

TC Talk

Ep 15 Transcript

A Welcome to TC talk.

B Yes. Welcome.

A You are

B I am Benton.

A and I am

B Abi.

A Tc is technical communication. Could there be a clunkier term?

B You know, when I hear that term, I feel like it needs to be said by C3PO. I'm fluent in over 6 million forms of technical communication. Oh my!

A Well, that makes that a little better. It just doesn't roll off the tongue. And even the abbreviation tech comm is a little clunky. I don't know.

We are going to continue the conversation on social justice in tech comm. We introduced the basics and the books. I just wanted more actual examples of what does it look like to think through and apply social justice in tech comm? And that's where these other couple books come into play.

B Oh,

A Agboka and Matveeva. *Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication*. What is advocacy? To return to your question. They write, "we see advocacy as the process of using a combination of academic and practical skills and knowledge systems to enact social justice with the goal of improving the quality of life for communities." They situate their book in the history of the field. So similar to Walton Moore and Jones, they recognize that tech comm has been kind of aligned with this almost industrial or corporate model. And as a field we don't want to be known as just churning out more cogs in the capitalist machine, right? And they identify the literature that has pushed the field towards preparing students to be citizens who can think critically. And I needed this book when I was writing my teaching philosophy. In fact, these authors were the chairs of the ATTW conference, Association of Teachers of Technical Writing several years back. And the theme of the conference was citizenship and advocacy. And I attended that conference. That was also around the time that I had, I was either preparing to go on the job market or was recently on the job market. And that kind of inspired my thinking about what do I want students to come out of my classes knowing?

In the field, some of the scholarship on citizenship and advocacy has come in the form of service learning in classes or experiential learning. So students writing for non-profits for instance. Have you ever had to do service learning or experiential learning like that?

- B In a way, a lot of senior design projects in engineering are sort of oriented around not exactly service, but working with, my personal one didn't involve working with an industry leader in the area. But a lot of times it'll be something that say a local company, local engineering company doesn't really want to devote all of the resources that it would take to have an actual employee.
- A So they exploit students?
- B Exactly. So they, they instead offer an opportunity for professional development at the same time as getting a lot of low-wage labor out of seniors in engineering programs.
- A Yeah. I mean, the experience is not nothing. It's in the context of a class, so. and that's probably a different situation from what happens in a lot of writing courses, which is that students do work for free, but it's not always that great.
- B That's oftentimes the case for senior design projects too.
- A But your needle-less electrospinning device was successful, was it not?
- B It was successful and I have no idea if it has been used since we finished our design project. Part of the excitement is the 50 thousand volts. It's truly exciting. Let's see, I think that the minimum approach distance for conductors for electrical line workers, for 50 thousand volts. It's gotta be like somewhere between 3 and 4 feet.
- A Your professor was putting his finger in it.
- B Yes, he was. We were mechanical engineers, not electrical, but we needed super high voltage and that made it really funny when he repetitively tried to turn the thing off by touching it and ouch. Fortunately, his grad student was there to bail him out with hitting the button with a pen.
- A I have used experiential learning in my classes. It is super valuable and super intense to plan and manage and follow through on.
- B For the instructor.
- A You know, it requires a commitment from the client as well.
- B Yes.
- A And students really have to step up because the stakes are a little higher for them as well. So it's hard work. I have a lot of respect for instructors who do that more regularly than I have. I've also done service learning as an undergraduate.
- B What manner of service learning?
- A It did not go well. Okay, so when I was a freshman in my first year speech class, we had to go volunteer somewhere for X number of hours and then give a speech on the experience. And I was the worst student because I knew there was this unspoken

template for what the speech needed to be like and it needed to be this kind of I didn't know this and then I learned that and now I'm inspired. The people I'm helping, helped me more than, you know? And I knew the narrative.

B Okay. You saw the genre conventions staring you down.

A Yeah. So I was a nightmare, I mean, in retrospect, a nightmare to my teacher and flipped that around and went up and I gave my speech. And I basically said, I didn't change anyone's life. I didn't even learn very much. And if I had a student do that, I'd be like, okay, edge lord. Good for you? The only reason I don't look back at that experience with 100% cringe is that the class loved it. And even the teacher was in tears laughing. So I'm going to call that a success.

B Where did you volunteer?

A It was a thrift store, so sorting through donations and there was a lot that wasn't, you know,

B Sellable.

A Exactly.

B Oh thanks for giving us 40 pairs of heavily used underpants. That's just wonderful.

A Yeah, it was pretty impersonal. But at the same time, someone has to do that work, right? The other time. And again, I feel terrible in retrospect because the professor had set up this very lovely partnership with a health group on campus that needed to get the word out about folic acid. 400 micrograms for women of child-bearing age. And I'm not a good reader of Minnesota nice. And so when our client was displeased with our work, I didn't pick up on it. But another student in our group did and she redid our project single handedly.

B You let someone do that?

A No, I didn't know she was doing it. By the way, I have learned lessons from this. And I use this very example when talking to students about group work and the challenges therein. And it was an excellent example of my complete and utter failure to consider the audience. The main problem was that my design involved a psychedelic pattern and the phrase, Are you on acid? on the front cover. Because I thought it would be eye-catching.

B You were an edgelord.

A So the redesign had a picture of, you know, stock photos of young women. Now, these experiences weren't framed specifically around social justice. The first one had potential, I think, if we could have gotten into what are the underlying structures that lead to people needing this charity, whatever it was, homelessness perhaps. And it gives me perspective on where some of my students are coming from. This was a fun walk down memory lane, but we gotta get it back on track. The book addresses how advocacy can play out in tech comm research and teaching. But I want to focus on the teaching aspect because that's what feels most immediately implementable to me.

And the first chapter I want to talk about is actually the last chapter in the book. Because I think that the author makes a really clear case for how advocacy, like social justice, isn't just an add-on, but is integral to tech comm, whether or not we're aware of it. Technical communicators are advocates. Most obviously, they're advocates for users, in theory,

Hopefully, yeah.

or should be. But they're also advocating certain positions. Some writing is obviously more overtly political than other writing. But it's still, you know, coming from certain assumptions about how things should be. Sarah Warren Riley wrote this. Her article is about using social media as a place to look for advocacy, and as a place to practice advocacy. She writes, "technical communicators need to be aware of their power and their savvy as researchers and communicators, ultimately as advocates who can make things happen in the world." She has a series of activities including analyzing their own social media use for what are kind of the underlying, what are, what are you advocating for? Even subtly or unintentionally?

I also want to highlight another chapter by Lucía Durá on asset-based thinking.

B Asset, not acid.

A Are you on acid? So this is essentially looking at strengths rather than weaknesses in a given situation. Asset-based thinking is meant to be highly participatory. It's learning solutions from members of a local community. And I loved this chapter because even though she's talking about big ideas like ways to structure a whole project around community-based participatory research, she also talks about how this can simply represent a shift in thinking in, in how you approach a problem. We can be so focused on solving problems, on fixing things, that we don't focus on what might be working and who is making it work and how.

B Interesting.

A Yeah. She talks about this strategy in a couple of client projects she did. One is in a hospital, on strategies to reduce infections that people get while in the hospital. So what they did was they talked to medical staff and basically asked, how do you solve this problem. And they got a bunch of ideas. They were able to narrow down and actually implement some of them. And some of those ideas were have patients teach their family members to wash their hands. If you are to teach someone else about something, you got to learn it yourself. And the infection rate gradually went down after they implemented some of these practices. The typical approach to problem-solving is imposing these top-down best-practices.

B Yep. And anybody who has been in a corporation knows all about the regular stream of bullshit that comes flying from corporate down to the front lines and says, okay, we're changing things. We're going to do this and we're going to do that and change is implemented by someone who has no practical idea of, like you said, what is working well, who is making it work?

- A Uh-huh. And the thing is, best practices are legitimate. Their best practices for a reason, they're likely research-based, evidence-based. But those are going to play out differently in local contexts.
- B More often though, honestly, corporations are, they'll call them new standard operating procedure, rather than making the claim that they are the best practices, because are they really going to research that? Probably not. I'm a cynic.
- A The nice thing about these local practices is that you don't have to work so hard to get buy-in for them because people are already doing them. It's, it's just a matter of expanding it. So best practices aren't bad, but it's also worthwhile to recognize what are the local ways to enact or adapt those practices to make them actually work for the real people carrying them out.

About a third of this whole book is focused on teaching specifically. My favorite thing about these chapters is that they had assignment sheets included.

- B Really?
- A Yes. And I want to touch on a few that I would love to assign at some point. Starting with Jessica Edwards' chapter on inclusive practices in the tech comm classroom. She talks about three sort of places to engage diversity in a class, including foundational perspectives, content, and teaching practices. So there's lots of different points at which you can incorporate social justice perspectives. And she shares what sounds like a really useful assignment. Make an infographic about a building on campus. So you're getting the practice with visual design. But you also need to share the history of the building. And how does this history engage diversity or social justice? And I can think of other ways you could connect a building to social justice, for instance, the accessibility issue.
- B Wheelchair accessibility.
- A Yes. Are there elevators, for instance? Is there a lactation room? I don't know. Like, these things that a privileged person wouldn't go out looking for because they wouldn't need it. But for those who need those resources, you really notice it when they're missing. So I think that could be really valuable.

Okay, another one, by Robert Rowan on open source tech comm in the classroom. He gets at the idea of citizenship and advocacy by teaching students how to be digital citizens, by contributing to their own online communities. And by community, I mean, not necessarily academic or professional, but based around a hobby, perhaps.

- B Like foraging for mushrooms.
- A Video games.
- B Oh video games, that too.
- A I mean, it could be largely anything that there's some, you know, a fan wiki around, or some kind of participatory website. And have students actually develop content for it, so you're tapping into something that they already care about. They're having to do that audience analysis, figure out what's there, what's missing? What can I add? Do

the research to develop that. And I love this idea because it ties in so well with what we were talking about in the Moby-Dick episode, that is, Tech Comm's Existential Questions, where we talked about the golden age of technical communication. Remember?

B What was the golden age?

A Everybody's doing it. Tech comm is not just the province of professionals. Again, I love the idea of having students draw from their own passions and interests. I saw a little bit of this actually when we had to pivot to online at the start of the pandemic. Because typically in my gen ed tech comm class I do a group-based project to create instructions. This time, that was not really feasible. So I framed it as, What are you an expert in? How can you teach somebody else about that? People did instructions for how to repot a plant, how to repair a hole in the wall because your roommate punched it in a fit of anger.

B Hopefully it's ex-roommate.

A How to make sambusa, how to, oh this is a good one. How to get your cat to sit on your shoulders. Which no, At first I was like, Is this a thing? But I tell you what she made a PowerPoint about it. It's legit, like if you want to go hiking and bring your cat along, they have to be comfortable perched on your shoulders. That is a gradual process.

B It's a stretch, but so is having your cat ride on your fucking shoulders.

A How to make bagels from scratch? I got a bunch of air fryer recipes actually.

B Have we tried them?

A We have, because remember you had just gotten the air fryer for Christmas?

B That's true, yes.

A And so I was like, Heck, yeah, teach me how to make cream cheese wontons in the air fryer.

The last book is Equipping Technical Communicators for Social Justice work. This is also an edited collection, this time by Walton and Agboka. And this is the most recent of the three. This is from 2021, and it's basically a direct response to that need for accounts of actual practice that was kinda set up in the social justice turn book. So really similar to the Citizenship and Advocacy book, but more closely focused on social justice versus advocacy, which is, a little broader, perhaps? Certainly related.

And as with the last book, I'm going to highlight just a few of the chapters. They're all excellent. But again, thinking in terms of what might I be able to use? A chapter by Emily Legg and Adam Strantz, "I'm surprised that this hasn't happened before: An Indigenous Examination of UXD..."

B That's user experience design.

- A Thank you, “failure during the Hawai’i missile false alarm.” That was in January 2018. What do you remember hearing about it?
- B So this was around the time that North Korea was doing some missile tests, they were getting progressively more capability in terms of altitude, distance they could go with the missile payload. That sort of thing. Within their range was Hawai’i. So that’s the backdrop of this event when there was not a missile coming in, but the emergency alert system sent texts to everyone in Hawai’i that there was a missile inbound.
- A And this is not a drill. It literally said that. I think it took at least a half hour to actually get the correction out. In the grand scheme of things, not super long, but long if you are certain those are the last 30 minutes of your life.
- B Yeah.
- A And I really appreciate how they open their chapter because they paint this picture of the absolute terror that the citizens of Hawai’i must have felt whereas from our perspective, it was just another news item. The authors then explained how things unfolded on Twitter where UX designers had a field day with this interface for the alert system. Here, let me show you.
- B Oh wow, yeah.
- A So see here how there’s like no sense of hierarchy in the menu. Drills are included in the same drop-down as the real thing. Very easy to confuse that. They write, “while the public’s attention was immediately drawn to the problems of the missile launch interface, very little attention was given to the impact that even a false missile launch alarm had on the residents of Hawai’i. Even less was paid to the indigenous native Hawai’ians. For them, even the possibility of becoming a military target is a reminder of the US occupation of the Hawai’ian Islands since 1893.” That did not cross my mind at all when I heard about this. I mean, I think my reaction was something along the lines of this is dumb and awful. It’s an excellent example of how that focus on the technical side drowned out the community’s real needs. They write, “the designer asks, how can we redesign this missile warning system interface? While their users want to discuss the need for such a system in the first place.”
- B How about you make us not a target?
- A No joke. Yes, human-centered design is a good thing, but it’s not enough. In UX, there is often this focus on perhaps the relationship between humans and the computer or the app or whatever. But an Indigenous UX approach, quote, “considers the myriad relationships the object has with the intangible, beyond the human, non-human network, the histories, policies, cultures, practices, stories.” So there’s a lot more going on there that we’re going to miss if we’re focused on a drop-down menu.
- B Yeah.
- A Just a couple of ways that they applied this indigenous UX framework to the missile alert. One change could be as simple as using place names that the Indigenous people use. So Hawai’i with the apostrophe.

B Yes, Hawai'i.

A Versus the Anglicized version. Another thing I like is that they build the possibility of failure into their framework. Because sometimes an interface redesign can't solve the real problem. Yet, failure shouldn't be seen as an endpoint, but a chance to reflect and prepare yourself to be proactive in the future.

They're not talking about teaching per se, but I think this would make a great case in class to show that importance of taking a step back, not diving into the surface level design fixes, but really taking the time to understand the impacts on specific groups of marginalized people that tend to get overlooked.

Here's another chapter that was great. Remember the episode we did called What Could Go Wrong?

B Right. With the duckling.

A We talked about how difficult it is for designers to think past the benefits that they intend for their product and think through the potential negative consequences. This book has introduced me to a tool that can facilitate that thinking. This is in a chapter called the Tarot of Tech, where the author, Hopton, talks about this tool, a deck of tarot looking cards that have various categories of questions like, what could a bad actor do with your product? Or what is the most unsustainable behavior your product encourages. So forcing yourself to look at those potential negatives. This isn't the only tool like this there's also things like the Envisioning Cards from the Value Sensitive Design Research lab. I will link to that as well. But the tarot format is kind of fun. In her classes, she shares a case study of Norman Borlaug.

B Norman Borlaug. He is responsible for wheat being what it is today.

A He wanted to end world hunger.

B He wanted to end world hunger. And the way that he wanted to do that was to make wheat more efficient. If you look at old timey pictures of wheat fields, the wheat is like as tall as people. Now, wheat plants will come up to your knee. And it isn't that people have gotten taller. Back when we had tall wheat, it wasn't harvested by machines, it was harvested by people who would tie it in sheaves, take the grain off and thresh it, usually with animal power. And then the straw that was left would be used for all of the work animals. With the Industrial Revolution, we were phasing out work animals and farms. We had no need for all of that straw on a wheat plant. So he said, let's make it semi dwarf. And so it is putting no energy into getting to be six feet tall. And that energy is instead going into the grain.

A He got the Nobel Prize for, you know, essentially saving millions of lives from starvation around the world. But what could go wrong? Well, what did go wrong?

B Because he developed this super efficient wheat, in the capitalist system we have, it out-competed and basically ran all of the other wheat varieties out of town. We lost a lot of diversity of wheat. It was planted with herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers.



A Yeah, the monoculture thing. So not great results environmentally. And it's not like we have to look at that situation and say, oh, our choice is between solving world hunger and the environment, right. There's that binary thinking I was talking about earlier. Instead, how can we plan ahead to minimize harms?

She also acknowledges in this chapter that thinking of design in this way is expensive. It slows you down.

B Everyone up the food chain from you is like get it done.

A She talks about how technical communicators can use technical communication of their own to make a case for slowing down. Things like making a budget impact statement. Case studies to show your company how this has played out with other companies who either did or did not incorporate that social justice thinking. Again, we should do these things because we desire a more just society. But working in a context where profit is essentially all that matters, you need to be prepared to fight that current.

B It's true.

A So you have to get persuasive. Again that's why I appreciate books like this. Because of this turn in the field students are learning different things in their classes about what technical communication is and what it can do. They are going to enter the workforce and hopefully do their part to turn their little steering wheel towards justice.

Last one, "Election Technologies as a Tool for Cultivating Civic Literacies in Tech Comm." This is by Sanchez, Dorpenyo and Sano-Franchini. They talk about the potential for theming a course or assignment around elections and the technologies and communications surrounding elections.

B Interesting.

A Yes. And deliberately fostering that citizenship. Voting is more confusing than it should be. Let's be honest. We know that voting is in many cases, deliberately confusing or deliberately onerous. So that is a place for technical communicators to potentially intervene.

B Where the legal entities are failing to.

A Yes. Another time I've touched on this has been in talking about usability. I've used the example of the infamous Florida butterfly ballot.

B Yes. Damn you, chad.

A For the youngins in our audience, the 2000 election between Al Gore, George W Bush, It all came down to Florida. And the design of the ballot may have had something to do with it.

B It started to really get into the weeds in determining who was being voted for on this particular ballot or was it valid or not? The Supreme Court just stepped in and anointed Bush as the winner of the election.

A We could have had a president in 2000

B Who gave two shifts about climate change.

A Yeah.

B And wasn't necessarily inclined to get us stuck in two 20-year long, endless wars.

A So needless to say, usability matters, citizenship matters, social justice matters. Have you ever heard of the butterfly effect?

B Yes.

A I find it funny that this butterfly ballot seemed to set off a butterfly effect. It's such a tiny thing. But the repercussions have been so sweeping.

B Yeah, I mean it's been a national disaster for 22 years.

A Yeah. You could address the role of social media in swaying elections. And the focus of this chapter, redistricting maps.

B It's a process that is ongoing at this moment.

A As we speak. Yes. Not everyone has heard of gerrymandering. This is a place to introduce that. The authors write "the maps produced may conform to best design practices. Yet at the same time, hide on-the-ground inequities that can only be seen and felt when the ballots are counted." I actually told you about this as I was reading, I had you try out that computer game. How did that go for you?

B The gerrymandering thing, it was basically come up with ways to divide red and blue voters into different groups, such that

A you get a certain result. So this instructor, he had students play the redistricting game and reflect on it. What other types of tech comm are involved in elections that you can think of? well, policies, obviously, like voter ID laws and such. You were an election judge.

B I was.

A in 2020. Tell me about it. Did you have to teach people how to register to vote?

B I wouldn't say that I had to teach people how to. I just kind of had to walk them through it. Maybe that is teaching them. People who had showed up and hadn't registered in Minnesota, we are able to register them right there at the polls same day, which, it is fucking madness that anywhere in the United States does not have that ability. The rest of you states get your shit together. Okay, stepping off my soapbox.

A Let me interject here. Those are issues that students can advocate for. Have them work with local groups that are fighting for greater voting access. If I remember correctly, weren't you having people sign a petition for ranked choice voting in Minnesota a while back?

- B That was in 2018. I hung around the polls for awhile to get signatures for people to say they were interested in ranked choice voting. For those of you who are familiar with it, good for you, for the rest of you, ranked choice voting is also known as instant runoff voting. In races where you have more than two people, it is possible for nobody to get a majority of the votes.
- A We don't need to get into what exactly it is. But I will say this, it's not entirely intuitive how it works. But the results are much, I think, fairer in that it breaks us away from that. I'm going to vote for the better of the two evils. How does that saying go?
- B Yeah. The lesser of two evils.
- A I'm going to vote for the lesser of two evils, which is problematic in and of itself.
- B Without getting into the nuts and bolts of how it works. It is very simple for voters, because people know how to put things in order. People, people know how to say like, I like this one most and this one next, and this one next. that's easy. The counting of it, that's where the hard part is. And that land squarely on the works.
- A Although it sounds like if you're going to rank a list of more than two, that is going to require more active participation on the part of citizens to learn about those candidates.
- B Yeah.
- A That's not a bad thing.
- B That's true. Some people are only going to rank 1. That's fine. If they pick someone who gets the least votes in the first round then their vote just won't count anymore.
- A Most people know who they absolutely don't want.
- B Yes. And so they will put them last or not on their ballot, which is fine. It gives people more options to engage.
- A Is ranked-choice voting going anywhere in Minnesota?
- B It is in local elections in Bloomington, Minneapolis. There's a couple of other Twin Cities suburbs.
- A So it has caught on a little bit, but it needs more awareness around it.
- B Yes. More importantly, it needs to be implemented in statewide elections.
- A All that to say, these are things that are complex and technical. Perhaps not even complex, but just need to be explained in a way that's understandable to a range of audiences. This is an opportunity for Technical Communication. I, for one, I'm feeling kinda pumped up just having had this conversation. How about you?
- B Yeah, I feel really heartened, if that if that works in this case, that tech comm is figuring out ways to maybe not necessarily be subversive, but to

A go against the grain,

B go against the grain and de-defaultize the audience as straight white man.

A Again, just want to acknowledge all of these authors I've mentioned. I am grateful that they're doing this work and they're putting it out there. Even so, I've only mentioned a handful of the people doing work that touches this topic in one way or another. More to come, I'm sure. But I hope our listeners come away with some ideas about research that they might want to engage a little more closely with.