Portfolio Introductory Memo
Interoffice Memorandum

To   Dr. Derek G. Ross, Dr. Stewart Whittemore, and Dr. Susan Youngblood
From   Kaitlin Coyle
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Subject   The Value of TPC Professionals in UX Careers: Promoting Effective
Communication via Human-Centered Design (HCD) & Advocacy
Keywords User Experience (UX), Usability, Interaction Design (IxD), HCD

Introduction

There is an abundance of research on Technical & Professional Communication (TPC) and User Experience's (UX) relationship (Getto, 2023; Redish & Barnum, 2011; Rose & Schreiber, 2021; Tham et al., 2022; Verhulsdonck et al., 2021). Despite this, Redish and Barnum (2011) note TPC professionals' struggle to shift into UX, and how some UX professionals do not see our value in the field. This portfolio's works come from ENGL 7000: Technical Editing; ENGL 7010: TPC Issues & Approaches; ENGL 7060: Web Development; ENGL 7080: Document Design; and INDD 7650: Design Theories, demonstrating the multidisciplinary skills TPC individuals acquire, including audience analysis, mediation, and user advocacy, which apply to writing, usability, document design, and UX. This portfolio's goal is to discuss how TPC's roots in rhetoric and communication lay the foundation for our multidisciplinary skillsets, demonstrating our value in UX, and how crossing the boundaries of both disciplines leads to more opportunities for advocacy and empowerment, an essential aspect of the UX ecology.

Background/Motivation

Growing up as a bilingual individual, communication and context were central to everything I did. I faced the challenge of learning two languages simultaneously—English and Spanish—however, doing so honed my skills in audience and context analysis. These skills also informed my undergraduate degrees—Journalism, English, and Spanish. It was in Journalism, though, where I combined these skills, and what eventually sparked my interest in TPC and UX.

As a journalism student, I quickly realized journalism was not just about written communication. My concentration was "multimedia journalism," so I often engaged in photojournalism and created digital publications, graphics, news packages, and podcasts. I realized I was no longer communicating through solely textual mediums, but rather several different mediums and modalities where there were more considerations regarding my intended audience.

This emphasis on different types of communication is similar to the shift described in TPC. Wysocki (2012, p. 432) and Tham et al. (2022, p. 431) discuss how media convergence—resulting from Web 2.0, the Internet, and the "mobile app marketplace" (Getto, 2023, p. 311)—has made new media products "ubiquitous" in users' lives, meaning they regularly expect

multimodal media. This has also led to what Dubinsky (2015) describes as TPC's "identity crisis" (p. 131). While traditionally TPC professionals saw themselves as lone writers and user advocates for far-away audiences (Hart-Davidson, 2012), Web 2.0 has shifted this relationship, leading us to consider users as collaborators in our work (Wysocki, 2012).

Viewing users as collaborators in an era of media convergence means the content TPC professionals produce is largely driven by users' experiences and interactions with that content (Dubinsky, 2015; Verhulsdonck et al., 2021; Wysocki, 2012). This focus explains the close relationship between TPC and UX several scholars have noted (Getto, 2023; Redish and Barnum, 2011; Rose and Schreiber, 2021; Tham et al., 2022; Verhulsdonck et al., 2021).

TPC in UX

UX is still a relatively new field with emerging definitions; however, several aspects are agreed upon: 1) UX is a "design process" (Getto, 2023, p. 311)—UX Design (UXD) (Stull, 2018; Unger & Chandler, 2009)—2) a measure of users' experiences interacting with products, artifacts, and the "organization[s] responsible" for them (Rose & Turner, 2024, p. 465), and 3) an emerging research field—UX Research (UXR)—that studies people who use products in different contexts (Robinson et al., 2017; Stull, 2018; User Experience Professionals Associations [UXPA], n.d.). UX's combined focus in design, research, and people shows its relationship to usability, which emphasizes useful and usable products that help users fulfill their goals (Mirel, 2012). Thus, both fields share focus on users, the basis of User-Centered Design (UCD) (Hart-Davidson, 2012). However, UX focuses more on Human-Centered Design (HCD), an "approach that puts human needs, capabilities, and behavior first" before beginning the design process; this allows ones designs to address or "accommodate" real "human" problems, rather than simply creating beautiful designs for the pleasure of creating them (Norman, 2013, p. 8)

Usability and UX's emphasis on users is similar to TPC's focus. Redish and Barnum (2011) note that TPC professionals are naturally "user-centered" because they simplify complex information, making it more "understandable and usable" (p. 92). While TPC professionals often work with written communication, many transition into usability careers, which advocates for users during product use, a concept often described as user advocacy (Hart-Davidson, 2012; Rose, 2016).

User advocacy also relates to UXD; however, UXD emphasizes users' *emotions* during product interaction (e.g., "enjoyment", desirability, or "fun," [Bargas-Avila & Hornbaek, 2011, p. 2693]), invoked by design choices (e.g., aesthetics, UI design, etc.) that communicate [psychological] messages. Thus, UXR studies how design choices help/hurt users in their context (Rose, 2016), but both UXD and UXR focus on creating positive user experiences through these factors.

UX design choices communicate [emotional] messages to users just like TPC does with rhetoric, often described as transcending written and spoken contexts to include "forms of symbolic interactions" that invoke "delight" (Porter, 2023, p. 247; Bargas-Avila & Hornbaek, 2011). Viewing rhetoric as interactions that evoke emotions suggests it plays a large role in experience design inherent to UXD, demonstrating TPC and UX's close relationship, and the value TPC professionals can bring to the field.

This portfolio's goal is to discuss how TPC's roots in rhetoric and communication lay the foundation for our multidisciplinary skillsets, demonstrating our value in UX, and how crossing the boundaries of both disciplines can lead to more opportunities for advocacy and empowerment. This memo's first section, "The Historical View: TPC Professionals as Writers" discusses our skills as writers, but how this role often leads us to be stereotyped by others and ourselves; the second, "The Usability-UX Paradigm Shift" discusses how TPC's relationship with usability teaches us user advocacy and mediation, but has also caused TPC to resist shifting to UX; the third, "UX as a Model for Human-Centered Design" discusses a resistance towards including UX in TPC curriculum, causing the field to miss out on important opportunities for their skillsets, (i.e., incorporating HCD); and the fourth, "The Core of TPC & UX: Communication" emphasizes UX's central focus as communication through design, reinforcing TPC and UX's shared connections. These sections highlight the work TPC professionals do and the value it can bring to UX, despite negative attitudes towards our inclusion (Redish & Barnum, 2011).

The Historical View: TPC Professionals as Writers

Historically, TPC professionals have always been perceived as writers, often described as working in "isolation," (Mehlenbacher, 2012, p. 188) producing written documentation, user manuals, FAQs, etc. (Dubinsky, 2015; Longo & Fountain, 2012). Traditionally, our work process was also linear; we outlined, collaborated with SMEs, wrote, and revised (Dubinsky, 2015). While this has been—and may still be—our role, Redish & Barnum (2011) state that this view is stereotypical, failing to consider how technology has shifted our profession.

Viewing TPC professionals as solely writers may contribute to the belief we do not bring value to UX, but it is also a stereotype we place ourselves into (Redish & Barnum, 2011). In talking with classmates, I often find we describe ourselves as "writers," "editors," or "simplifiers of complex information" but these roles diminish the complexity of our work. As a beginning MTPC student, I also fell into this stereotype, seeing myself as a writer and editor. I carried out this role on the C.H.O.I.C.E. Editing Project I completed for ENGL 7000: Technical Editing.

During this project, I was first introduced to TPC's connections with rhetoric as "effective communication" (Porter, 2023, p. 247) grounded in the analysis of audience, context, and purpose, the field's foundational principles (Pope-Ruark, 2019; Redish & Barnum, 2011; Rose, 2016; Wysocki, 2012). Although the public often views rhetoric as manipulation and persuasion, Porter (2023) describes a more accurate definition as "truthful and ethical communication" allowing us to "interact" with audiences to "address social needs and problems" (p. 248). This view of rhetoric helps promote goals, positive relationships, and "avoid conflict;" it is also closely tied to TPC because of our "obligation" to help audiences and end users, demonstrating how "effective communication" can become a form of user advocacy (Porter, 2023, p. 248).

As I worked on the C.H.O.I.C.E. project, I was given two versions of an informational document and asked to conduct comprehensive edits on one. However, considering my audience—residents of Uniontown, Alabama, an impoverished, rural community—I realized the best version would result from combining both documents. The time spent analyzing my audience,

considering their informational needs, and context of use, allowed me to communicate effectively *for* them, and become a user advocate without even realizing it.

While it's true TPC professionals are writers, and our field was founded on rhetoric, I see this as an advantage we bring into UX, rather than a disadvantage. I can't tell you how many times I have heard "audience, context, and purpose" repeated in my MTPC classes. Yet, as I have begun transitioning into UX spaces, I realized this focus is often what sets me apart from other aspiring UX professionals. While I enter a room always emphasizing the user's (audience) need (purpose) for their specific context of use, I find that UX professionals from other backgrounds do not always have the user at the forefront of their mind. The advocacy that TPC professionals bring into UX spaces is precisely why we should have a seat at the UX table.

The Usability-UX Paradigm Shift

TPC has always had a close history with usability. In the 1980s many TPC professionals (e.g., Ginny Redish, Carol Barnum, Steve Krug [Rose & Turner, 2024]) shifted into usability roles due to TPC and usability's shared emphasis on user advocacy and UCD, concepts that focus on users (Redish & Barnum, 2011). Thus, TPC professionals' historic role as user advocates allowed them to practice the same skills but shift into a more technological landscape.

I was introduced to TPC and usability's close relationship while designing a usability test for ENGL 7010: TPC Issues and Approaches; this was also where I first saw the ways technology was shifting my role as a TPC professional. Our test evaluated the usefulness and usability of Auburn's library printing instructions, arising from my own frustrations printing. Whereas before, I saw myself as a writer, during this project I began seeing myself as a user advocate, mediating information from users to product developers. Traditionally, TPC professionals were always seen as "experts," communicating information to lay audiences (Melenbacher, 2013); however, technology has led to "distributed expertise," calling us to shift into mediation roles (p. 194). It is no longer our job to explain things to lay audiences but collaborate with users whose expertise on a product is often greater than our own. This means we must place ourselves in positions of humility where we no longer teach users, but they teach us.

The usability project was where I first realized "the user is always right" and that my rhetoric and communication background could lead to deeper user advocacy. I believe TPC and usability's shared history can reinforce our roles as user advocates and mediators; however, Rose and Turner (2024) highlight the history somewhat negatively, discussing the usability-UX "paradigm shift" (p. 464). In early days, the focus was on usability—a "property of the artifact" assessing whether its "operations, displays, and content" were "easy to understand, use, access, learn, and navigate" (Mirel, 2012, p. 287)—but that focus how now shifted to UX. Rose (2016) explains this shift is because UCD and usability are more "technology-focused," emphasizing the technology's functionality and viewing people as users of an object, rather than humans emotionally experiencing technologies (p. 428). Thus, usability was never quite equipped to address the "wicked problems" (Tham et al., 2022, p. 433) now arising from users' daily interactions with devices (e.g., wearable technology, mobile phones). UX, however, focuses on users "holistic" (Bargas-Avila & Hornbæk, 2011, p. 2690) experience, encompassing

usefulness, usability, aesthetics, and emotions, factors usability alone cannot account for. However, many TPC professionals and programs have resisted this shift due to its close history with usability (Rose and Turner, 2024).

I first saw the shift towards UX while designing the Pilates on the Plains (POTP) website for ENGL 7060: Web Development. Tham et al. (2022) discuss this shift as "ubiquitous computing;" essentially, computers are an "interface to the physical world" implying interactions between users, influencing how they feel, think, and live (p. 431). On the web, Redish and Barnum (2021) discuss how "every use of your website is a conversation started by your site visitor" (p. 94). When we performed our POTP usability test, our user's first comment was the site's "classy" and "minimalistic" aesthetics, concepts pertaining to emotions. This suggests user concerns have shifted to implicit messages communicated in a design, rather than functionality, explaining UX's continued prominence and usability's decline; it also explains the emerging need for TPC professionals trained in rhetoric and communication to shift into UX professions.

UX as a Model for Human-Centered Design & Advocacy

Despite obvious connections between TPC and UX, TPC still resists including UX as a valued part of the curriculum. Rose and Turner (2024) explain this problem's origins; some TPC programs are in English departments where UX is seen as a "foreign" field, and even when UX *is* known, it is often conflated with usability (p. 470). The exclusion and confusion surrounding the field means TPC students are missing out on important opportunities for their skillsets.

In her article, "Design as Advocacy," Rose (2016) discusses the relationship between usability, UCD, UX, and HCD, emphasizing usability-UCD and UX-HCD connections. While UCD focuses on a technology-user relationship, Rose (2016) argues UX implies a higher standard: HCD. This approach views users as humans with complex contexts such as race, socioeconomic status, culture, human activities, and how problems in people's lives are "solve[d] or exacerbate[d]" by technology (p. 442). Considering these allows us to see users more humanistically.

When I first encountered HCD (via Rose's article), I was a first semester MTPC student. The concept quickly interested me because of its promise to advocate for and empower users, something I am passionate about. This stems from my journalism background where I saw reporting on stories about the Latino/a community as a means of highlighting the culture's complexities, dispelling its stereotypes, and advocating for the community.

The UX-HCD connection means UX can serve as a deeper form of advocacy. As Tharon Howard discusses in an interview with Pope-Raurk (2019), he sees UX as a "grassroots" effort that can bring out practical and valuable change because of its roots in Design Thinking (DT). This type of work is something I did while designing my National Hispanic Heritage Infographic for ENGL 7080: Document Design. I wanted the document to be an educational tool for non-Hispanic/Latino audiences, and a tool of empowerment for the Latino/a community. Because I carefully considered my audience's cultural contexts, human activities, and frustrations via participatory design, I created a document that empowered users, and that I felt proud to share.

The Core of TPC & UX: Communication

The relationship I see between TPC and UX stemmed from the mobile app I designed for INDD 7650: Design Theories. There, I was introduced to a famous Interaction Designer, John Kolko (2011), who wrote the field's most notable book: *Thoughts on Interaction Design*. He describes Interaction Design (IxD)—a subfield of UX—as "the creation of dialogue between a person and a product, system, or service" (p. 15) through a product's physical or metaphorical affordances, but also—in digital products—via metaphors, feedback, and a user's context of use.

I soon realized the "dialogue" I was creating in my app was no different than the communication I produce as a TPC student; the only difference was its medium. This emphasis on user-device "dialogues" and "conversations" (Kolko, 2011, p. 15-17) made me wonder why TPC and UX professionals struggle to see connections between their disciplines, and the value in boundary crossing. Redish and Barnum (2011) discuss how technology has shifted TPC professionals' roles, but this is not reflected in industry where some UX professionals believe the field benefits more from those with human factors and psychology backgrounds, rather than TPC.

This portfolio demonstrated how I carried TPC skills (i.e., audience analysis, mediation, user advocacy) into UX, and brought UX-HCD connections into TPC. However, I believe TPC's history with rhetoric and communication gives us the best advantage transitioning into UX careers. As Kolko (2011) and Wysocki (2012) note, interaction because of new media and digital applications are part of our daily lives. The core of those interactions, though, lies in understanding effective communication with users, both as humans and "digital consumers" (Thomas & Macredie, 2002 as cited in Rose & Turner, 2024, p. 466). It is communicating as humans who consider one another's complex contexts without the distractions of aesthetics—something that is visually beautiful (Kolko, 2011)—and product design that allows TPC to bring value to UX. And it is UX's HCD concept that has allowed me to cross both field's boundaries, engaging in much deeper thinking than if I had stayed within TPC's bounds. This type of complex thinking, stemming from both field's values, is what Lanius et al. (2021) say "would allow for more meaningful advocacy for users" (p. 352).

Although TPC can still foster further UX connections, this work is starting to emerge. For example, several scholars researched interface design in mobile apps (e.g., Facebook), emails, and digital journalism, discussing its influence on users' social and political lives (Cheek & Allen, 2024; Sano-Franchini, 2017; Vasudevan, 2020). Others examined how UXD in web and mobile apps serve as advocacy for different communities (Kalodner-Martin & Leon, 2023; Khan & Azhar, 2024; Wang, 2024), and others, examined how multicultural UX Research (i.e., Cultural User Experience (CUX) and Multilingual UX), can lead to the distributed expertise Melenbacher (2013) discusses (Al-Hassan, 2023; Cardinal et al., 2020; Konstantakis & Caridakis, 2020).

This type of work is promising to further demonstrate the value of TPC professionals in UX. I hope my transition into UX shows students their TPC skills are versatile and that they are perfectly capable of shifting into a design-based profession *because* of their communication backgrounds. And I hope any TPC professionals who read this memo also feel inspired to transition into UX.

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