Towards a Social Justice Agenda: Learning Outcomes as a Site for Coalition Building

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Abstract. In this short article we share initial efforts made by faculty in the professional and technical writing concentration at George Mason University to redesign the professional and technical writing minor curriculum to equip students with the tools to dismantle unjust and oppressive practices. We provide our three-pronged approach as: a) beginning the conversation through content analysis; b) strategizing revisions to align with social justice goals; and 3) coalition building.

Keywords: Coalition Building, Curricular Change, Learning Outcomes, Programmatic Administration, Professional and Technical Writing, Social Justice

I n this short article we share initial efforts made by faculty in the professional and technical writing concentration at George Mason University to redesign the professional and technical writing (PTW) minor curriculum to equip students with the tools to recognize, reveal, reject, and replace unjust and oppressive practices that are produced, reproduced, and maintained by communication practices and our various institutions (Walton et al., 2019). This exigence to redesign the curriculum was influenced by internal (local) and external (global) forces.

Internally, the president of George Mason, Gregory Washington, the first Black president of the university, recognized the need for institutional reforms. On July 23, 2021, he announced a taskforce on

antiracism and inclusive excellence that will take actionable steps to "address racial inequities" (Washington, 2020) at George Mason University. The taskforce is to reflect on six broad areas: Training and Development; Campus and Community Engagement; University Policies and Practices; Curriculum and Pedagogy; Student Voice; and Research. The taskforce is expected to come up with practices that will amplify the agency of marginalized or underrepresented groups.

The president's initiative aligns with the current upsurge of conversations about social justice in technical and professional communication. Thus, the second force that informed our decision to redesign the curriculum was our disciplinary knowledge about the uptick in research in social justice. Although scholarship in social justice is on the increase, much of those conversations have not influenced pedagogical or curriculum design (Agboka & Dorpenyo, 2022). In other words, while we have seen numerous publications on social justice, curriculum design has yet to keep up with the pace of scholarly conversations in social justice. Agboka and Dorpenyo (2022) documented this development when they analyzed 231 technical communication program websites and found out that only 23 had courses that explicitly discuss social justice.

We wanted curricular change for the PTW minor to be coalitional, so we decided to focus on the learning outcomes of a 300-level course as a productive site to begin this conversation. Our curricular work has been informed by the notion that social justice "explicitly seek[s] to redistribute and reassemble—or otherwise redress—power imbalances that systematically disenfranchise some stakeholders while privileging others" (Haas & Eble, 2018, p. 3) and that social justice works from the assumption "that we are all complicit in injustices and that our only recourse is to engage these injustices overtly, purposefully" (Walton et al., 2019, p. 2). Focusing on the learning outcomes first has allowed us to begin wider curricular change intentionally and deliberately for the PTW minor, while allowing for conversations about social justice to begin through the learning outcomes.

Therefore, our revision responds in part to George Mason University's president's initiative, and in part to the social justice turn in technical communication. We believe that the president's initiative and calls for technical communicators to explicitly address social justice issues are steps towards actions that will fulfill both local and global concerns aimed at uprooting systemic injustice, racism, discrimination, and white supremacy. We believe that we need to develop a curriculum that not only prepares professional and technical communicators to understand or know how to write, but also a curriculum that prepares

students to:
1. understand and address systemic racism and values in a multi-cultural world;
2. intentionally include diverse scholars and voices that contribute to the academy; and
3. help prepare future engineers, technical professionals, and managers to create more inclusive and equitable workplaces/designs.

In subsequent paragraphs, we describe how we have begun to build coalitions that allow us to make incremental changes that can then cascade into broader initiatives, keeping in mind the different institutional mechanisms available to us. We reflected on these questions: How can learning outcomes help us begin the conversation and coalitional support needed to more explicitly address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion? How do we strategically engage with current institutional mechanisms to advance this conversation?

Step 1: Beginning the Conversation - Content Analysis of the 300-level Course

At Mason, the PTW minor has gone through several revisions in the last few years, mostly focused on increasing student participation. More recently, we began discussing the PTW minor as a productive site for centering social justice concerns, which align to the external and internal exigencies named above. In our conversations, we soon realized that rather than begin with the minor, which requires extensive coordination within the institution, we could begin by focusing on one 300-level course, ENGH 388 Professional and Technical Writing. The ENGH 388 professional and technical writing course is a requirement for students who seek to graduate with a PTW minor, but it is also a required course for psychology and computer science majors, so it includes students from a variety of disciplines. This course is a hub for students in engineering, psychology, computer science, writing and rhetoric, film and media studies, business, sciences, literature, and accounting. The course has an online template, assignment sheets, and PhD TAs often teach it and use those resources, which has helped somewhat in standardizing course content and delivery. Depending on the number of TAs available and needs of students, we offer about five sections every semester. In the summer, we offer about four sections. Table 1 below indicates the syllabi we collected and the dates the course was taught. The class helps students to meet these outcomes:

- Be familiar with the major genres of the workplace, including memos, email, proposals, and white papers;
- Be familiar with the basic elements of document design, including principles of accessibility;
- Be familiar with basic visual communication principles;
- Have developed audience awareness and techniques for addressing multiple workplace audiences;
- Be able to work collaboratively and complete projects within deadlines.

Thus, we thought it was important to review syllabi from this class because of the broader outreach work it does at Mason. We also bore in mind the claim Lisa Me.onçon (2018) made in "A Critical Postscript on the Future of the Service Course in Technical and Professional Communication," which notes that the service course "ought to be the touchstone from which we improve as a field—particularly in our programmatic research and development" (p. 202). Because of its broad impact on students and visibility in the university, the course could be a site where we can produce lasting impact and transformation toward equity and inclusion (Bay, 2022; Shelton, 2020).

To see how the learning outcomes reflected current field practices, we performed a content analysis on fifteen ENGH 388 syllabi from courses taught between 2014 and 2021 to see if instructors explicitly included social justice issues, including race and diversity, systemic injustice, marginalization, diversity, and privileging of one world order over the other, disability, translation, multilingualism, access, advocacy, and activism. We sought to look at syllabi from 2014 because it was the year the course was introduced in the department. Unfortunately, as Table 1 shows, we did not receive any document from 2014. This is probably because most of the TAs who taught the class had graduated and faculty had relocated to other universities. We followed the GRAM framework proposed by Schreiber & Melonçon (2019) as we collected the data. That is, we *gathered* documents, *read*, *analyzed*, and *made* sense of our data through content analysis. Content analysis is a highly flexible but systematic, inductive, and rigorous approach researchers use to analyze documents obtained or generated during research. In this process, the researcher uses analytic constructs, or "rules of inference to move from the text to the answers to the research question" (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 27). Following Geoffrey Clegg et al. (2021), we created an initial list of descriptive codes based on three primary criteria: (1) an inductive reading of the program outcomes; (2) considerations of existing literature; and (3) our own situatedness within the field and our home programs. We each analyzed the syllabi separately

and met to discuss our findings. Lourdes' initial content analysis yield-ed 235 codes while Isidore's yielded 225 codes. For the second round of coding, we met to discuss our findings and we noticed we had to merge some of the codes. Before we merged our codes, we separately generated a word cloud of our codes to identify recurring patterns. To generate the word cloud, we copied and pasted our codes into the word cloud generator. Figures 1 and 2 indicate our separately gener-ated clouds, Table 2 captures the codes and outcomes from Lourdes' analysis, and table 3 captures codes and outcomes from Isidore. Table 4 captures our merged codes and outcomes.

Table 1. ENGH 388: PTW course offerings between 2016 and 2021

Semester	Year	Number of syllabi
Fall	2016	1
Fall	2017	1
Fall	2018	1
Spring	2018	1
Summer	2018	1
Spring	2019	2
Summer	2019	1
Summer	2020	3
Spring	2021	4
Total		15

Figure 1. Word Cloud from Isidore's codes

Figure 2. Word Cloud from Lourdes' codes

Table 2. Codes with Lourdes' analysis

Code	Outcome
Professional and technical writing/ communication	28
Rhetoric	21
Writing/writing process	8
Design/document design	22
Oral communication/presentation	2
Professionalization	23
Genres	36
Audience/audience awareness	27
User	4
Technology/tools	3
Scholarly inquiry/research	6
Collaboration	4
Communication	3
Context	6
International	1
usability	9
Visual communication	4
innovation	2
Entrepreneur	2
accessibility	3
Problem solving	2
Grammar	4
Project	1
Planning	1
multimodal	2
Practical/practice	9

Table 3. Codes from Isidore's analysis

Code	Outcome
Writing/write/writing process	12
Communication	14
Context and situations	14
Rhetoric	13
Scholarly inquiry/research	6
Design/document design	16
Present/oral presentation	2
Practice/practical experience	17
Professionalism	10
Genres/professional genres/genre knowledge	32
Professional and technical writing	5
Audience	25
Technology use/technical knowledge	11
Workplace/workplace writing	14
Purpose	1
Social justice	1
International/cultural diversity/global sensitivity	7
Problem solving	2
Collaborative writing/skills	4
Usability/user test	5
Innovation	1
Entrepreneur	1
Accessibility	4
Visual communication	4
Grammar	4

Table 4. Merged codes from Lourdes' and Isidore's analysis

Merged Code	Outcome
Professional and technical writing/communication	33
Rhetoric	34

Writing/writing process/write	20
Design/document design	38
Oral communication/presentation	4
Professionalization	33
Genres/genre knowledge	68
Audience/audience awareness	52
User/user test/usability	18
Technology/tools/technology use/technical knowledge	14
Practical/practice	26
Scholarly inquiry/research	12
Collaboration/collaborative writing or skills	8
Communication	17
Context and situations	20
International/cultural diversity/global sensitivity	8
Visual communication	8
innovation	3
Entrepreneur	3
Accessibility	7
Problem solving	4
Grammar	8
Project	1
Planning	1
multimodal	2
Workplace writing	14
Purpose	1
Social justice	1

As the codes in Tables 2 and 3 and the figures show, ENGH 388 was structured around the six layered literacies for technical writers which was proposed by Kelli Cargile Cook (2002) in her TCQ article "Layered Literacies: A theoretical frame for technical communication pedagogy." The six literacies Cargile Cook proposed include basic, rhetorical, social, technological, ethical, and critical. This framework shows how techni-

cal communicators are trained to learn: the basic skills to communicate well and write clearly; rhetorical skills which help students to appreciate the needs of audiences; collaboration skills; a working knowledge of the technologies that technical and professional communicators use at the workplace and in the classroom; a consideration of stakeholders in a writing situation; and a consideration of how ideological stances and power structures shape the writing situation (Cargile Cook, 2002).

Coming into this research we wanted to see if assignments and readings currently in use aligned with concerns raised by the social justice turn. Specifically, we hoped to see outlines that explicitly addressed one or several of the 4R heuristics proposed by Walton et al. (2019), namely:

- Recognizing injustices, systems of oppression, and our own complicities in them
- Revealing these injustices, systemic oppressions, and complicities to others as a call-to-action and (organization/social/political) change
- Rejecting injustices, systemic oppressions, and opportunities to perpetuate them
- Replacing unjust and oppressive practices with intersectional, coalition-led practices

Although the 4R's framework became operational in the field in 2019, conversations about social justice and diversity were being advanced by numerous scholars (Agboka, 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Popham, 2016) and the expectation was that we would see an orientation towards social justice, even if it was not the focus of the class. Also, while social justice topics may be taught without the learning outcomes explicitly saying so, learning outcomes often impact content for the graduate pedagogy course, the professional development of graduate assistants, and the expectations of faculty new to the course.

From the two diagrams and tables above, one can see that the learning outcomes of ENGH 388 focus on: writing, genre, audience, rhetoric, workplace, design, documents, professionalism, oral presentation, communication, practice, and usability. These terms, we believe, maintain the traditional conversations that enculturate or prepare technical communicators to be good writers or designers at the workplace. To be clear, the social justice turn calls for technical communicators to be able to recognize and openly have conversations about injustice, inequity, racism, marginalization, and activism. The word clouds clearly show a disjuncture between training technical communicators to be mere scribes or translators and technical communicators as critically engaged citizens who are ready to dismantle

unjust practices. We did not see any direct or indirect references to the 4Rs framework, and that is a conversation our program needs to have as we modify the learning outcomes.

Our findings are not specific to George Mason University. They align with findings from Clegg et al.'s (2021) project which analyzed programmatic outcomes from the field of technical communication and identified "rhetoric," "writing," "technology," and "design" as the top four occurrences of their analysis (p. 24). The fact that our analysis reveals a similar trend shows the professional and technical writing course is in tune with broader practices in the field. What is worrying is that a social justice focus is not reflected in any of the codes we have above (only two faculty included readings in social justice, and one assignment was adapted to center diversity and equity concerns but the learning outcomes did not reflect this orientation). And neither does social justice show up in Clegg et al.'s (2021) findings. Findings from our analysis confirm Agboka and Dorpenyo's (2022) claim that our curricular practices are not in tune with the upsurge of social justice scholarship. We believe that research and scholarship must shape pedagogy and curricular practices and vice versa but it appears that is not the case now. We call on programs to make conscious efforts to introduce social justice conversations in their pedagogical practices.

Step 2: Strategizing Revisions to Align with Social Justice Goals

From our analysis of the 300-level course, we have drafted updated learning outcomes which do not require department approval. This allows us to revise the readings and assignments to align them more closely to the revised learning outcomes, and it allows us to talk about the updated learning outcomes, build consensus, and argue for wider changes that require institutional approval. We also analyzed the website description of the PTW minor and noted that it did not include an orientation to social justice. Hence, we proceeded to revise the description of the minor on the website as well as the catalogue description. The catalogue description has been approved by the Undergraduate Committee and it has been updated in the University's system. Revisions to course outlines and assignment goals do not need approval from the Undergraduate Committee so we went ahead and implemented those changes. These new descriptions continue our programmatic work to align the minor more closely to current social justice concerns, while at the same time we continue to build relationships that will allow us to make changes through broader institutional

channels. The next goal is to change the course description and make it more explicitly oriented towards social justice concerns.[1]

Step 3: Coalition Building - Changing the Minor

As we prepare to discuss our findings from the analysis of ENGH 388 syllabi, we are keeping in mind that several recent decisions impact the discussion, and that the discussion will also impact others. The Writing and Rhetoric doctoral program recently hired two new faculty whose expertise includes social justice in technical communication, which will likely impact how the faculty-wide conversation progresses. Our institution is responding to President Washington's call for change, and a new Quality Enhancement Plan is being developed to center community engagement and antiracism, so there is an institutional exigence for change.

At the same time, changes to the service course impact the pedagogy class taught at the doctoral level, the professional development graduate students receive, and the current online templates. These changes are labor intensive, and generally fall to marginalized populations within the program. One important aspect of building coalition and consensus is to ensure that the labor these changes generate are distributed in equitable ways. As Natasha Jones et al. (2021) suggest, the work must be coalitional, iterative, and it should harness the labor of those with more privilege and power (p. 33; refer to Jones et al., 2021, for a comprehensive framework for building social justice initiatives that are pro-Black and antiracist).

The revised description is the first step in a long process. The course is part of the PTW minor, and other courses will have to be revised to orient the minor more explicitly towards social justice concerns. Some of this work is already being done, but we are beginning to recognize the importance of making visible this work. For example, ENGH 380, an introduction to rhetoric and writing course, was taught in fall 2020 with an orientation towards social justice. The course's learning outcomes allowed for the readings to encompass robust theoretical discussion about social justice in writing studies and rhetoric. The next step is to consider how the course may shift more overtly towards these concerns.

Lessons Learned

As we build coalitions and consensus, we have learned that:

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[1] Refer to the Appendix for course descriptions being implemented by one instructor after our conversations.

- Local initiatives are very important in intervening for equitable outcomes. It takes political will to make a shift to a more inclusive curriculum. In our case, the drive for change was amplified by George Mason's president's call to action and a discipline-wide call for a more inclusive curriculum.
- Learning outcomes in a 300-level course with some institutional visibility is a good site for a conversation about curricular impact, given its position in the university and how change may generate productive conversations about other courses in the concentration and across programs.
- Balancing the lengthy process of official approval with coalitional building at lower levels of the institutional structure can generate short-term and long-term ideas and increase potential impact.
- Labor conditions need to be part of any conversation about social justice, particularly when change impacts courses taught by graduate students and contingent faculty.
- TAs and faculty should be provided with resources that prepare them to take on the arduous task of teaching social justice courses and make them meaningful to students. (To this end, we have started putting together social justice pedagogy resources for students, we invited Dr. Natasha Jones to talk about social justice in technical communication with our community in October 2020, and we intend to put together a workshop and invite resource persons to provide practical ways on teaching social justice.)

Revising a curriculum to meet social justice needs is challenging, but the change can happen if local and global contexts provide the needed atmosphere and resources. We can eventually enact policies or redesign curriculums that provide the next generation of students the tools to uproot and identify racism, inequality, and systemic injustice.

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Appendix

Description of ENGH 388 and course outcomes

Professional and technical writing or technical communication is the process of presenting technical, scientific, professional, complex, and civic information in ways that enable people to take clear action to dismantle systems of oppression while centering the voices of multiply marginalized or vulnerable populations. According to the Society for Technical Communication, professional and technical writing is broadly concerned with any form of communication that exhibits any or all of these characteristics:

- Communication about technical and specialized topics, such as health information, vaccines, computer applications, COVID-19, social justice, and antiracism,

- Communication by means of technology, such as through social media, webpages, and help files

- Instructions and procedures about how to do something, such as how to cast a ballot, how to code, how to fix everyday technology breakdowns

In this course, you will learn how to communicate effectively and efficiently in scientific and technical workplaces. You will also learn how to be an innovator and even an entrepreneur, whether you want to work for yourself or work for a company.

This semester, you will learn how to write a variety of workplace documents, including technical descriptions, letters, memos, formal reports, and proposals. You will also learn how to confidently present information in public. To sharpen your communication skills, you will learn how to interpret situations in the workplace; then, you will learn how to use techniques of reader-analysis, organization, style, and page layout to develop documents that address those workplace situations. Whenever possible, you will have the option to compose documents that suit your major and your future career.

Course Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able:

- Recognize, reveal, reject, and replace unjust and oppressive practices

- Identify how your positionality, privilege, and power influence the way you communicate

- Design documents with an awareness of the human needs of

users, paying special attention to accessibility, cultural diversity, and global sensitivity

- Interpret, contextualize, explain, and visualize data sets in specific rhetorical contexts or problems

- Apply a problem-solving approach to any communication task, identifying purpose, audience, and an appropriate production and delivery plan to achieve your goals

- Reveal the organization of their communications by using forecasting and transitional statements, headings, and effective page and document design.

- Arrange material to raise and satisfy readers' expectations, using both conventional and rhetorical patterns of organization.

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