Redefining the Responsibilities of Teachers and the Social Position of the Technical Communicator

Gerald J. Savage
Illinois State University

As we increasingly recognize the social nature of technical communication, our responsibilities as teachers need to be redefined. Three levels of responsibility are suggested: at the theoretical level, we should study technical communication as a historically emergent social practice; at the pedagogical level, we need to incorporate social and historical perspectives into technical communication courses and curricula; at the level of social action, we should participate in defining and creating new sites of practice for technical communicators. Several suggestions are offered for helping students locate or develop alternative sites of technical communication practice.

"Ethical studies may fairly be called political.”
Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, i, 2, 1356a, 26

Many scholars have explored issues of technical communication ethics in recent years. Employing a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, these studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of the complexity of technical communication as a social practice. Yet, until very recently, such studies have maintained a fairly consistent assumption about the location of responsibility for the ethical practice of technical communication. The assumption has been that moral responsibility resides with the writer, seen as a morally and politically autonomous individual. It is interesting that this assumption has prevailed so long in studies of technical communication ethics, despite the parallel exploration of the collaborative nature of technical writing.

James Porter seems to have been the first to point out this contradiction. Looking primarily at the field of business communication, he says that these studies “typically present ethical problems as decisions facing individual writers” (130). Porter argues for a negotiated,
dialectical process of ethical decision making in the production of workplace documents, an approach that does not ask technical writers to assume sole, individual responsibility for the texts they help to produce. He suggests that the change must come from within the corporation, where the organization actually might encourage the exploration of conflicting perspectives. "Corporations must learn to value dissonance," he argues (138). Porter's essay, however, seems to be addressed to technical communication managers, not to corporate managers; he is mainly preaching to the choir, therefore, and leaving us with no practical guidance for bringing about his vision of workplace writing collaborations founded upon humanistic values.

I argue in this article that many of the most challenging ethical concerns in technical communication are rooted in political and theoretical issues that should be confronted by teachers. It is not enough for us simply to tell students who are preparing for careers in technical communication that they must take responsibility for the social consequences of their texts. It is not enough, because in the positions in which they most commonly are employed, technical writers have limited autonomy in their practice. In the organizations that employ them they are likely to have little voice in deciding how they can portray the technologies they write about, and little power to negotiate textual decisions that they believe may be dishonest or may not be in the interest of their audiences. I argue that we should frankly acknowledge the difficulties our students may face as writers on the staff of an organization, and we should help them to begin to reconceive the profession as one that can be practiced in alternative ways that would permit them greater autonomy and professional integrity.

**Ethics as a Rhetorical/Political Concern**

Some of the most effective analyses of ethical issues in technical communication situations are overtly political, and often (although not necessarily) call for radical reforms in the ways that technical communication contexts are construed. Thus, for example, Beverly Sauer employs a feminist critique to examine the ways that U.S. mine safety regulations are written and implemented, and to challenge the conventional image of the engineer as "Rational Man." Such a perspective appears to demand a political space in technical communication practice for the kind of negotiation of the social implications of texts that Porter calls for.

Cezar Ornatowski explores the contradictions he finds "between two incompatible claims we make at once about the nature of technical writing and two incompatible conceptions of language that these claims imply" (94). One claim is "what technical writing does... is
effective and useful to employers" and the second, that "technical writing ... is objective, plain, neutral, clear, and so on" (94). These two claims are contradictory, he says, because writers cannot effectively and usefully serve the interests of their employers and at the same time adhere rigorously to standards of objectivity or clarity. What is necessary to understand, Ornatowski points out, is that "technical writing in real-world contexts is much more political and rhetorical than the textbooks make it out to be and that it is in this political/rhetorical sphere that ethical problems arise" (99).

Ornatowski argues that technical communication is constituted in and by the social, political, and economic interests it serves, while giving the appearance of being scientific and rational. "The fact that we do not commonly think that way about it is its greatest rhetorical asset" (101).

Ornatowski arrives at a point he did not seem to have intended but seems unable to avoid. His critique, he says, provides a means "to analyze the trade-offs and bargains that one makes. And that is the first step to talking about ethics," but, he admits, "Of course, in saying this, I have not solved my initial problem" (102), which was to define a position from which technical communicators might take personal responsibility for their discourse. Instead, after moving the question of ethics onto a rhetorical and political terrain, Ornatowski abandons the technical communicator to a dismally functionalist role "as the rhetorical instrument of organizational-bureaucratic rationality" (101), leaving the technical writer without hope, able neither to effect social reform, nor to be reformed.

A politically radical perspective is that presented by Jennifer Slack, David Miller, and Jeffrey Doak. They attempt to define technical communication in a way that would save technical communicators from becoming rhetorical instruments. Beginning with Foucault’s notion of the author as produced by the discourse s/he writes, it would seem at first that Slack, Miller, and Doak only confirm the analysis Ornatowski offers. They point out that "authorship empowers certain individuals" (13). Yet, in the sense of having full authority over the text one produces, authorship is commonly denied to technical writers by the organization employing them. Slack and her colleagues argue that technical writers should see themselves as authors in the sense of having full responsibility for their texts. They want writers to recognize that their texts inevitably function in a social environment; that their texts participate "in the articulation and rearticulation of meaning and power" (33) and should not be perceived as neutral in their social function. Whether or not subject matter experts, editors, supervisors, or other writers may be involved in producing a document, at some point, individual writers more or less willingly put their hands to keyboards and generate texts. At that point, Slack, Miller, and Doak suggest, the writer has the responsibility of authorship and
should recognize what ethical and political arrangements that responsibility connects to in society. However, this position disregards the collaborative nature of so much writing in organizations and focuses on individual writers. Similarly, Stuart Brown opposes the privileging of group or corporate ethos in technical documents instead of the ethos of the individual writer. If writers themselves accept the subordination of their individual values to the ethos of the organization, he suggests, ethical judgment is likely to be reduced to the “organization’s stipulated codes of conduct” (193). Ultimately, he suggests, the removal of the presence, or ethos, of the individual author from the document may leave little or no room for ethical considerations.

Slack and her colleagues, too, recognize the need to maintain a role for the authority of authorship. The strength of their argument depends upon a theoretical model of technical writing that they propose as a replacement for two, more commonly accepted models:

In the first, the transmission view of communication, the technical communicator is a purveyor of meanings; in the second, the translation view of communication, the technical communicator is a mediator of meanings; in the third, the articulation view of communication, the technical communicator is an author who among others participates in articulating and rearticulating meanings. (14)

In each of these models, both the writer and the language function at different levels of authority. The transmission view embodies the notion of the technical writer as effective instrument, consistent with one of the common claims about technical writing identified by Ornatowski, that it “is objective, plain, neutral, clear” (94). The communicator at this level is seen as little more than a scribe, with responsibility solely toward his or her employer. Any real moral or legal responsibility—to customers, society, the law, or the environment—is presumed to reside primarily with the corporation as a legal entity.

The translation view, according to Slack and her colleagues, sees the technical communicator as mediator between sender and receiver. It involves the notion of technical writers as rhetors, highly skilled sophists, who “know how to fix meanings” (23). This view diverges from Ornatowski’s position that although technical writers may know how to fix meanings they are restricted to constructing only those meanings that serve the interests of their employers.

Translation begins to suggest that the writer needs specialized skills different from those of the scientist or engineer. The translator gains a degree of autonomy and a claim to professional status by such skills. It seems, moreover, that it was only when technical communicators began to see themselves as professionals in their own right that ethics became an issue for the field. W. J. Williamson identifies the 1980 International Technical Communication Conference, which emphasized ethical issues, as a benchmark event, when “discussion of
ethics and technical communication became both more concrete and more philosophical" (2). Marsha Penti points out the relationship between awakening professional consciousness among technical communicators and explicit discussion of professional ethics.

Slack, Miller, and Doak argue, finally, that the key to full authorship, empowerment, and consequent ethical responsibility for technical communicators is to be realized in an "articulation model." Based on Stuart Hall's articulation theory, this model depends upon the relationship of meaning and power. Meaning, in this view, is determined in social and political contexts through processes of negotiation and struggle. Power, according to articulation theorists, "is ... what works to fix meanings, that which empowers some possibilities and disempowers others" (Slack, Miller, and Doak 28, emphasis in original). Articulation theory then

works to rearticulate the location of the technical communicator in the process of communication, specifically in that technical communicators must now be understood as articulating and rearticulating meaning in (and variously contributing to or changing) relations of power. (29)

At this point, we can see that we have moved from an emphasis on the ethics of a professional practice in the translation model to an emphasis on the politics of a social practice in the articulation model. The articulation model of technical communication resembles Porter's representation of the technical writer as a negotiator of multiple interests and meanings in the production of a document. A significant difference between the two views is that Slack and her colleagues want to restore authorial authority to the individual writer and to emphasize the responsibility writers have for the social function of their documents. Porter wants us to acknowledge the sense in which documents are authored in many cases by corporate entities rather than by individual writers, and to "insist that ethical responsibility, like a corporate document, is socially constructed and must be shared" (132). Ornatsowski questions, on one hand, the practicality, the economic common sense, of the kind of approach advocated by Slack and her colleagues. "Employees, after all, are paid to render services to em-

ployers and to further their goals 'effectively' and 'efficiently,'" Ornatsowski points out. And they are expected to render such services "no matter how lofty the social sentiments of the writer" (100). On the other hand, Ornatsowski points out,

little seems to have changed in the wake of these discussions in terms of how we conceive of the nature of technical writing or how we see its teaching. Could it be that "irresponsibility" is built into our present thinking about the nature of technical writing and into the very foundations of how we go about teaching it? (93)

These discussions begin to make clear, I believe, the complexities that may be involved in redefining the responsibilities we have as
teachers of technical communication. These responsibilities can be defined on three levels: theory, pedagogy, and social action. I would like to examine each of these levels in more detail.

The Theoretical Level: Technical Communication as a Historically Emergent Social Practice

The view of technical communication I am proposing has both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The synchronic dimension, within which the field is examined as a practice functioning within a complex array of social relations, has received a fair amount of attention in the past ten years. In addition to those mentioned already, we have a number of theoretical and case studies of our field revealing technical communication as a social practice that inevitably both responds to and transforms the social arrangements within which it functions. Just a few of such studies are ones by Carolyn Miller ("Technology", "Humanistic Rationale"), Lee Odell, James Paradis ("Text and Action"), Malcolm Richardson and Sarah Liggett, Sauer ("Sense and Sensibility", "Engineer as Rational Man"), Dale Sullivan, and Dorothy Winor.

Ornatowski observes that "technical writing is a form of rhetoric developed in, and uniquely suited to, the social contexts in which it typically takes place" (100). If the typical context of technical writing is understood to be bounded by the corporate workplace, the responsibilities of the writer are similarly constrained. But if, as a great deal of current theoretical work argues, the context of technical writing includes the entire community within which the technology and its related discourses interact, then the technical writer is responsible to that larger community as well as to the corporation. Slack, Miller, and Doak ask us to imagine the consequences if communicators would take up the role of "advocate" for the customer and the public as well as for the engineer and the corporation (33n). As Carolyn Miller has argued,

what a technical communicator ought to bring to this work is a critical perspective on it—a refusal to seek efficient means without examining ends; a bias for the human side of the relationship between people and technology; a subversive presence in the technocracy, with enough power, credibility, and knowledge to make a difference—in product design, policy making, and public affairs. ("Some Thoughts" 110)

If approached as a critical practice, technical communication has a unique potential for exploring the forces and structures, the processes and products of technology, science, and institutions. We should have, as well, the ability to explain these domains to the public. What
is needed is a practice and a theory defined in relation to an entire social perspective, a perspective that includes the dimensions of technology, economics, politics, the environment, and an understanding of the social nature of discourse, and that understands these dimensions as mutually constitutive.

A theory of technology is no small part of the task I am describing. As Slack states, we need

a definition of technology that emphasizes the relationship between the objects we generally accept as being “technological” and the social forces within which those objects take form and within which their meaning as objects in relationships is articulated, empowered, and empowering. That task is resisted by our incredible social loyalty to a conception of technologies as autonomous objects, despite considerable efforts to reconceptualize technology as “social relations.” (337)

It is increasingly clear that technical communicators participate, knowingly or not, willingly or not, in negotiating the meanings and values in terms of which those social relations are formed.

In the diachronic dimension technical communication is examined historically in order to understand the ways it has emerged in relation to particular social, economic, and political contexts. This dimension has been receiving increasing attention in the past few years. Some important studies in these areas include historical studies of scientific writing such as those of Charles Bazerman (“How Natural Philosophers”; Shaping Written Knowledge); Paradis (“Bacon, Linnaeus, and Lavoisier”); James Zappen; David Russell’s work on the history of writing across the curriculum (“American Origins”; Writing in the Academic Disciplines); studies in the history of technical writing instruction such as those of Robert Connors, James Souther, and Teresa Kynell; historical case studies by Debra Journet (“Biological Explanations”; “Ecological Theories”; “Interdisciplinary Discourse”); and Elizabeth Tebeaux’s explorations of the Renaissance roots of technical communication.

We need to explore this history in order to understand the diverse social, economic, and technological forces that have converged in the various practices that today we call technical communication. When we learn from David Russell (“Ethics”), for example, that technical communication courses have been sites of struggle between English departments and engineering and technology programs for as long as a hundred years in some universities, or from Marsha Penti that many of our practices have origins in the U.S. military and World War II, we begin to recognize that such practices and the relationships of practitioners to the technologies they are employed to represent are social conventions arising from particular historical contingencies, not timeless, ineluctable ways of doing things that cannot be overturned or modified.
The Pedagogical Level: Technical Communication Courses and Curricula

The second and most obvious level of responsibility we have as teachers of technical communication involves pedagogy—the content and methodology of the courses we teach, and the overall goals and structure of the curriculum within which we teach them. Our pedagogy needs to be consistent with our theoretical understanding of our discipline’s practices. Thus, if we are to accept the paradigm of technical communication as a social practice, we should not continue to teach it as a set of value-free tools and skills. We should refrain from teaching skills, procedures, rules, and forms as if these things have no history, as if they exist objectively, neutrally, somehow separate from the contexts in which they appear.

We need pedagogical models of the kind offered by Lee Brasseur, who describes a course she has developed emphasizing gender issues in technical communication. In this course she asks her students

to confront the idea that while traditional discourse models in technical and professional writing may contribute to successful communication within an organization, they may also promote enculturation to a kind of communication which diminishes peoples’ voices, disinherit them from power and, thereby, limits the capacity to affect change. (115)

A course such as the one Brasseur proposes might go far toward defining and empowering the kind of alternative technical discourse that is called for in Sauer’s study of mine safety manuals.

Yet the implementation of particular courses, however informed they may be by critical perspectives, is not sufficient by itself. The dilemma I have portrayed cannot be resolved simply by insinuating into the existing curriculum a few courses in the theory, ethics, or politics of technical communication. Indeed, Carolyn Miller (“Some Thoughts”) has called for a “systems” approach to the design of a technical communication curriculum, a strongly interdisciplinary curriculum in which the discipline is presented “as a social phenomenon that occurs in many guises, in many places, at many levels, often not under the control of individual persons, especially those with professional commitments to and training in communication” (110). Such a program might include an emphasis on the rhetoric of science and technology, including not only Miller’s insistence upon engagement with disciplines outside the humanities, but also perhaps with agencies beyond the university. This might include teaching the kind of curriculum advocated by Slack and her colleagues: courses in organizational communication and ethics, as well as the rhetorics of science and technology.

Such a program need not exclude opportunities for mastery of the communication practices generally employed in technical com-
munication, but mastery should include an understanding of the origins of these practices and their ethical, legal, and political significance. Students would learn to critique the discourses and practices of science and technology, and they would explore the element of struggle and hegemony in the very notion of academic disciplines. Underlying such a curriculum is the goal to provide students the ability to responsibly act in the constitution of their own subjectivity, and their own historic moment, both as professional communicators and as citizens.

The Level of Social Action: Defining Alternative Social Positions for Technical Communicators

To illustrate my argument that technical communication teachers need to begin helping students define and locate alternative sites of practice, I want to present some examples of experiences reported by technical writers and technical communication consultants I have interviewed recently.

Consultants and Staff Technical Writers: The Power to Negotiate on Ethical and Political Grounds

I asked several staff technical writers about experiences they may have had in addressing ethical issues of writing assignments. As might be expected, such issues simply do not arise every day, and when they do they are seldom life or death matters. Nevertheless, it was not difficult to find two staff technical writers who had attempted to question aspects of assignments that they felt involved wrong or deceptive information.

Barbara (the names of persons used in these examples are pseudonyms), who has an M.A. in writing with a technical communication emphasis, wrote marketing information for a bank. Soon after starting the job, Barbara worked on a brochure in which she included a bulleted list of information about interest rates and charges, restrictions on the accounts such as minimum balances, and TDD phone service for customers with hearing impairment. The draft was returned with instructions to put that information in fine print. Barbara questioned this demand, arguing to her supervisor that she believed it was important information and putting it in fine print would make it relatively inaccessible. Barbara's supervisor told her, "That's just how it's done in banking. There isn't anything we can do about it." Barbara said it was clear that further discussion would not be acceptable. In any case, she had no avenue for negotiation beyond her supervisor, who was not the person who made the decision. All editing of Barbara's work was done by a "compliance" office located at the headquarters of the bank in a different state.
John, who has a B.S. in computer science, provided support and wrote documentation for business software. In working with an upgrade to an application he found that no error codes existed to tell a user where to restart a procedure that otherwise could entail as much as five hours of work to do over. Although John knew a way existed to prevent such extensive downtime for the user his supervisor would not agree to changes in the software, and would not permit John to call attention to any problem with the procedure in his documentation. John raised this issue repeatedly with the supervisor, but the supervisor insisted it was a problem only for users who "couldn't follow directions" and would not agree to having it addressed in the documentation. The supervisor did not consider it negotiable and when he told John to drop the matter, John felt he had no one else to discuss it with and he finally desisted.

Although both writers were disturbed that they were forced into complicity with what they believed were dishonest practices, they did not feel it was worth risking their jobs to pursue the issue. Indeed, concern for job security may overshadow concerns staff writers may have for the readers and users of the documents they write.

Wendy is a technical communication consultant specializing in safety and health education manuals in heavy manufacturing industries (the industries in which Wendy works as a consultant have been fictionalized to protect confidentiality). She is increasingly well-known in the industries she serves, as well as in the safety profession. She takes an innovative approach to developing safety and health materials, involving company workers in the writing of the manuals and in developing education programs. Recently, she was invited to work on the revision of a safety manual for a company that had hired her six months earlier to write the manual she was now being asked to help revise. This situation arose because of a merger with another, smaller company. The merger required the consolidation of documentation for a number of areas, but safety was a top priority because of legal concerns. For complex reasons, the smaller company emerged as the dominant force in the new organizational structure following the merger. Wendy described the smaller company as "fiercely autocratic; very old-fashioned in its ideology in terms of management, legal affairs, and safety."

Wendy learned that the manual the new management wanted was essentially a return to the old legalistic, rule-driven safety philosophy, a philosophy she was convinced undermined vital educational principles she believes must be part of a truly safe workplace. For example, the manual Wendy had written earlier emphasized worker involvement in identifying safety issues and in developing measures to prevent accidents. She was reluctant, therefore, to take on the revision job, but she was urged to accept it by people she respected within the company and had worked with on the previous version of the manual.
She was encouraged, as well, by people in the safety profession outside of the company. All of these colleagues pointed out that if she didn’t accept the assignment, the company would hire someone who did not have Wendy’s understanding or commitment to progressive safety philosophy and the manual would revert entirely to the old tradition. They felt that Wendy could make her voice heard in the process, even if she could not produce the manual she believed was best. They argued that further revisions of the manual were bound to follow and the manual was more likely to return eventually to a progressive model with Wendy’s continued involvement.

After listening to these voices from her own profession, Wendy took the assignment and began a two-month project converting the manual to something she could not fully believe in. She was vocal about her concerns during the process, and she found that a number of people within the company privately shared her concerns. She believes her position as a consultant gave her more latitude and credibility to speak out. “There were people I’d worked with on the first project who also were just sick, you could see it, but everybody was scared for their job. It was a brand new culture; the trust level in the meeting was fairly dicey because they’d never met with these people before. People were flexing muscles . . .”

Eventually, however, the new powers of the company told her, “Write it down and we’ll pay attention to it, but it’s not going to happen this time around. It may happen down the road.”

Wendy took this qualified rebuke as a promising sign. She says that “throughout, I was reassured that we would be revisiting this book within a year.” Moreover, she believes that by voicing her concerns and arguing for the more progressive perspective she favors, the traditionalists began to understand where she was coming from. “The more they heard, the more they got kind of indoctrinated to the stuff we had done, the more they liked the first book.”

Wendy felt at the end that she had been able to retain some features of value and that indeed, the ground had been laid to begin yet another revision sometime in the next year or so, a revision she believes will move in the direction of more enlightened safety training.

As a consultant, Wendy was able to establish a generally cordial, collegial relationship with the people she met with. Yet she did have to deal with challenges from company managers to the way she chose to play her consulting role. She gave the following example:

They made good-humored but sharp comments to me about my place. Now I was the only woman there so to some degree we played that as a gender thing. And I just said you guys are just used to doing this and I’m a woman who won’t let you do that and blah blah blah. And so we just worked it that way. But at one point one of the guys from the [new power structure], who I had been working hard to
build a good relationship turned to me and said, "You just can't stand not to think, can you?" And I looked at him and said, "That is why you pay me money, that is why I'm here, to think."

He said, "You're just here to write."

I said, "You are quite mistaken. You need to talk to David about why I'm here. If you want just a writer, and if that's all you want, you go get somebody else. I am more than that."

And it would be—I don't think I used the word unethical, but I said it wouldn't be honest for me not to raise questions when I've got questions.

Wendy made a distinction between being "just a writer" and being a consultant. Writing with no questions asked, she says, is not how her clients perceive her. "That is the kind of writing they would have a technical writer who is on staff do."

Although Wendy would like to have had more influence on the safety manual re-revision, she believes that as a consultant she has considerable power. This power comes partly from her stature in the profession, the perception that she knows a great deal about safety manuals. Partly it is an economic matter, as well. "As a consultant, I get paid a lot," she explains, "and they know they won't have me for long."

The ethos of the consultant gives Wendy latitude to question, and to define the task, which might be difficult for staff writers. The consultant should offer more than a "transmission" service; she should be able to bring a principled notion of practice to the job, and should identify issues of principle as part of the service she provides. These are aspects of consulting that, at least in the example Wendy reported, seem to have been negotiated before she accepted the job. Moreover, in Wendy's situation, she was not really trying to negotiate greater autonomy for herself as the manual writer. Her view of the writing situation was not that the moral autonomy of the writer as author was at stake. She seems to share Porter's perspective, that ethical and social implications of texts are necessarily collaborative. The problem she was confronting was that the people who should be involved, the workers who were directly affected by safety policies, were not included in the collaborative process. For the group in power in the new organization, however, the workers could have almost no responsible voice in determining policies about safety. Yet, it was on the basis of including those workers' voices that Wendy had built her professional ethos. She had to use her stature in the safety training profession to argue for the inclusion of voices that had no credibility with the managers she was dealing with.

Staff writers might find it difficult to negotiate the ethical and political parameters of an assignment. They may not have a great deal of latitude in deciding whether or not to accept a writing task on
ethical or political grounds. As Wendy's experience suggests, the attitude of managers in many organizations, whether or not it is stated explicitly, seems to be that staff technical writers are expected just to write, not to question ethical implications. Because my data in each of these examples is anecdotal and relies only on the testimonies of the writers, it is difficult to determine whether or not their perceptions of their power to negotiate ethical issues is realistic—whether John and Barbara were really as disempowered as they felt they were, or whether Wendy was as influential as she felt she was. Nevertheless, as the example of Wendy suggests, the consultant is more likely to work from the beginning directly with managers and corporate policy makers, rather than with staff supervisors who are unlikely to be in positions to question or revise policy when ethical questions are raised. Moreover, Wendy's network of professional contacts both in the safety training field at large, and even within the company where she consulted provide her moral reinforcement, an opportunity for ongoing dialogue on ethical issues with persons who are informed about the complexities of such issues, and, indeed, what may have been considerable peer pressure to take a challenging job in which she had to negotiate the limits of compromise while maintaining professional ethical standards. Such networks are of course available to staff technical writers, as well. However, when the only choice they may have is either to quit their job or do as they are told, they may have less motivation to take advantage of such networks than consultants like Wendy.

Undoubtedly, in some organizations, staff technical writers have earned considerable credibility and have the stature to be able to negotiate how documents will be constructed in terms of their social implications. Their education in technical communication may well include Saul Carliner's recommended curriculum of theory, professional skills, technical proficiency, and internship experience, or a program such as the one recommended by Slack, Miller, and Doak, that would add studies of the social relationships of discourse, science, and technology. However, many technical communication job descriptions do not seem to require this kind of knowledge. For example, most of the positions announced in the Society for Technical Communication job list ask vaguely for applicants to have a degree in technical writing, journalism, English, or communications, but they ask for proficiency in a variety of computer hardware and software applications, which they list with considerable specificity.

Teaching ethical principles, sending students into the traditional workplaces for technical writers with notions of transforming communication practices for a larger social good, may at best make them appear naively idealistic to their co-workers, and at worst get them in trouble with their employers. Our efforts to intervene in the social formation primarily through academic advice to our students in
classroom contexts may, as Richardson and Liggett argue, "turn into a liability on the job" (125).

As teachers, if we are to overcome the irresponsibility that Ornatsowski suggests "is built into our present thinking" it seems we need to explore alternative possibilities for the practice of technical communication. Miller questions the assumption "that the traditional positions that technical writers and editors hold in organizations provide the best ways for them to improve the creation and production of texts in those organizations" ("Some Thoughts" 110). To reconstitute the role of the technical writer as empowered and responsible author is necessarily to reconstitute the social position from which an authoring role can be enacted. This means that our vision needs to be even more far-sighted than the ambitious project of redesigning the curriculum. We need to conceive technical communication practices in quite different locations from where they are now most commonly situated, not limiting our thinking to preparing students primarily for staff positions in business and industry.

Alternative social positions for technical writers entail economic realities we ought to consider. Part of our job in theorizing a critical practice of technical communication ought to include helping our students discover or create new economic prospects; some places to explore might include journalism, private consulting, environmental organizations, law firms, and health and social agencies. These are only suggestions of places to begin. What I am proposing is to help identify and create positions that are economically and politically practicable, positions from which technical communicators can enact critical and interventive discourses. Such a communicator might ultimately even have a different name—technical critic, perhaps.

The responsibility of social action is undoubtedly the most difficult of all for technical communication teachers to fulfill. The vision of social responsibility is not so difficult, but it runs the risk, as a preacher once said, of being "so heavenly-minded that it's no earthly good." The responsibility to act on our vision, I suspect, can only be fulfilled by a cooperative effort, not only by teachers, but with the advice, vision, and practical knowledge of practicing technical communicators who are already in successful, responsible practices. Many of our students in the foreseeable future are still going to be working in organizations where they may find little encouragement to explore the social and ethical implications of organizational practices and products. Indeed, there is undoubtedly a place for socially concerned technical writers in traditional industries. Writers with the courage and the political and rhetorical skills to successfully negotiate socially responsible communication decisions are surely needed in such workplaces. We should try to make sure our students know what moral resources are available to them in such circumstances. Membership in a nearby chapter of the Society for Technical Communication
or other professional organization could give them a network of associates with whom they could discuss issues and strategies from the standpoint of professional ethics and standards. Such organizations can also provide leads to other jobs should a technical writer feel she or he cannot in good conscience continue to work for the current employer.

We should cultivate cooperation, as well, from business and industry. There are decision-makers in many organizations who share our goals for a society in which human needs and a healthy environment are fundamental. We can encourage our students to learn how to identify such organizations. Technical writers seeking socially responsible employers might look for corporations that recognize the notion of "stakeholders," a perspective in which a business recognizes the legitimate interest of persons and groups in the policies of the organization beyond those who own stock in the company. Indeed, as Severyn Bruyn argues, "Stockholders are usually more interested in the stock market than in the corporation, and are only one 'stakeholder' concerned about the direction of corporate policy" (55). Stakeholders may include members of the community, employees, and even competitors. Corporations recognizing their stakeholders find ways to make themselves accountable to this broader group.

Some resources that would help include Alan Reder's 75 Best Business Practices for Socially Responsible Companies, the Council on Economic Priorities's The Better World Investment Guide, Susan Cohn's Green at Work: Finding a Business Career that Works for the Environment, and the Environmental Careers Organization's The New Complete Guide to Environmental Careers. Stock brokers and mutual fund representatives have current information on such companies and may be willing to discuss them with classes or with individual students who could then give reports to the class. In addition, students could be encouraged to become active in such organizations as Student Pugwash Association, an organization that promotes socially responsible science and technology practices and provides job related information. Finding alternative sites of technical communication practice is not in itself a guarantee of freedom from ethical compromise. However, it may prove to be less quixotic or suicidal for a technical writer to raise challenging ethical questions in an organization with a commitment to socially responsible conduct than in one committed only to competition in the marketplace.

Many students may hope, as Alan Reder says, to "take their citizenship to work with them" (iv), yet it seems doubtful that many of them would prefer to work in industries in which loyalty to the organization holds priority over social accountability. Technical communication teachers should take immediate practical action, as well as committing themselves to working for humanistically motivated changes in the ways we think about, value, produce, and inter-
act with our technologies and our institutions. Social action, therefore, should include acknowledging our students' needs to obtain a livelihood with the practice of technical communication, and accepting, as well, the responsibility of preparing them to practice in ways that benefit their entire community and not just their employers or themselves.

Conclusion

It is difficult, from a pragmatic standpoint, to hold technical communicators morally responsible for the social consequences of their texts when they produce such texts from relatively powerless positions within organizational hierarchies. Academic efforts to engender socially responsible values in our technical writing students are often perceived by employers as merely pedantic and irrelevant, and may do little to bring about desirable changes in workplace practices. Yet to theorize a social view of technical communication while teaching a primarily instrumental approach emphasizing skills, tools, and prescriptive rules is not only theoretically inconsistent and perhaps intellectually dishonest, it amounts to an abdication of our own moral responsibility to make students aware of the social effects of their professional practices.

However, our responsibility as teachers is not limited to being intellectually consistent in our theory and pedagogy. If we really want to see technical communication practiced professionally and with social responsibility, we should take practical social action as well. This may involve helping our students find or create alternative sites of practice in which they can not only fully engage in the kind of dialectical negotiation of meanings called for by theorists of the social model of technical communication, but in which they can make a reasonable living, as well.

The responsibility we have as teachers to integrate theory, pedagogy, and social action is not a project to be realized in a syllabus or a new curriculum plan. It requires an on-going commitment to examine the ways our profession and our practices shape and are shaped by social and technological contexts. The particular arrangement that prevails at present, what we now call technical communication, is a practice representing a particular historical conjuncture, a history that we should continue to explore. Let us recognize that as theorists, as teachers, and as social participants we should remain engaged in the ongoing struggle to reconstitute technical communication as a socially responsible practice.
Works Cited


**Gerald Savage** is assistant professor of English at Illinois State University where he teaches technical writing and editing, and coordinates English internships. He has published in the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* and *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences*. 