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Revisiting Four Conversations in Technical and Professional Writing Scholarship to Frame Conversations About Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

This article explores four different topics of conversation in technical and professional communication (TPC) scholarship that overlap and connect with contemporary issues in generative artificial intelligence (AI): process and iteration, theory and power, actors and activity, and the social justice turn. The authors offer four nonexhaustive reviews of these conversations, offering insight into key issues and texts that have animated discourse in the field and can directly or indirectly address the complex relationship between TPC work and generative AI.

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Writing is a technology (Ong, 1983). As a field of academic inquiry, technical and professional communication (TPC) has an orientation toward and a rich literature in writing as a technology that is helpful to draw from when we see shifts, even leaps, in what writing technologies can do (Johnson-Eilola, 1996). In this article, we point to four specific scholarly conversations within the field of TPC that correspond with epistemic and technological shifts in both learning and workplaces. We gather them here so that those new to TPC and those in adjacent fields may draw on these conversations for guidance in theorizing and strategizing the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI). We highlight these four conversations as starting places for reading (see Appendix for a reading list of sources from Conversations 1–3) and reflecting on what TPC has dealt with substantively in its recent scholarship and provide ideas about how we, as TPC scholars, might offer our expertise. While each of these had its moment of being the predominant conversation in the field, all are ongoing. We have selectively chosen specific works that can serve as entry points for shaping our understanding of AI and writing and the impact of writing with AI on learning and working.

The four conversations can be understood as moments of reckoning. Perhaps our current moment—characterized by the field's "social justice turn" to matters of equity, identity and representation, and justice—makes this most clear. It is not by coincidence that these topics are ascendant as we grapple with generative AI and its potential to amplify bias, (re)normalize modalities and value structures of language that erase linguistic difference, and spread disinformation.

The expertise our field has built related to the role of technical and professional writing in maintaining structural inequity may prove helpful for understanding how disparities can grow from generative AI. For example, AI could amplify and normalize biases that are (over)represented in the materials it has been trained on (Sun et al., 2023). And generative AI, when presented as a monetized service that may become standard or essential for a competitive labor or learning situation, could widen inequities for those whose access may be limited (Hatzius et al., 2023).

Conversation 1: Process and Iteration

We begin with perhaps the most fundamental concept in TPC and across writing studies: process. The field of TPC is rich with perspectives and frameworks to help writers, readers, and users of information create with words and images. A common element in these frameworks is iteration, a recognition that repetition and recursivity are key elements in writing as a human activity. A key takeaway: repetition helps people to learn and become better readers and writers. With fewer repetitions, as promised by generative AI, what becomes of learning?

Process and Writing Beyond School Settings

The act of interrogating process and iteration goes back to 1977 and more broadly to composition studies, when Emig noted that "writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (p. 122). Emig's work helped to ignite a research interest in empirically observing the activity of writing in order to gain insights from learning more about writers' thoughts, contexts, and decision-making.

In 1986, Odell and Goswami made the compelling case for studying writing in nonschool settings. They argued that "researchers need to examine writing that is not assigned by a teacher and that has a purpose beyond improving writing skill or generating research data" (p. 201) in order to build our collective understanding of writing as a kind of essential human activity in modern life and work. Since then, workplace writing studies have proliferated. These studies extend theories of writing to include the lived experience of people in many different contexts. As researchers, we can draw on this expansion today as we contemplate where, when, and why to use AI writing technologies in everyday writing processes. While the use of AI writing tools may indeed be problematic in many school contexts, for people at work, it can make difficult processes easier, faster, and less expensive. Such nonschool contexts will no doubt make for fascinating research opportunities to come.

Multimodality and Multiliteracies

In 2003, Prior and Shipka proposed a framework for considering an expanded scope of literate activity in order to render the writing process in a more fulsome way—"not for first drafts [but as] a step in a longer and blurrier chain of textual invention and production" (p. 181). As

writers, we map our process, and when success comes, we strive to duplicate it—we develop internal algorithms to deploy again and again. Thus, the use of generative AI would be just one of many steps in the invention, reinvention, and revising that make up the multimodal process of writing.

In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Selber (2004) provided a framework for using three literacies: functional (How does it work?), critical (Why does it work the way it does?), and rhetorical (How can I contribute to the conversation?). Selber wanted to help teachers of writing build and design effective, responsible computer literacy programs (p. xi). What better way to aid faculty in developing such a program than an algorithm—one that provides room for iteration and learning—that can be used by humans to improve it?

In 2019, Borgman and McArdle developed the PARS (personal, accessible, responsive, strategic) framework to help contingent faculty build, write, design, and develop their own online classes. They view "digital technology as an opportunity to take advantage of online spaces already being used by students and refocusing them for improving writing" (p. 11). In doing so, faculty can meet students in spaces they currently inhabit and will inhabit beyond the perceived beta test of the university. Although the framework was developed for course design, it leaves room for iteration and process. The TPC field is devoted to simplifying systems to be more inclusive, to provide space for iteration and equity. Such attention to inclusivity, iteration, and equity should be applied to its pedagogy and research on generative AI.

Practice, Process, and Change With AI

Research conversations in TPC about writing practice must now evolve once more to include nonhuman writing agents as routine participants in the practice. We see this moment as parallel to the conversation that sparked the broader field of writing studies to consider collaborative dynamics, common in workplace settings, not as the exception but rather as the rule for the majority of writers doing the everyday work of composing, reviewing, and revising texts. As writers, we are seldom individual authors and much more often part of larger systems, as Odell and Goswami (1986) showed us: The organization is the author (see Paradis et al., 1986).

As generative AI further complicates this dynamic, possibly even moving into the role of coauthor or author, the human contributions to the writing process will likely shift and evolve. Not everything will change, but the speed of our process steps, such as drafting, will change. The collaborators might change. Where writing occurs and where it is distributed will

continue to change. The lingering lesson from our scholarship on process, however, is that humans will pay a price if we take process shortcuts enabled by technology. That is, with fewer iterations, human learning is lost. And getting a textual result faster may be of little value to TPC because learning is the goal, not speed.

Conversation 2: Theory, Agency, and Power

Technology amplifies power, and it can sometimes distribute it. Powerful people have always had access to agents who can write on their behalf. With AI amplifying and distributing generative capability, some barriers to access will likely fall. But new disparities may just as rapidly appear.

Although *theory*—which we use here as an umbrella term for a set of ideas and concepts concerned with power, representation, culture, epistemology, and the legacies of Marxist politics—might not have the currency it once did within business and technical communication, many will be familiar with its ascendancy and prominence within English departments across U.S. universities (see Berlin, 2003). Eagleton (2003) noted that the body of ideas that came to be known as theory was largely a response to World War II and "had their Roots deep in the age of civil rights and student insurgency, national liberation fronts, anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigns, the emergence of the women's movement and the Heyday of cultural liberation" (p. 24). The explosion of theory and its various expressions and permutations (literary theory, cultural theory, postcolonial theory, etc.) changed the nature of academic inquiry in the humanities. As Eagleton (2003) observed, "The universities which had been the very home of traditional culture, the citadels of disinterested inquiry, became for a fleeting moment, most unusually, the cockpits of culture as political struggle" (pp. 25–26).

When English departments began offering courses in business and technical communication, faculty looked to theory as a productive body of knowledge to outline the shape and aims of their work. In their reexamination of postmodern theory in business and technical communication, Wilson and Wolford (2017) pointed out that much of the discipline's early scholarship "was influenced by the zeitgeist of 1980s and 1990s postmodern theory and drew on postmodern and critical theory to define and redefine, not just workplace roles but some of our fundamental thinking about technical communication" (p. 4). It is unsurprising, then, that Sullivan and Porter's (1993) seminal "Remapping Curricular Geography: Professional Writing in/and English," offers a "postmodern and/or feminist" model of professional writing influenced by Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodern theory (p. 411).

Studying Organizational Contexts Means Reckoning With Power

Considering Sullivan and Porter's (1993) important mapping of the field, people might say that theory was an essential component in shaping the disciplinary identity of business and technical/professional writing as an area of academic inquiry. For example, drawing on Jacques Derrida, Hart-Davidson (2001) argued that "we need theory. By this I mean that the ranks of working professionals *and* academics in technical communication should participate in activity that makes the core expertise of technical communication explicit" (p. 147). Or, in another example, Winsor (2003) used the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and other post structuralist thinkers to examine how generic texts (re)produce power, direct action, and "distribute cognition" among multiple writers over a period of time. Further, revisiting Sullivan and Porter's "Remapping Curricular Geography," Kent (2007) observed that their "article continues to serve us well today by providing us with a better understanding of the social forces that shape our fields of study and, consequently, regulate what we can and cannot teach" (p. 13).

Our point here is that business and technical communication has a long history of engaging theory. And while this history might be less familiar, taken for granted, or overlooked by faculty today, the field's long engagement with theory provides a useful set of concepts and vocabularies to engage with the questions and implications of the rapid rise of generative AI, especially, as we show in the next section, given the field's commitment to understanding materiality and the influence of nonhuman actors.

Foucault's (1998) "What Is an Author?" is one possible, if not obvious, starting point for excavating theory's usefulness in thinking through generative AI in business and technical communication. As a contrast to the view of a self-aware and agentic writer who "deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations" (p. 221), Foucault wrote about the "author function," which is "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (p. 211). Taking up the question of how the figure of the author and authorship are articulated and reproduced at a certain cultural moment, Foucault pointed to four characteristics to guide our understanding of the "author function": (a) a link to "juridical and institutional systems" that determine and reproduce discourse (e.g., copyright, profit), (b) some culturally and historically specific degree of influence on other discourses (e.g., that of literary writers on scientific discourses or vice versa), (c) a collection of specific and complex operations that lead to the construction of "author" (e.g., literary criticism, the attribution of style and motives, a

writer's personal history), and (d) the rhetorical elements within a text that signify the existence of a "plurality of self" and not a unified subject called the "author" that precedes the production of a text/work (p. 216).

Authority and Authorship

As we better understand the impact of generative AI on our teaching, research, and day-to-day lives, Foucault's (1998) analysis of the "author function" provides us with a useful heuristic. Following Foucault's four-part method, we might ask, for instance, (a) How will generative-AI technologies be monetized by the large tech companies? What regulations might be developed and implemented by legislative bodies across the globe? (b) How might generative AI influence policymaking? How might such technologies be used to compose workplace documents? (c) How do we, as a field, contribute to the construction and perception of generative AI as a recognizable "author" or writing technology? What does the history of AI teach us about our present moment? and (c) How might TPC researchers contribute to theorizing AI rhetoric and interpretive frameworks for identifying AI-generated writing?

As AI technologies continue to develop and our understanding evolves, the questions we ask will surely be sharpened, expanded, revised. Indeed, Foucault (1998) suggested as much when he ended his essay with one provocative question that might serve us well today: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (p. 222). With AI as an increasingly embedded resource within our writing technologies, devices, and spaces rather than a stand-alone technology, we can see the currency of contemporary theory such as Rickert's (2013) *Ambient Rhetoric*, which calls us to consider more pervasive, subtle, and yet critical sensibilities such as *attunement*—an ability to bring intentionality to moments when the conditions are right for rhetorical action. Such critical sensibilities may well become (or are becoming) new workplace literacies.

Thus, AI will, at least while it is new, create a compelling need for a new understanding of the dynamics of power, agency, and authority. As we formulate and pose questions, then, we should recognize that, as Eagleton (2003) posited, "if theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever" (p. 2).

Conversation 3: Actors and Activity

Theory's proclamation and the field of writing studies' assimilation of "the death of the author" (Logie, 2013) may have already prepared us for an

alarming idea: The machines might soon replace us. Thinking about the potential perils of AI could make us feel threatened. And indeed, we have faced several recent examples exposing the precarious relationship between human and nonhuman actors during times of disaster.

When Latour proposed the actor-network theory (ANT), it was to shake up sociology's understanding of technology use and its effects on society, countering a human-centered bias in the discipline of sociology. Latour (1987, 2007) engaged in a thought experiment in which human and nonhuman actors might have equal agency in a given situation, suggesting that as an analytic frame, such a view is helpful for investigating situations in which humans and nonhumans interact. Many in TPC have applied this frame to technical communication work (Fraiberg, 2017; Jones, 2016; Potts, 2009; Read, 2016; Spinuzzi, 2008; Swarts, 2010). But with nonhuman agents' prominence and influence seemingly on the rise with AI, does ANT have any validity today? At a minimum, we need to reevaluate the flattened hierarchy that Latour proposed. Recent issues relating to disaster, expertise, human intervention, and trust in machines have led to serious issues.

Nonhumans in the Loop

Let us consider a situation that occurred in 2018 in Hawaii. A worker at the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (EMA) made a mistake during a drill that resulted in sending out alerts to the residents of Hawaii, advising them, in all caps—the parlance of shouting online—to "SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER" because of an "INBOUND" threat of a "BALLISTIC MISSILE." As reported by the Centers for Disease Control (Murthy et al., 2019), residents experienced feelings of sheer panic and then anger as they received the alert and then learned that the alert was indeed a mistake.

We could take the stance that this mistake was human error until we take a look at the opaque interface used to send the alert in AlertSense's software. Reporters at *The Verge* conducted an excellent breakdown of the failures in the interface and the EMA's governance of the emergency alert system (Lecher, 2018). The trust we have in government alerts is only as strong as the reliability of these systems, but it is ultimately up to technical communicators to ethically design these interfaces, algorithms, policies, and systems. Without a doubt, all of these issues are the fault of poor choices made by leaders who trusted in these systems. Does that mean we should have trusted the machines more fully, or does it mean we need a better set of best practices about the governance of technology?

Should We Maintain a Positive Bias Toward the Human?

What does all of this mean for the future of AI and human actors collaborating on writing projects? It certainly points toward the continuous need for human intervention. Writing involves more than just delivery. It involves refinement and understanding. That is, invention, iteration, testing, and review require nuance, discussion, understanding, and the kind of encoding/decoding that is less algorithmic and more empathetic. Without the correct ratio of human to nonhuman actors, your content may write itself, but it certainly will not guarantee the context in which people will use it.

And at this point, we need to consider the activity theory with an emphasis on human collaboration (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), an emphasis that TPC examines within confines across time and space (Potts & Jones, 2011; Sherlock, 2009; Spinuzzi, 2011). Rather than focusing only on the actions and reactions behind these systems, perhaps we ought to use our available means of persuasion to outline the ethical ways in which we can humanely coexist. That is, perhaps we should think about technology and how it can effect societal change for social good. As Spinuzzi (2023) pointed out, activity theory and ANT offer complementary ways for us to examine these systems and develop best practices for their use. A key difference, for Spinuzzi, is that activity theory builds in a bias toward human consciousness by creating a hierarchy of action that depends on motivated, purposeful behavior. In this way, activity theory's humanistic bias can be an affordance, particularly in a situation in which the overdetermined or hegemonic influence of nonhuman actors is more aligned with power than is the influence of human actors. It is easy to see, then, that in certain arenas such as policymaking, a human-centered perspective may be seen as the most just.

Conversation 4: Social Justice Turn and What Lies Ahead

TPC has recently had to reckon with the complexity of writing and communication as organizational processes. That is, the increasingly distributed nature of textual work has blurred the line between human and nonhuman agency and the identity of the authorial agent. Now the field is also reckoning with the material disparities and inequities that its practices—and even its ways of knowing—contribute to rather than work to improve. TPC's efforts to understand writing practices across all the dynamics characterizing the eras of process, theory, and activity/actor networks continue with a renewed urgency in order to make a meaningful change with and for those marginalized and harmed by these practices.

The field routinely brings a critical sensibility to the study of process and practice frameworks. Walton (2016) noted that TPC is "well positioned to combat forms of oppression" because "TPC is involved in crafting the communications" that can enact change (p. 412). In 2019, Walton et al. released *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn*: *Building Coalitions for Action*, a book that reexamines the role of technical communication as a whole and the responsibilities that come with it. They offer overviews of "distributive justice, procedural justice, and three forms of legal justice (retributive, restorative, transitional) before landing on social justice" (p. 34). These overviews provide a framework for us, as TPC researchers, to examine our own privilege and the privilege that TPC work can perpetuate. Understanding privilege "provides insight into the ways that technology prioritizes particular users and in doing so, particular perspectives" (p. 85). This insight can be used in examining generative AI: That is, how can we, as TPC researchers and practitioners, be responsible and use the privilege that comes with that responsibility to advance justice?

Less recent voices from each of the prior three conversations have also called attention to social justice matters. For instance, in his landmark essay "The Ethic of Expediency," Katz (1992) turned our attention to the weaponization of organizational authorship and its massive dehumanizing, violent potential as talk of the ludic possibility of a decentralized authorial subject reached its nadir in the theory era. His warning is a check on dynamics that we see surfacing in discussions of generative AI today, including the ways that appeals to expediency can afford rapid and massive scaling of deadly rhetorical power. As the excitement about nonhuman actors was heating up, Sauer (2003), in her study of coal miner's embodied rhetoric, directed us to the distinctly human, material risks of communication in hazardous conditions. And more recently, Sun (2020) reminded us that the TPC community is a global one that comprises technology users, writers, and researchers and that the U.S.-centric view that dominates in TPC scholarship sheds light on only a fraction of the rich activity that the field aims to understand. Both Katz and Sauer, then, in contrast to the tenor of most TPC scholarship in their respective moments, raised alarms as calls for the TPC field to use its knowledge to prevent harm. Today, by contrast, the call to be vigilant and to work toward transformation, toward justice, is becoming a common cause for those entering the field (Mckoy et al., 2022).

Prompting Dialogue: Can the TPC Community Lead the Way on GenAI and Writing?

Although the Call for Papers for this special issue of the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* invited submissions that "center on how AI

tools change or do not change aspects of TPC work," our piece evades such evaluations or predictions about generative AI and TPC work. Instead, we have looked to work in TPC—to conversations that build and utilize iterative frameworks, theorize human activity and power, and attend to the materiality of writing and writing technologies in order to advance justice and equity. By taking this kind of inventory, we are calling on our colleagues to recognize that in these conversations, our field has led and contributed to an opportunity to bring our expertise to the table as our institutions and the culture at large deal with how to adjust to generative AI in our work and personal lives. We are not starting from scratch.

The time to do this work is now, when generative AI is as transparent and stand-alone as it will likely ever be. In the near future, GenAI capability will be more embedded, more integrated into other systems and devices, making it harder to detect, understand, scrutinize, and critique. Our voices as writing experts matter a great deal. We understand from other moments of rapid and disruptive technological change that there will be both positive and negative developments within TPC as both a field of academic inquiry and professional practice. With GPT (generative pretrained transformer), a technology whose inception was not linked to solving a problem with writing, all of these developments—positive and negative—are in a sense unintended (Vaswani et al., 2017).

Indeed, we look forward to reading what others have to say about the impact and implications of generative AI on our collective work. Although we do not know what is to come regarding the effects of generative AI—including shifting and new criteria to evaluate these effects—we do know that the conversations we have outlined here serve as productive commonplaces and starting points for understanding, influencing, theorizing, and working alongside generative AI.

Appendix

Reading List for Conversations 1, 2, and 3

Conversation 1. Borgman, J. (2019). Creating a User-Centered Experience in Online Courses Through Content Strategy. In G. Getto, J. Labriola, & S. Ruszkiewicz (Eds.), *Content Strategy in Technical Communication* (pp. 154–170). Routledge.

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