

Chapter 11

Using Learner Centered Pedagogy and Social Justice Pedagogy in Post-Secondary Technical and Professional Communication Writing Courses

Kimberly C. Harper

North Carolina A&T State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the author's approach to implementing social justice and learner-centered pedagogies in a course titled Technical Communication in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter. The author uses the Black Lives Matter movement as a springboard for teaching technical communication students about the responsibilities of workplace writers. Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) make use of a skills-based pedagogy and, at times, omits the importance of providing students with cultural competency skills. However, there is a shift in the field of TPC as some scholars are advocating for the inclusion of topics such as race, culture, gender, and class in pedagogical discussions. Discussed in this chapter are the theories behind the author's pedagogical choices when creating the described course, the student assignments, and the challenges encountered while teaching the course.

INTRODUCTION

When I started teaching in August 2004, I was fresh off a stint in corporate America. I was working as a proposal writer for a software company and was laid off after the company merged with a competitor. As fate would have it, in December 2003, I completed my Master's degree in Technical and Scientific Communication from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and had the 18+ credit hours needed to adjunct teach. I did not know anything about teaching, but it sounded like a reasonable option since the new position required me to create and teach technical writing courses. I walked into my first classroom nervous,

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excited, and somewhat fearful of my students and their expectations. Out of everything I did to prepare for my new career, I never thought about pedagogy nor the student learning styles that I would encounter. I figured I would teach what I learned in corporate America and that would be enough. This seemed like a good plan since I would be sharing with students what was happening in the “real world.” I was not pedagogically prepared for the challenges that lay ahead, so, I took the advice of my Aunt Deloris who told me to “Put those glad rags on, and say I am somebody.” And with that, I walked through the door of academia and began my teaching career.

Looking back, I find that much of what I did that first year and in subsequent years was an amalgamation of what my favorite teachers did in their classes. I attempted to recreate those experiences of inquiry, agency, freedom, discussion, guided correction, and excitement that I encountered. Most people, unless they earn a degree in education or take curriculum design courses, haphazardly fall into their teaching style. Now that I have had the opportunity to be part of the Academy, I understand the importance of a sound pedagogy and why it is more than a “buzz” word that academics use to sound fancy.

I currently teach technical and professional communication (TPC) courses at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (North Carolina A&T), which is a historically black college/university located in Greensboro, NC. When I joined the faculty in 2015 as the director of the technical communication concentration, I was deftly aware of the lack of cultural competencies taught in our current TPC curriculum as well as other program curriculums around the country. Many programs focus on mimicking workplace writing, understanding audience analysis, or usability and design, but students are not always engaged in understanding global competencies. I found a heavy emphasis on computer and software based skill building, with little attention given to the effect culture has on audience, access, and design choices (Selber, 1993). Scholars such as Agboka (2012, 2013, 2014), Dallas (2008), Haas (2012) Harper (2017), Jones (2016), and Williams (2009, 2014), address this discussion but much work needs to be done. And while people are researching and discussing the importance of teaching TCP courses that integrate a skill based need with transnational/international audience and workplace considerations, Pearson Publishing (2010) states “...very little work has been done to successfully incorporate transnational communication into college-level technical communication curricula...” (p.3). To make students competitive and effective writers in the workplace, TPC educators must move past the notion that people live in cultural vacuums where the social construction of knowledge is free of bias and political and ideological influence (Herndl, 1993).

As I began to research different teaching strategies, I came across a variety of approaches that incorporated transnational and international curricular and pedagogical approaches (Savage & Hunt, 2004; Savage & Mateveeva, 2011; Haas, 2012). To help students develop a cultural competence, I decided to use social justice and international and intercultural technical communication to transform my courses into learner centered classes. International, intercultural, and transnational technical communication are variations of the same approach. The goal is to address the global needs and perspectives of writing for a variety of rhetorical situations that are often influenced by cultural needs.

Social justice and international technical communication can help students learn global competencies such as international awareness, appreciation of cultural diversity, proficiency in foreign languages, and high level thinking competitive skills (NEA, 2010). A focus on global competencies can also help TPC programs produce students who are both capable in their technical skill set and culturally competent. In an attempt to respond to this need, I started working to create a pedagogy for our program’s curriculum, and I use the phrase “a culturally situated approach to technical communication,” (Savage & Matveeva, 2011) to serve as a guiding principle. Savage and Matveeva (2011) define this approach as the “...blend-

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