 2010, p. 6). Unfortunately, the existence of scholarship that examines technical communication from an LGBTQ perspective or a specifically queer theoretical perspective is sparse. More is needed.

In essence, I offer only a limited number of suggestions for approaches that technical communicators may find useful for integrating research for and about social justice concerns. However, for those who are committed to discovering ways to develop scholarship that contributes to a more just and equitable human experience, the approaches examined provide a starting point. Moreover, these approaches highlight key themes related to the concepts of power and legitimacy in TPC. These overarching themes include concepts of agency and empowerment, notions of voice and silence, and dialogue and praxis.

Perspectives that are most useful are those that attend to power and empowerment in some way. Consideration of these two concepts allows researchers to take the lead in examining ways to promote agency in others as well as take action themselves. Another theme found across the perspectives and approaches discussed earlier is that of providing a voice and valuing other experiences. Approaches that eliminate marginalizing silences and seek to legitimize the perspectives and experiences of others help to position our field as more credible, concerned with the pragmatic, humanistic implications of our work on a societal level. In addition, legitimizing the experiences and perspectives of others encourages researchers to explore other ways of learning, knowing, and communicating while reflexively interrogating whom we seek to empower and by what means we support such empowerment. In a similar vein, approaches like the ones mentioned open and encourage dialogue among various groups and stakeholders, priming a rhetorical space for critical reflection and action (praxis) that supports advocacy goals and creates alliances with populations that have been traditionally marginalized and othered.

Scholars can consider the themes presented earlier and apply practical strategies within their research and pedagogy. These strategies can include the following:

- Exposing hegemonic practices and ideals in the texts that we develop or analyze in order to promote social change
- Incorporating alternate views about learning and knowing into our classrooms' curricula and sharing activities and assignments that encourage consideration of social justice
- Instilling in our students an appreciation that technical communicators are often in positions to explicitly advocate for oppressed groups
- Fostering multidisciplinary and cross-domain collaborations for research, pedagogy, and advocacy
- Engaging critically with cultural concerns within and outside of the academy through service-learning and civic engagement projects
- Considering our users' ways of making meaning and privileging our users' experiences and worldviews by inviting our users into the design process, and
- Improving access to resources (whether textual or material) (Blythe et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Contemporary sociopolitical climates provide an exigence for reenvisioning the field technical communication to fully integrate social justice. Integrating social justice through theoretical and pedagogical approaches "affirms the belief that this field has something to offer" (Rude, 2008, p. 270). As technical communicators move away from considering social justice issues on a purely descriptive level toward research and pedagogy that promotes agency and advocacy and fosters collaboration for and about social change across disciplines, domains, and communities while engaging critical cultural concerns within and outside of the academy, scholars can identify other theoretical and pedagogical approaches that support such goals. There is much work to be done and technical communicators are ideally positioned to impact positive change. As a humanistic discipline, our focus should be squarely on improving the human experience for the oppressed. There are still those oppressed due to their race and ethnicity, their nationality, their gender, their sexual orientation, their educational background, and their economic status. And, for these reasons, as a field, we have waited long enough.

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