

The TPC Contact Zone: Preparing Graduate Student Instructors for Students' Writing Realities

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Introduction

Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) and Rhetoric and Composition (RC) scholarship often claim instructors must possess—and teach—discourse-specific knowledge so students may learn how to write for their disciplinary genres and contexts. Lora Anderson writes in her introduction to *Rewriting Work* that acknowledging the “place[s]” where writing happens is an essential prerequisite to engaging with TPC scholarship and pedagogy given that place and context are integral to “identities and ideas about expertise” (11). Similarly, Lisa Melonçon argues TPC scholarship must intentionally “consider the material dimensions of context” by focusing on how, why, and where writing happens in workplace settings (47). These studies stress the importance of crafting a curriculum that teaches the nuances of genre, audience, and rhetorical situation so students may expand their understanding of the myriad reasons for how and why people write across contexts. This socialization often requires interaction with that community and their genres, a sentiment that is reaffirmed by RC scholars, such as Anne Beaufort. Although Beaufort calls for general writing instruction to focus on discourse theory to prepare students to write for their various discourse communities, Beaufort questions: “[C]an a teacher of writing teach one to write for a discourse community the teacher is not a part of?” (58). While this is a useful question for all instructors to think through, it is a particularly important question for graduate students that serve as professional writing instructors. Most Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs) do not have TPC-specific training or experience at the onset of their teaching careers; instead, GSIs are typically only trained in composition, resulting in mixed success achieving TPC course objectives (Doan). This lack of training catches GSIs in what Mary Louise Pratt identifies as a “contact zone,” a space where differing expectations for writing between instructors, students, and administration “meet, grapple and crash with each other” (34). In our experience as GSIs in the TPC contact zone, graduate students “grapple” and “crash” with the expectations that come with performing as “expert” educators, providing expected assessment, and navigating a less-than-familiar administration.

Our article adds to the above existing conversations by acknowledging that awareness of discourse-specific features is integral to teaching writing courses, while also acknowledging, as Sara Doan notes, that often “instructors do not have the requisite content knowledge or the time to plan their pedagogies around these evolving content areas and best practices” (20). Echoing Beaufort’s question: How might a teacher design a course, specifically a TPC course, around social situations and context if the instructor is unfamiliar with the vast rhetorical situations students are writing for in the

workplace? Additionally, how might a teacher design a course wherein enrolled students are writing for vastly different discourse communities?

What follows, then, is an overview of our experiences teaching TPC courses as GSIs at our urban, Midwestern, Research 1 institution. The two courses we describe—*Technical and Scientific Writing* and *Business Writing*—are prerequisite courses, required for students across tracks before enrolling in their capstone or senior seminar course, and they are often taught in an asynchronous, online modality. Students can also opt to take these as electives, and they are therefore treated as general “catch-all” courses for how to write professionally. As our experiences detail, we often teach students in our TPC classrooms who have experience writing for “real world” contexts through their co-ops or internships, and our students’ writing experiences differ dramatically depending upon their discourse community’s writing practices.

Going into teaching TPC, we each expected that we were prepared to teach the genres of technical writing and professional writing given our teaching training in First-Year Composition (FYC), which provided us with knowledge about genre and discourse theory. However, we found our students often had institutional writing experience for professional discourse communities that we, as their instructors, were unfamiliar with. As GSIs, our TPC pedagogy was initially framed through our FYC training, and so, when we entered the contact zone of the TPC classroom, there was a clash between our graduate teacher training and the expectations of the classroom, namely the expectation that we would know how to write for and assess writing for every single discourse community a student participates in. Our experiences echo Sara Doan’s findings in her 2022 study of TPC instructors where she noted that “less experienced instructors typically relied on terminology from composition or classical rhetoric,” resulting in “problems that arise when rhetorical concepts are not used effectively for teaching TPC” (21). In our experience of the TPC contact zone, GSIs are expected to teach TPC genres using their existing knowledge of composition despite the fact that students’ social situations and discourse-specific expectations for writing do not look the same and that instructors often have little to no context for the various professional writing contexts and genres our students write for and within. Following Jamey Gallagher and Kris Messer, this article questions how we teach discourse-specific TPC writing instruction to students “who are already in the real damn world” (147). Teaching GSIs to shift from a FYC focus on “rhetoric as argument” to the problem-solving ethos necessary for TPC courses would help them better equip their students to enter the workforce as adept writers.

To answer the question of how to shift this focus, we use an autoethnographic narrative method to relay our personal experiences of different challenges entering the TPC contact zone. Across our narratives, we consider how GSIs can be supported in developing a pedagogy that is not driven by “what we think is expected of people in the work world” (147), but rather is built around the contextualized rhetorical skills that students’ careers ask of them. Such an approach limits our ability to make claims about TPC outside of our local context. To account for this, we place our experiences as GSIs

teaching TPC into conversation with existing TPC and FYC pedagogies, ultimately identifying these challenges as having structural solutions that can help new instructors bridge the gap between the rhetorical contexts of these two subfields. Though approaching the TPC curriculum with previous coursework on genre theory, Anna and Katie both detail that our FYC training does not always adequately prepare instructors to teach professional genres. Further, while we assumed we might be able to transfer our knowledge of teaching FYC into TPC, Brooke details the difficulty in assessing and engaging with student work when our students are a different audience than the students we teach in FYC. Finally, while we lack specialized training in teaching TPC courses, Alex describes the challenges in making programmatic changes to support writing program administrators (WPA) to bridge the gap between programmatic goals and individual instructors' realities. We conclude our article by describing our solutions towards preparing instructors, particularly GSIs, to teach these courses.

Katie's Narrative

Halfway through my doctoral program, I was excited to teach my first technical writing course. When designing and discussing the course with the program directors, I felt confident in my ability to teach the material. After all, I had almost completed my coursework for the *Professional Writing Certificate*, my electrical engineer father and I often discussed the importance of writing for engineers, and I worked with both undergraduates and graduate students as a writing center tutor for four years. Yet all of my abstract understandings of technical writing did not teach me what technical genres looked like practically; nor did they prepare me for the myriad of contexts that my students brought into the technical writing classroom.

Genre theory examines genres as rhetorically and socially situated. Carolyn Miller suggests that genre should be viewed rhetorically, left "open rather than closed and organized around situated actions" (155). Kerry Dirk and Brad Jacobson et al. suggest that students view genres as informed by rhetorical moves and situations. By considering academic genres in these ways, I am able to navigate most genre conventions well—save for perhaps small quirks in style guide preferences. When I do encounter unfamiliar genres (namely in tutoring settings), I ask students to identify the rhetorical moves/situation and, for questions outside of my scope, direct them to their professors, "the experts" in their genres. These strategies work so long as I am familiar with the social contexts and/or I am not positioned as an expert. Yet these strategies did not transfer into teaching technical writing as I was surprised to find that I had little to no context for the genres I was assessing and was now meant to be "the expert."

I had hoped that my "coach" mentality would help make up for my lack of expertise. After all, John Bean and *Naming What We Know* had taught me that being an expert in material was not needed to teach writing; my novice status could be an asset in FYC. However, I struggled to gain a sense of where and how my online asynchronous students wrote, which ordinarily would be my way of supporting my students as experts in their contexts. This was made more difficult by the fact that I had been given

assignment sheets with no clear guidance on how to ultimately assess the resulting work. I understood that there were specific expectations for these genres, as I'd been generally told the Engineering department had such expectations. However, I had not accounted for the variety of engineering contexts—mechanical to chemical to electrical and more—that my students would be coming from. Stuck between knowing that there were specific expectations my students needed to follow and not knowing what those expectations might be, I had difficulty giving my students meaningful feedback. How could I coach my students on how to navigate genre contexts when I could not even begin to understand how others were assessing them in a concrete way?

My issue here was, mostly, an internal one. While I'd taught FYC for three years before taking on a professional writing course, I could not begin to know what I didn't know about the genres I was asked to teach. This was not helped by the fact that TPC courses are, for job market purposes, framed as easy CV lines. However, the assumption that RC students easily transfer their skills due to their knowledge of genre theory neglects to consider a material reality: GSIs may not know the practical contexts of the genres TPC asks them to teach, as further detailed by Anna below.

Anna's Narrative

While I think fondly of the TPC courses I teach, I nervously stared at my class roster the first time I taught one. The entire class, save two, were majoring in *Information Technology* or *Cybersecurity*, many of whom had extensive experience writing for their field through co-op placements. While my job was to teach these students professional writing genres, I was unsure of their workplace communities' genres and writing style. Would my general *Business Writing* course be of any use to them? The same feeling emerged one year later when I taught the course again. Some students were majoring in *Cybersecurity*; some were on the *Rhetoric & Professional Writing* track and preparing to apply for law school; some were interested in careers in copyediting; some were in interdisciplinary business tracks and pursuing careers in marketing and human resources, among others. Certainly, a student writing for an *Information Technology* field is going to write in different professional genres and write for different audiences than a student who is preparing to learn how to write legal documents. As a result, I found myself agreeing with what Elizabeth Wardle claims is the difficulty in teaching FYC and, as I now see, teaching TPC: "genres make sense to the people who create, use, and change them, but they are difficult, if not impossible, to teach people to write out of context" (768). In other words, the problem with the TPC contact zone is that students are expected to not only write in genres outside of their natural context but also to write in a genre that may not be directly related to their professional discipline.

Is it possible for a teacher of professional writing to teach professional genres when the teacher and students exist in different professional discourse communities? I believe the answer is yes, the teacher can, although perhaps not in a way that emphasizes discourse-specific subject matter or even teaches the broad strokes of what it may mean to write "professionally." The dilemma of a TPC course is that it cannot attach

itself to a specific discourse community. It is not realistic for an instructor to learn how to write for every professional discourse community a student belongs to, nor is it realistic to tell students there is a universal standard for professional writing. What is realistic for many writing teachers is creating a pedagogy that emphasizes students gaining context-specific genre and audience knowledge for the writing they do in their professional lives.

Writing does not exist in a decontextualized vacuum. All writing is situated, contextual, and varies depending upon the text's author, exigence, and audience. Rather than positioning TPC as a catch-all course for learning what it means to broadly write professionally or attempting to teach discourse knowledge in a field we are not literate in, we can maximize our time by positioning TPC classes as an opportunity to encourage student-led reflection about the rhetorical concepts expected for their field. For example, when reflecting on an assignment that asked students to relay "bad news" to an audience based on a provided prompt, a student explained to me that in their field most "bad news" conversations are typically had in-person and rarely done in writing. Why, then, I wondered, was I requiring students to write this genre in a format that did not serve them?

As we moved forward in the class and continued to work on these projects, I adapted my pedagogy to emphasize that all professional writing depends on the discourse community it belongs to. For example, I now have relaxed parameters on genre. As in the above example, instead of requiring students to write a formally written "bad news" message, students may pursue alternative options: if students feel their field communicates these messages verbally, students may submit a script for a verbal conversation or a video that enacts that script. I then ask students to reflect on their intended audience and the rhetorical choices in a cover letter that precedes every individual assignment they submit. Students are expected to reflect upon their intended audience (e.g. the professional discourse they belong to) and explain how their rhetorical choices—the word choices they use, the tone they are using, the mode they have submitted the assignment in, the length of the document, among others—fit their discourse community's expectations for writing and composing. We describe these solutions further in the following sections; although, the challenge in assessing TPC work and teaching a new student audience remained an obstacle, which Brooke describes below.

Brooke's Narrative

When I was asked to teach *Business Writing* for the first time, I immediately thought back to my time in undergrad as a marketing intern and assistant webmaster and hoped that would translate to expertise in the classroom. I was surprised to learn that my limited experience in the business world was vastly more substantial than many of my graduate student peers, and, furthermore was shocked that so many of my students had significantly more business writing experience than I did through co-ops and internships. I was confronted with the question: If my students have more experience

writing in their fields than I do, how am I meant to teach them something new and useful? Furthermore, how am I meant to assess them on their work beyond noting grammatical and syntax errors?

Critical pedagogy and contract grading seemed like one possible answer, particularly as a contract grade seemed to mirror the business environments where so many of my students would be employed. So, I constructed a class that allowed students to use their own expertise in constructing assignments and responding to prompts. I designed an engagement-based contract grade that used similar language as a job contract might and held regular check-ins with students the way that a boss might with a new employee. I received incredibly positive feedback from my students, even the ones who weren't sure why the class was required for them at this stage in their careers. I drew on my own expertise in rhetorical situations, writing for an audience, as well as my limited experience writing in a business setting where that was useful.

However, after spending two semesters using engagement-based contract grades, I was told that this grading scheme was a threat to the standardization required by other schools within the college and was asked to no longer use contract grading when teaching these courses. I felt incredibly frustrated, not least by the fact that I had been teaching this way for a year before anybody noticed, and I was provided no additional assistance for how to shift my syllabus for future teaching semesters. This is not to paint anybody or any program at my university in a negative light; I mention this anecdote because, based on my conversations with other TPC graduate instructors, this lack of ongoing teacher education and support is a systemic issue, not a program-specific one.

Now that I have taught these classes repeatedly, I am much more adept in translating my experience teaching composition classes, but with additional teacher training opportunities that focused on “the high-order concerns of the TPC classroom: purposeful content, ethical reasoning, and audience awareness,” I might have walked into that first *Business Writing* class with a better awareness of my audience—the very skill that business and TPC writing classes are meant to teach (Doan 22). Believing that English composition classes share many of their goals with TPC classes is a misconception; the teachers certainly need overlapping skills, but teaching FYC well does not de facto mean that one can successfully teach TPC courses. This view deeply undercuts the value of TPC courses and inadequately prepares teachers to be successful with a very different audience than they are used to teaching. One solution would be to offer a course for graduate student teachers focused on teaching TPC as well as FYC, as the existing courses for new graduate student teachers typically focus solely on FYC pedagogy and assignments. This added education on how to teach TPC courses would benefit the undergraduate students being taught as well. However, as Alex explains below, programmatic structures, curricula, and larger institutional cultures surrounding writing create challenging conditions for supporting GSI teacher training.

Alex's Narrative

Unlike my coauthors, my introduction to TPC came not through a teaching assignment or graduate course but instead via an academic journal. When I first enrolled as a PhD student in RC, a faculty member in the program shared a job listing with me.

Programmatic Perspectives, a journal focused on WPA for TPC programs, was looking for a copy and production editor to join their editorial team. Having worked for literary journals in the past, I had some experience line-editing and typesetting, and after a short interview, I was offered the position, despite my lack of knowledge about TPC or WPA work. Closely reading accepted manuscripts for *Programmatic Perspectives* offered me a birds-eye view of many different writing programs and key insights into some of the prevailing arguments in the field. When I was first offered the chance to teach courses in TPC, however, I struggled to transfer this theoretical knowledge, mostly circulated between tenured faculty and WPAs, to my own courses.

WPAs in both RC and TPC are tasked with bridging the gap between broader programmatic goals and individual instructors' classroom realities. There are many approaches to achieving this goal, including using a shared curriculum, course shell, or textbook, encouraging/mandating instructors to engage in programmatic professional development and/or mentorship, and carrying out regular assessment and observation efforts to ensure consistency across sections and between instructors. The challenge, particularly for programs that rely on adjuncts and GSIs to teach their most popular courses, is that most of these approaches require labor from these part-time instructors beyond their contracted duties. To respond to this and ensure consistency, our professional writing program provides new instructors with a course shell and textbook, but thus far it has not included GSIs in any of the other approaches above.

While effective in ensuring that all courses follow the same assignment sequence and use the same readings, this approach has significant limitations. As my co-authors have noted, the lack of specialized training leaves many new instructors feeling as though they lack the content knowledge to adequately guide their students through the course. As information in the program flows only one way (from the WPA and full-time instructors to GSIs and adjunct instructors), there is no clear feedback mechanism for instructors to ask for additional support or suggest revisions to the course shells. TPC scholarship offers many solutions to this. For example, recent scholarship outlines the process of developing a graduate orientation for new TPC instructors (Blackmon), describes the value of an advisory board in making programmatic changes (Carrington and Wingerter), and considers how new TPC WPAs transfer knowledge from past roles and contexts into a new programmatic environment (Speicher Sarraf). Yet for instructors like me, who are neither WPAs nor compensated for or expected to engage in programmatic work, these features must be developed and supported by WPAs or full-time faculty to be sustainable.

Practical Strategies

Addressing these thorny problems for new teachers of TPC is not an easy task. Even for more established TPC instructors, Doan argues that there exists a disconnect

between genre-focused instruction and pedagogy, as genre theory has “not always translated into actionable pedagogical methods that enable students to learn how to solve problems using workplace documents” (Doan 24). The most obvious solutions, which we have derived from already-existing graduate student training on teaching FYC—new teacher orientations, regular professional development, mentorship models, and such—are time-, labor-, and resource-intensive, particularly for programs that would be building such structures essentially from scratch. Even better would be the involvement of a broader range of stakeholders—discipline- and industry-specific experts as well as TPC researchers and faculty—both in the development of the curriculum *and* in the development of the instructors most likely to be delivering it. Such an approach productively draws from WAC/WID models that bring together faculty from across institutions to support students’ disciplinary writing practices, but again, finding the resources to develop and sustain such programs is a challenge at many institutions. What is especially difficult for GSIs is that while they might have an awareness of these programmatic or institutional solutions, they are often poorly positioned to instigate these kinds of changes, both due to their temporary positions within programs and their relative lack of power or connections within the broader institution. In TPC programs that rely heavily on graduate student labor to teach courses, administrators should be mindful of this and actively solicit these instructors’ feedback and ideas as they plan for programmatic and curricular changes.

Given these systemic issues, it can be overwhelming for GSIs with limited TPC experience to determine best practices for their courses. That said, we find that there are practical strategies that can be used to bridge the gap between a lack of genre-specific knowledge and what FYC teachers are more familiar with. For instance, discourse communities, which are typically taught in FYC courses, can be a powerful way to help students engage with their own writing and practice metacognition and audience analysis. Teaching students to investigate their professional discourse communities can also empower them to better engage with unfamiliar genres in familiar and unfamiliar settings. This strategy encourages students to consider themselves as experts in their own field and allows the GSI to become a coach in the writing process.

In lieu of practical expertise with TPC contexts, GSIs may benefit from turning to reflections as a component of assessment, particularly for major assignments. While instructors will always need to grade student work based upon their context-specific institutional and departmental standards, we suggest utilizing a flexible grading ethos in TPC classrooms. This ethos necessitates a grading heuristic that grades student work not on what the instructor views as a universal professional “style and correctness,” but rather, assesses work upon students’ metacognitive reflections about how and why their submitted assignment reflects their community’s discourse practices (Elliot 47). In our own TPC classrooms, we typically ask students to submit a memo or cover letter alongside their genre-specific assignment. In these reflective assignments, students consider the rhetorical choices they made and why they made those choices in the submitted assignment, identifying how their rhetorical choices successfully capture their discourse community’s writing practices. Such a reflection is standard in FYC to

facilitate transfer (Robertson, Yancey, & Taczak) and to give students working on non-written texts the ability to share their understanding of the social and rhetorical contexts for their work (Shipka). When applying this assignment to the TPC classroom, students are encouraged to become more aware of what it means to write in their professional workplace, while also giving instructors a place to begin assessing their work based upon the discourse traits described.

Our assessment practice is ultimately guided, again, by the notion that the TPC classroom is a contact zone. We believe our assessment practices should not apply a universal maxim or suggest, even inadvertently, that students are writing in an insufficient way when we may not possess sufficient knowledge of their discourse communities' writing expectations. Ultimately, future research must better attune to assessment methods in TPC. To date, Margaret N. Hundleby and Jo Allen's 2010 *Assessment in Technical Communication* is the only edited collection about TPC assessment, suggesting the TPC field has long "suffered from irregular attention, uncertainty about authentic strategies, and muddled identification of aims" when setting expectations for assessing TPC student work (Elliot 45). No matter the assessment styles used, the most valuable focus for GSIs would be to help students analyze their own discourse communities and practice audience analysis. This allows GSIs to do what they do best: guiding students toward a metacognitive understanding of their needed genres and allowing students to take control of their own learning.

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