Ethical Literacy in Technical Communication

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Essential Skills and Knowledge for Ethical Literacy in Technical Communication: A Student's Perspective

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Introduction

Both researchers and professionals recognize the significance of ethics in the field of technical and professional communication (Martin, 2007, p. 225). The importance of understanding and practicing ethics in technical communication is clear because ethical standards have been considered essential in the field for a long time. For example, in 1978, the Society for Technical Communication created a code of ethics to help guide people in the field (Society for Technical Communication, 1978). Two decades later, in 1998, the STC formally adopted a more comprehensive set of ethical principles emphasizing honesty, confidentiality, quality, fairness, and professionalism (Society for Technical Communication, 1998). Although ethical guidelines exist, their consistent application remains a challenge. This shows the growing need to understand and follow ethical practices in technical communication today.

Technical communicators often face complex situations, such as creating content for diverse audiences, working with advanced technologies, or handling sensitive information. These challenges highlight the importance of making responsible and ethical decisions. As the field evolves, ethics in technical communication adapt to these complexities, with new keywords and concepts shaping its direction. However, while these theoretical developments provide valuable guidance, putting them into consistent practice remains an ongoing challenge (Katz, 2003).

Building on these challenges, scholars began to expand the boundaries of literacy in technical and professional communication pedagogy, recognizing the need for a broader range of skills to address the complexities of the field (Cargile Cook, Literacy, 2003). Developing ethical skills early is crucial for students in technical communication. These skills prepare them to address challenges like plagiarism, cultural respect, honesty, and responsible data use. This report investigates the ethical skills and knowledge most essential for technical communication students, focusing on how education, critical thinking, and communication shape ethical decision-making from a student's perspective.

Methods

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the important skills and knowledge needed for ethical literacy in technical communication, focusing on a student's perspective. Two methods were used: a review of existing literature and a reflective analysis of personal experiences.

The literature review involved a systematic analysis of academic articles, professional guidelines, and textbooks on ethics in technical communication. Sources were identified through databases such as JSTOR and IEEE Xplore. Key references included foundational texts, such as *Keywords in Technical and Professional Communication* (Han & Buehl, 2023), *Resources in Technical Communication: Outcomes and Approaches* (Selfe, 2007), and ethical codes published by the Society for Technical Communication. These materials were analyzed to identify recurring themes, such as honesty, respect for diversity, and responsible use of technology, and to highlight gaps where further exploration might be needed.

The reflective analysis drew on my personal experiences as a technical communication student over one semester. Journals, coursework, and project-based notes were reviewed to identify challenges and opportunities in developing ethical literacy. Particular attention was given to issues like avoiding plagiarism, respecting cultural differences, and using data responsibly. Themes from the literature guided the reflective process, allowing for a comparison between theoretical benchmarks and practical challenges.

A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide depth and personal insights into ethical literacy, offering a student-centered perspective on this essential topic. While the subjective nature of the reflective analysis may limit the generalizability of findings, this method provides valuable insights into the practical application of ethical principles in technical communication education.

Results

Ethical responsibility in technical communication is increasingly recognized as a dynamic and evolving concept. The shift from a purely factual and objective approach to one that acknowledges the moral implications of language and context is emphasized (Katz, 2003) .This perspective highlights how communication can shape perceptions and realities, suggesting that ethical literacy requires critical reflection and responsibility in decision-making. Understanding these ethical dimensions urges technical communicators. To go beyond objective reporting and consider the border impact of their work on society.

From my perspective as a student, this shift was particularly evident in assignments where I analyzed portfolios of professional technical communicators, focusing on the ethical challenges evident in their work. For example, one portfolio included a series of documents

created for different industries, such as instructional manuals, marketing materials, and public safety guides. Analyzing these materials revealed instances where language choices, like omitting key details or using persuasive rather than informative tones, could potentially mislead audiences or obscure critical information. This exercise emphasized the ethical responsibility of technical communicators to ensure that their work is not only effective but also transparent and fair. By reflecting on these real-world examples, I gained a deeper understanding of how language and design choices can have ethical consequences, highlighting the need for communicators to balance clarity, accuracy, and responsibility in their work.

The concept of layered literacies integrates ethical literacy as a foundational element of technical communication pedagogy. Ethical literacy, in this framework, is the ability to address moral challenges in communication, combined with rhetorical and critical thinking skills (Cargile Cook, Layered Literacies: A Theoretical Framework for Technical Communication Pedagogy, 2002). This approach stresses the need for technical communication education to move beyond isolated skill sets, embedding ethical considerations into all aspects of learning. For students, this means not only learning theoretical principles but also applying them in ethically complex scenarios, such as crafting accessible content for diverse audiences.

In my coursework, for example, a project on designing a course syllabus highlighted the importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity. The task involved creating a syllabus that not only conveyed course objectives and policies but also ensured accessibility for all students, including those with disabilities or diverse cultural backgrounds. This required careful attention to language, tone, and layout, as well as incorporating flexible policies to accommodate varying student needs. Through this project, I learned how the syllabus, as a technical document, reflects ethical principles by fostering an equitable and supportive learning

environment. This experience demonstrated how layered literacies, including ethical, rhetorical, and critical thinking skills, intersect in real-world applications to ensure fairness and inclusivity. By doing so, students are better prepared to navigate complex, real-world situations where moral decision-making is essential (Cargile Cook, Literacy, 2003).

Social justice also plays a crucial role in ethical literacy. The importance of using inclusive and fair practices in technical communication is stressed to help ensure the voices of underrepresented groups are heard (Jones & Walton, 2018). This work positions ethical literacy at the intersection of ethics and advocacy, emphasizing that addressing systemic inequities is integral to fair and responsible communication. In one class project, I was tasked with designing a Google Site, specifically focusing on making it accessible to visually impaired users. This involved ensuring the site adhered to accessibility best practices, such as using high-contrast color schemes, providing descriptive alt text for images, and ensuring that all headings and navigation elements were logically structured for screen readers. I also prioritized using simple, clear language throughout the site to make the content more accessible to a broader audience, including individuals with cognitive disabilities.

Additionally, I included links to accessibility resources and a contact form for users needing further assistance, recognizing the importance of ongoing support. This experience emphasized the importance of designing with marginalized perspectives in mind, demonstrating how technical communication can create inclusive digital spaces. By centering the needs of visually impaired users, I learned that accessibility is not just about compliance with guidelines but about fostering equity and respect for all users. This project reinforced the role of ethical literacy in technical communication, showing how ethical considerations can guide design choices to ensure no audience is excluded or disadvantaged. By integrating social justice

principles, technical communicators can contribute to more inclusive and equitable professional practices (Jones & Walton, 2018).

Discussion

This study highlights critical aspects of ethical literacy in technical communication. Ethical responsibility, as discussed by Katz (2003), emphasizes the shift from a purely factual and objective approach to one that considers the moral implications of language and context. This finding stresses the importance of critical reflection and understanding how communication choices shape perceptions and realities. From my coursework, analyzing professional portfolios reinforced this principle. It showed how language choices, like omitting details or using persuasive tones, can obscure critical information. This emphasizes the ethical need for transparency and fairness.

The layered literacies framework, introduced by Cargile Cook (2002), positions ethical literacy as a foundational element of technical communication pedagogy. This approach integrates ethical, rhetorical, and critical thinking skills into coursework, such as designing inclusive syllabi. This was evident in a class project where I designed a course syllabus, focusing on accessibility and inclusivity. The project required attention to language, tone, layout, and policies to create a document that reflected ethical principles, fostering equity and support for all students.

These findings underscore the importance of integrating ethical literacy into technical communication education. Embedding ethics into coursework, such as assignments on syllabus design or accessible web content creation, provides students with opportunities to apply theoretical principles in practical contexts. Such projects prepare students to navigate complex

ethical scenarios by fostering empathy, critical thinking, and inclusivity. By equipping students with these skills, educators can ensure that they are well-prepared to address real-world ethical challenges in their professional work.

Beyond implications for education, these findings contribute to the broader field of technical communication by emphasizing the ethical responsibility to promote equity and fairness. Katz's call for ethical responsibility (2003), Cargile Cook's layered literacies (2002), Cargile Cook's literacies (2003), Martin's an ethics primer: strategies for ethical decision making (2007) and Jones and Walton's emphasis on social justice collectively (2018) highlight the need for technical communicators to prioritize ethical considerations. These principles reflect broader societal efforts to address systemic inequities, ensuring that technical communication serves diverse audiences inclusively and transparently.

However, this study has limitations. As it is based on the perspective of a single student, the findings may not fully capture the diverse experiences and challenges faced by others. The reflective analysis was also limited to specific coursework and projects, which may not encompass the full range of ethical dilemmas in technical communication. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating perspectives from a wider range of students and professionals, offering a more comprehensive understanding of ethical literacy in different contexts.

Further exploration could also investigate how students from various cultural and educational backgrounds approach ethical literacy. Additionally, studies could focus on how educators can design curricula that effectively integrate layered literacies and social justice principles. Examining the long-term impact of ethical literacy training on students' professional practices could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these approaches.

In conclusion, this study highlights that ethical literacy is an essential component of technical communication education and practice. By fostering skills like critical reflection, inclusivity, and social justice awareness, educators can equip students to address the ethical challenges of their field. These efforts not only prepare students for professional success but also contribute to a more equitable and ethical communication landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethical literacy is a key part of technical communication education and practice. It helps students develop the skills they need to make thoughtful and fair decisions in their work. This study shows that ethical literacy is not just about knowing the rules. It's about applying ethical principles like honesty, fairness, and inclusivity to real-world challenges. Frameworks like Katz's focus on ethical responsibility, Cargile Cook's idea of layered literacies, and Jones and Walton's emphasis on social justice provide useful tools for teaching these skills.

Through assignments like designing accessible websites and creating inclusive course syllabi, I learned how to apply ethical principles in practical ways. For example, creating a website for visually impaired users helped me see the importance of making information accessible to everyone. Similarly, designing a syllabus taught me how technical documents can promote equity by supporting students from diverse backgrounds. These projects showed how ethical literacy can make technical communication more inclusive.

However, this study has some limits. It reflects only my experiences and a small set of projects, so it may not cover all the challenges other students or professionals face. Future research should include more students from different backgrounds to better understand how they

approach ethical literacy. It would also be helpful to explore how educators can design courses that teach ethics effectively and how these lessons impact students' work after graduation.

This study highlights how ethical literacy can improve not just individual skills but also the field of technical communication. By making ethical principles a central part of education, we can prepare students to tackle complex problems with fairness, empathy, and critical thinking. More importantly, ethical literacy ensures that technical communication becomes a tool for inclusivity and transparency, serving all audiences in a fair and respectful way. With these skills, students and professionals can make a positive difference in their work and contribute to a more ethical world.

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