ETHICS, PROFESSIONALISM, AND THE SERVICE COURSE: RHETORICS OF (RE)FRAMING IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM IN THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SERVICE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COURSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Communication and Rhetorical Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational the Service Course in the Discipline and the Academy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Forward: Framing the Discipline</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. FRAMES, RHETORIC, AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing Theory and Rhetoric</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing in the Classroom</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Analysis</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing Technical Communication</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. THE SHIFTING “GOOD” OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION: A FRAME ANALYSIS OF</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOLARLY AND PEDAGOGICAL DISCUSSIONS OF ETHICS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economic Efficiency Frame for Technical Communication Education</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rise of the Ethical Practices Framework for Technical Communication</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Survey on Ethics and Professionalism in the Technical Communication</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Framing the Discipline for Students and Practitioners</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. THE PROBLEM OF PROFESSIONALISM: POSITIONING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS PROFESSIONALS AND THE DISCIPLINE AS A PROFESSION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism as Workplace Competence</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism as Ethos</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism as a Social Role (and Legal Status)</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism in the Service Course: An Analysis of Original Survey Data</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ETHICAL PROFESSIONALISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE TECHNICAL</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Intersection of Ethics and Professionalism</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professionalism as a Frame for Technical Communication</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professionalism and Civic Engagement Pedagogies</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professionalism, the Service Course, and the Future of the</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTERWORD</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1, Tenets of the Economic Efficiency and Ethical Practices Frames ....................56
Table 2, Versions of the Professionalism Frame........................................................87
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines scholarly and classroom discussions that introduce technical communication students and practitioners to the concepts of ethics and professionalism. Through an analysis of scholarship, textbooks, and original survey data, I trace the development of a number of rhetorical frames used to articulate the role of the technical communicator in the workplace and in society to insiders and outsiders alike. I then propose an alternate frame, ethical professionalism, that can be used to articulate technical communication (and in particular the service course) as a site for outreach, not only through pedagogies that address the needs of local communities, but also as a site of ethical, professional, and civic instruction for students in disciplines outside of the humanities.
1. ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM IN THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SERVICE COURSE

Challenger. Three Mile Island. Ford Pinto. Weapons of Mass Destruction. Enron. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Each of these names is associated with mismanagement of information, communications breakdown, and (although the scale varies widely) disaster. Careers ruined. Investments unrequited. Businesses collapsed. Lives lost. And upon reflection, opportunities for intervention missed. Somewhere along the line, shouldn’t these businessmen, engineers, and politicians have learned how to act more ethically, behave more professionally?

The discipline of technical communication has experienced tremendous growth since its inception as a writing course for under-literate engineers over one hundred years ago. Course offerings, enrollment, and professional and academic employment opportunities have increased dramatically. Certification programs, undergraduate majors and minors, and graduate degrees in technical communication offer a great range of training and career options. Our body of theory is exponentially larger and more diverse than that available to early instructors and practitioners. And the discipline’s value, or at least its usefulness, is increasingly recognized across the academy. The technical communication service course is now a required writing course for students in a variety of majors at many institutions. This last development is significant, not just because of its monetary impact on technical communication programs, but also because instructors of the service course today have access to a broad range of students from a variety of disciplines.
Collaboration with such a diverse student body presents opportunities as well as challenges. Students bring their own disciplinary knowledge and perspectives to the class, enriching their own work and that of the class as a whole. Students also bring experiences with writing in diverse contexts outside of the norm for English or communication majors; as a result they can teach us much about the value of writing in other disciplines. But designing a curriculum for an audience with varied backgrounds and goals can prove difficult. Technical communication itself must be defined in such a way that it is seen as contributing to a broad range of careers. Differences in perspective, culture, and even epistemology can lead to miscommunication or disagreement about terms or concepts such as *ethics*, *professionalism*, and even *work*. In addition, when students conceive of the technical communication course as external to their own disciplinary work, the material can come to be viewed as an obstacle to overcome rather than as valuable to their professional communication.

This dissertation offers one approach to the service course that has the potential to transcend disciplinary differences and unite instructors and students in a common pursuit: the ability to contribute to local and professional communities through writing. Technical communication is, at its heart, a form of communicative *praxis* that is practiced in civic arenas, with real and often very public consequences. Technical communicators mediate between specialists and nonspecialists in a variety of fields; the practice of technical communication is thus not limited to those with degrees or certification germane to the discipline-proper. Our skills and disciplinary knowledge are relevant to—even important for—those in many academic disciplines and career tracks, and because the service
course is a requirement for students in a variety of disciplines, we have an opportunity to work with those populations and educate them about the power and responsibilities of rhetoric in public spaces.

The service course introduces the discipline to an audience of nonmajors culled from programs across college campuses. In this context, instructors must define the nature and applications of technical communication as well as the role of the professional technical communicator in society in broad enough terms to include those whose job descriptions do not include the words “technical” or “communicator.” The undertaking is a contentious one—scholars within the discipline have yet to develop a widely accepted definition within their own circles, and some follow Jo Allen’s lead in refusing to endorse a concrete definition of the discipline. Allen claims that to define technical communication would be to emphasize limited features, types, and technologies of the practice and neglect the “variations the future will bring” for technical communicators (“Case” 75). Instructors of the service course must nonetheless find ways to discuss technical communication that respond to the many competing goals present in the classroom: Students, instructors, English departments, and students’ home programs and parent colleges all have their own expectations and goals for what the course should be. As a result, instructors and scholars have adopted strategies for accommodating these competing goals while still emphasizing the civic mission valued in the humanities. One such strategy is the careful development of rhetorical frames that emphasize the common values of technical communication and other disciplines.
Two sets of related values and concerns—ethics and professionalism—are the foci of this dissertation. These two frames allow instructors and scholars to engage in conversations about the societal role of the technical communicator as a public figure with access to specialized information and a duty to take “socially responsible action” (C. Miller, “What’s Practical” 23). In addition, due to their prominence in media and within the academy, ethics and professionalism as master concepts have the potential to bridge the cultural and epistemological differences between those training to be technical communicators and those who take an introductory technical communication course in preparation for a variety of other careers. Indeed, ethics and professionalism are common topics of conversation and even debate in other “professionalized” fields such as law and medicine (the differences between fields as professions and professionalism as an ideal are discussed in chapter 4). But for students in “nonprofessional” disciplines, including those in the humanities, these concepts are often integrated into writing courses like the technical communication service course, if they are brought up at all (Russell). Because, more and more frequently, other departments send students to the service course for professionalization and “humanizing”—holistic education in the tradition of the humanities rather than purely career-oriented training—this course is a key site for ethical, professional, and civic instruction for students from a variety of disciplines.

I contend that ethics and professionalism as master terms represent two (often but not always opposing) forces that have shaped the discipline as it has developed from early engineering writing courses into the multifaceted, increasingly well-theorized discipline it is has become in the 21st century. On one hand, many instructors trained in
the tradition of the humanities share a common desire for technical communication to be more than a set of simple forms and skills. On the other, technical communication specialists have long been motivated by political and material conditions to stake out professional territory for themselves, which has often resulted in an emphasis on demonstrations of workplace proficiency. In addition, a number of historical circumstances have motivated shifts in scholarship, practices, and curricula: early calls for increased basic literacy skills among engineers; the location of most technical communication programs within English departments; a material dependence on junior faculty, adjuncts, and graduate students to teach introductory courses; and the development of graduate programs in technical communication, to name but a few.

In addition to the ways in which calls for increased professionalism and more or differently ethical practices have shaped the discipline, the two frameworks have been employed together productively to help the discipline look inward and deepen its theoretical perspective regarding its own practices. Modern uses of each term often imply the other: Professionalism as “dedicated service to the ideals of the profession” necessitates some code of ethics common to practitioners (J. Allen, “Case” 69), while ethics have increasingly come to be viewed as situated within particular contexts and acts, including and especially the professional realm. Indeed, two of the discipline’s most prominent professional organizations—the Society of Technical Communicators (STC) and Association for Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW)—have drafted formal ethical guidelines for their members. The intersections of ethics, professionalism, and technical communication are complicated even further in the service course, however. Students in
the service course may not share a common set of professional ideals because of their differing goals and training. Different disciplines may also foster different senses of what it means to act ethically. For ethics and professionalism to serve as usable touchstones in this setting, instructors of the service course must take responsibility and define them in ways that transcend disciplinary boundaries and truly motivate students to think and act as agents of positive influence in the public sphere.

Throughout this dissertation, I will attempt to answer the following questions: How can framing theory inform scholarship, pedagogy, and practices in technical communication? What do ethics and professionalism contribute to technical communication theory and pedagogy that other frames do not? Where do those master frames intersect, and how can the overlap between the two be used to improve practice and pedagogy? The remainder of this chapter discusses technical communication pedagogy through a lens of classical rhetorical education, explicates the service course as a site of outreach to students in multiple disciplines, and outlines the research project that is the foundation of chapters to come.

Technical Communication and Rhetorical Education

Contrary to the perceptions of many outside the discipline (and historically more than a few within) the practice of technical communication is highly rhetorical. More than simply placing technical information into accepted, standardized forms, technical communication is a complex and highly contextual act that requires a keen understanding of audience and purpose. In addition, technical communication is a form of deliberative
discourse that impacts lives, as Steven Katz ably demonstrates by analyzing a memo recommending improvements to Nazi extermination vans in “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust.”¹ A great deal of modern scholarship emphasizes the rhetorical dimensions of technical communication, ranging from the use of Aristotle’s appeals to methods of audience analysis. Technical communication instructors housed within the humanities have also managed to incorporate a humanistic agenda into their courses through lessons and pedagogies centered on civic engagement.

Walter Ong is one of many noteworthy scholars to assert that for humans, communication exists to persuade rather than purely transmit information. In “Writing Is a Technology that Restructures Thought,” Ong writes:

> Knowledge itself is not object-like: it cannot be transferred from one person to another physically even in oral communication, face-to-face, or *a fortiori* in writing. I can only perform actions—produce words—which enable you to generate the knowledge in yourself. (25)

What Ong depicts as the nature of all communication is certainly true of technical communication, despite the fact that the practice has often been cast as an objective reporting of facts. Cezar Ornatowski asserts that technical communication, and indeed all scientific discourse, is inherently persuasive, writing, “[T]he products of science (scientific facts) and technology (technological artifacts) are products of encounters between people, needs, resources, and exigencies, mediated through discourse,” and are thus rhetorical (34). Marilyn Samuels too stresses the rhetorical nature of technical communication, writing, “[T]echnical writing is a recreation of reality for special

¹ Although Patrick Moore disputes Katz’s assertion that an ethic of expediency underlies all technical communication on a number of points, he does not take issue with Katz’s portrayal of technical communication as a form of deliberative discourse with public consequences.
purposes,” but in anticipation of criticism of this view of writing she also notes that it is “an act of creation without departing from the truth” (11).

Technical communication, like any other form of persuasive communication, involves elements of *ethos, pathos,* and *logos* (see Grimshaw and McCarron for an early discussion of the modes of persuasion in technical communication). Though the latter has historically been the focus of technical communication due to its association with scientific and engineering writing,² *ethos* and *pathos* too are now recognized as inseparable from the context of technical communication. For all too long, the preferred *ethos* of technical communication was a constructed façade of objectivity, but recent scholarship has highlighted the importance and inescapability of authorial presence in any work of writing or communication (Lee Brasseur; Carolyn Miller, “Humanistic”; and Brenda Sims all discuss this issue at length from a technical communication perspective). Pathetic appeals too are inseparable from any form of communication, although they are often described within the discipline as potential distractions to efficient communication. The 8th edition of Mike Markel’s introductory textbook, *Technical Communication,* warns that technical communicators should “combine emotional appeals with appeals to reason [and] not overstate or overdramatize them, or you will risk alienating readers” (162). While this common view portrays the pathetic appeal as a supplement at best to technical communication (a position I find reductive and inaccurate), it does acknowledge the existence, if not the power, of the third of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals.

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² See Little for a discussion of how *logos* has been misrepresented in modern definitions of rhetoric.
Aristotle’s appeals are not the only classically rhetorical elements of technical communication: Carolyn Miller ascribes a civic component to technical communication in “What’s Practical about Technical Writing?” arguing that technical communication is a “practical rhetoric” that entails “arguing in a prudent way toward the good of the community” (23). Miller calls this kind of practical rhetoric praxis, in which technical communicators exercise “prudential judgment, the ability (and willingness) to take socially responsible action” (23). Social responsibility requires a kind of practical wisdom, which Dale Sullivan refers to as the phronesis of technical communication. Phronesis “enables a person to deliberate about the good rather than the expedient and, as such, to act in the political sphere rather than [exclusively] in the sphere of work” (378). Such wisdom, Sullivan argues, is absolutely necessary in practitioners of technical communication, who are involved in matters of public safety and policy.

While praxis and phronesis have been used to describe the ways in which technical communicators address ethical concerns, some scholars refer to classical rhetoric to describe the practical elements of the discipline. Both Carolyn Miller and Dale Sullivan discuss the basic skills, technologies, and forms of technical communication as techne, the art of production. Each scholar points out, however, that to define technical communication as techne without also treating it as praxis is both reductive and dangerous. Ken McAllister and Ryan Moeller discuss the techne of technical communication as “the ‘way’ of the hammer”—an intuitive feel for the craft developed through experience—as opposed to the hammer as an instrument or the act of hammering (185). McAllister and Moeller see education in techne as an opportunity for students to
learn approaches to craft that are valuable on their own terms, though certainly enhanced by the kind of practical wisdom espoused by Miller and Sullivan. Still others see the kind of artisanship described by McAllister and Moeller as a modern instantiation of *metis*. de Certeau describes *metis* as “a form of intelligence that is always ‘immersed in practice,’ which combines ‘flair, sagacity, foresight, intellectual flexibility, deception, resourcefulness, vigilant watchfulness, a sense of opportunities, diverse sorts of cleverness, and a great deal of acquired experience’” (81). *Metis* here might be seen as a kind of craftiness—in both the positive and negative senses—unless it is tempered by something like *phronesis* to ensure ethical practices in the public arena.

The emerging focus on rhetoric in technical communication scholarship has led numerous scholars to describe the technical communication course as a form of rhetorical education akin to that practiced in ancient Greece and Rome during the first few centuries BCE and CE. Steven Katz points out in “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust” that technical communication is a type of civic, deliberative discourse, much like the legal and political oratory taught by Aristotle. Katz writes that, as a form of deliberative rhetoric, technical communication is concerned with “decision and action” and “perhaps even more than other kinds of rhetorical discourse, always leads to action, and thus always impacts on human life” (259). Service-learning advocate James Dubinsky also connects technical communication to classical rhetorical education, noting that in ancient Greece and Rome, a rhetor’s work “involved a commitment to the polis, to society” (“Status” 26). Citing Isocrates and Quintilian as his inspirations, Dubinsky writes that the dual purposes of the technical communication
classroom should be to teach a useful skillset and “inculcate a sense of civic idealism” in the hopes of molding students into the classical ideal rhetorician: “orators and citizens who put their knowledge and skills to work for the common good” (“Service-Learning” 62). And though she is not writing specifically about technical communication, Sharon Crowley cites Gorgias and Cicero as her exemplars when she contends in “Composition Is Not Rhetoric” that “any practice entitled to be called ‘rhetoric’ must intervene in some way in social and civic discursive networks.”

In the past 30 years, numerous technical communication scholar-instructors have used ongoing discussions of rhetorical education as springboards to develop a strong sense of civic obligation in their pedagogies. The service-learning model espoused by Dubinsky, Catherine Matthews and Beverly Zimmerman, and Darold Henson and Kristine Sutliff, among others, specifically encourages students to engage public issues through collaboration with nonprofits and other community organizations. The civic simulation pedagogy articulated by David Reamer, Brian Jackson, and Erik Juergensmeyer is intended to foster “rhetorical literacy—the ability to perform eloquently and analyze critically in different situations for practical purposes” (111). Andrew Mara’s charettes pedagogy, likewise, is designed to “help teachers and students successfully perform critical citizenship within professional practice” (220). Other pedagogies incorporate perspectives including usability studies (Mirel) and stakeholder theory (Kimme Hea) in order to encourage students to engage the public in their own research and practices.
It is clear that technical communication education is highly rhetorical. In addition to the simple fact that technical communication, like all communication, is persuasive in nature, instructors have begun to incorporate the values of ancient rhetorical education into their pedagogies. Perhaps the most significant element of today’s rhetorical education is its focus on rhetoric as a civic act, a practice that takes place in public spaces and affects human lives. I contend that this emphasis on the civic, more than anything else, is what technical communication has to offer students in the service course: an awareness of their potentialities and responsibilities as public rhetors. Constructing those lessons for the service course, however, can be a tricky task due to competing goals and expectations impacting curriculum development.

Situating the Service Course in the Discipline and the Academy

As has been well documented, the first technical communication courses were writing courses for engineers in the early American land-grant university. Following the American Civil War, the passage of the first and second Morrill Acts (in 1862 and 1877) led to the foundation of state-run universities that offered technical degrees in agriculture, mining, and eventually engineering. A great majority of the students entering these new programs did not have the benefit of preparatory schools to provide them with adequate training in fundamental skills such as reading and writing, and the increasingly specialized degree programs being offered around the country did little to address these basic needs of their students, instead focusing on the more complex mechanical processes involved in emerging trades. By end of the 19th century, it had become apparent to
educators—mainly through trade journals and the complaints of employers hiring recent graduates—that engineering programs across the country were producing mechanically skilled but nearly illiterate engineers (Connors 79).

The discipline of technical communication thus emerged in the American academy to fill a specific void in engineering curricula: literacy education. First-year composition courses by themselves provided insufficient training for future professionals to perform the reading and writing tasks required of them when they entered the workforce. Critics placed the blame squarely on colleges, and many engineering programs responded with a required upper-division writing course. This course, typically taught by English department faculty, focused on what Samuel Chandler Earle referred to in his 1911 textbook *Theory and Practice of Technical Writing* as “the special forms of engineering writings,” namely description, narrative, and directions (v). Rather than offering content from the humanities, the American technical writing course originated as a course taught by English department faculty but tailored to address a perceived workplace literacy crisis in other disciplines.

Technical communication’s humble origin as a service course for engineering students has impacted how the discipline is viewed and practiced to this day. In addition to a wide variety of courses being taught within technical communication programs, technical communication is often taught to nonmajors as a skill set and/or knowledge base that transcends academic disciplines and career paths. Emphasizing rhetoric in such courses is now a common practice, but the civic component identified above as part of a classical rhetorical education is far from standard. Although the service course is taught
primarily out of English departments, instructors must maintain a delicate balance
between the career and disciplinary goals of students in a variety of academic programs,
the theoretical perspectives of technical communication scholars, and the mission of the
humanities to develop well-rounded students. In addition, instructors of the service
course must negotiate students’ differing conceptions about what technical
communication is and how technical communication is relevant to their other coursework
and future careers.

Some instructors attempt to meet this challenge by outlining course goals that are
general enough to satisfy multiple perspectives on the purpose of the service course. Nell
Ann Pickett outlines one such set of goals for the service course in “The Technical
Communication Service Course Serves.” She writes that the course should “[i]nprove
speaking, writing, and graphics skills of students majoring in technical, scientific, and
professional areas”; “[b]etter prepare students to become successful practitioners of their
occupation or profession”; and “[h]elp to fulfill employers’ expectation that prospective
employees have communication skills to support their technical expertise” (293). But
these criteria, which attempt to accommodate students from any discipline, present only
the vaguest outline of what a technical communication course might look like. Even with
these guidelines, instructors must design a curriculum and assignments general enough to
transcend students’ disciplinary boundaries while still teaching the principles deemed
most valuable within the discipline-proper of technical communication. Those instructors
who wish to focus on civic engagement in their curriculum, moreover, must determine
ways of defining that component to encompass a wide range of possibilities for students with disparate majors.

Despite the complexities inherent in teaching the technical communication service course, the need for such a course is plain given the lack of comparable education elsewhere in the university. In an article in *Technical Communication Quarterly*’s 1999 special issue on the service course, Ed Nagelhout outlines the sense of responsibility involved in teaching writing under these circumstances:

[F]or many small and mid-sized universities, the sophomore- or junior-level technical writing classroom represents the primary (and oftentimes only) writing experience for students after their freshman year, especially if the disciplines have no other formal writing requirement or if the disciplines fail to provide writing-intensive courses as part of their students’ degree plans. [. . .] The technical writing class, then, should be a vehicle for students to reflect on the ways that writing functions in their discipline, as well as the ways that writing functions in our society. [. . .] Our ‘service’ in these technical writing classes, therefore, is to help students develop the tools for analyzing language and understanding writing in more complex ways, to provide them with opportunities to reflect on their writing, to think critically about rhetorical situations, and to create, design, and write ‘texts’ that can be developed through a variety of media. (286)

Nagelhout’s solution to this dilemma is a multifaceted approach to education that involves elements of rhetorical literacy, information literacy, visual literacy, and computer literacy—a full plate for instructors who must also devote time to their own professional development.

As many composition faculty can attest, teaching a service course often hampers one’s ability to advance professionally in academia. Billie Wahlstrom describes the situation many technical communication instructors find themselves in at research universities: “[T]echnical communication faculty are often seen primarily as teachers of
service courses rather than as serious researchers and scholars working in an area of disciplined inquiry. [This] means trouble to the competition for tenure, where research is often highly valued” (131). Instructors of the service course are thus caught in a web of obligations: They are responsible to students who desire skill-based training applicable to their future careers, diverse though those careers may be, and to the home programs and future workplaces of those students; as faculty in the humanities, they are obligated to “help students learn to be more responsible professionals in whatever fields they have chosen and more humane participants empowered to enter a public discourse” (Russell 183-84); as members of the discipline of technical communication (see chapter 4 for a discussion of whether instructors consider themselves part of the discipline), they are responsible for delivering disciplinary content; and, all the while, they are expected to conduct research of value to the academy, which may or may not include technical communication scholarship.

In addition to the general complexities of the service course, instructors must deal with the specifics of their institutional context. In a 2006 article in Technical Communication Quarterly, Thomas Barker and Natalia Matveeva call for an increased focus on intercultural communication in the service course. The authors attempt to analyze and recommend textbooks to aid instructors in teaching this multifaceted approach to communication; before their analysis formally begins, however, they concede that the service course exists within a unique context at each institution and in each classroom, which impedes their ability to make specific pedagogical recommendations (192). Jo Allen agrees that the service course exists within a unique
context that resists broadly applicable standards, writing, “Different courses and programs serve the needs of different regions, institutions, and students and, therefore, are incapable of being assessed by any series of rigid standards” (“Role[s]” 366). Even the “service” nature of the service course is inconsistent from school to school; as TCQ guest editor Dan Riordan notes, the service course does not only cater to students outside the discipline. It may also serve as an introduction to the discipline for students wishing to pursue a degree in technical communication. Thus the technical communication service course “has always had a dual function: to prepare a wide range of students to write clearly in the work of their professions, and [in some contexts] to prepare technical communication students to begin the study of their profession” (245).

Under these circumstances, many instructors bring ethics and professionalism to the course as foundational concerns that are relevant across multiple disciplines. For W. J. Williamson and Philip Sweany, professionalism is the unifying theme of a technical communication course for non-majors: “We see the introductory course in technical communication as an ideal site for connecting disciplines [. . .]. Emphasizing professional development [is] our conceptual link between the subject matter of our courses” (61). Paul Dombrowski, on the other hand, frames technical communication practices as a series of “ethical dilemmas” in his textbook, Ethics in Technical Communication, and includes case studies of the Challenger tragedy and ongoing lawsuits against tobacco companies in his textbook in order to help students analyze the ethical codes underlying historic acts of technical communication. These approaches have some benefits:

Professionalism and ethics as master frames draw on discourse that students are already
aware of, whether through their own coursework or media representations, and each of these frameworks can be used to encourage reflective practice and civic engagement with some instructorial nudging. Each frame, however, addresses only part of the need for a pedagogy of civic engagement, and on their own each is potentially problematic for use in the service course.

As I explore in chapters 3 and 4, ethics and professionalism are complicated frameworks to apply in the technical communication service course. Ethics is a context-sensitive set of concerns: In addition to their own moral compasses, students and practitioners of different disciplines abide by their own formal and informal codes of ethics. These codes govern activities within specific professions—the Hippocratic Oath and the National Association of Realtors’ Standards of Practice, for example, are highly specific to the fields of medicine and real estate, while many businesses distribute internal documents outlining goals and expected behaviors for employees. Some disciplinary or organizational codes of ethics are more nebulous—one need only look to recent headlines and editorial pages to see debates about the nature and limits of journalistic, legal, and business ethics in the context of public controversy. In each of these examples, students need to learn of the ethical guidelines governing their fields during coursework, internships, or some other discipline-specific training. Even the set of values we call “professionalism” loses specific meaning when students are training for different professions. Depending on students’ career aspirations, their sense of professionalism may or may not include, for example, a dedication to customer service or a process of accreditation. In addition, the very idea of “professions” privileges some
careers over others, a troubling concept in the context of the service course (see chapter 4 for more in-depth discussion of this topic).

The technical communication service course may serve as students’ introduction to the values of ethics and professionalism. Technical communication scholars claim, with much supporting evidence, that technical communication transcends disciplinary boundaries, and the rhetorical and civic education we hold dear is unlikely to appear in courses outside the humanities. If we are to persuade students from a wide variety of backgrounds of the importance of rhetorical writing strategies, civic participation, and ethical conduct, those lessons must be framed to highlight their relevance to students’ personal and professional lives. That task is the focus of this dissertation and underlies the discussions of technical communication scholarship and pedagogy in the following pages.

**Looking Forward: Framing the Discipline**

Students come to the technical communication service course with a wide variety of backgrounds, goals, and expectations for the course, and professional aspirations. The role of the instructor, then, is to negotiate these diverse aims and find ways to bring students together in a common pursuit, whether that is a mission of civic engagement, a sense of *praxis*, or a standard of professionalism. In a 1993 publication, David Russell addresses all three of these objectives, writing, “[T]he goal of a professional communication course might well be to teach thoughtful practice in one or more of those professional communities as a way of helping students find empowerment through
participating effectively in the discourse of those professions and thus in the community as a whole” (172). Russell does not, however, tell instructors *how* to accomplish these goals.

I believe one solution to this dilemma lies in the process of framing, which is already employed (consciously or no) in technical communication scholarship, pedagogy, and practice. *Framing*, the process of structuring expectations discursively, allows members of the discipline to construct their work so that students in multiple majors and career tracks can see its relevance to their own careers. Though little theorized or even discussed in technical communication scholarship, framing is a powerful rhetorical process that has the potential to shape future professional behaviors. Williamson and Sweany hint at this potential, affirming that “when framed as courses in professional development rather than as a series of exercises about writing forms or the mechanistic development of text, technical communication courses can become explorations of what it means to become a responsible, practicing professional” (94). *Ethics* and *professionalism*, two broad frames central to technical communication practices and pedagogy, already appear in some instructors’ pedagogies, although they are employed inconsistently and with mixed results.

The remainder of this dissertation examines the use of ethics and professionalism as frames for the technical communication service course. In particular, I construct the service course as a site where the values of members of the discipline intersect with the needs and interests of students from a variety of personal and disciplinary backgrounds, and therefore an opportunity for instructors to instill in those students a sense of civic
responsibility that they may not otherwise develop. If framed in the right ways, the service course can thus be an important site for outreach—not only through pedagogies that address the needs of local communities, but also as a site of ethical, professional, and civic instruction for students in disciplines outside of the humanities. Chapter 2 examines framing as a process by which the discipline of technical communication is constructed for students, as well as the ways in which multiple sources can reaffirm or contradict the messages instructors compose about the discipline and the role of the technical communicator. Chapters 3 and 4 analyze textbooks and original survey data to determine how ethics and professionalism are currently being used to frame technical communication for students in the service course. In chapter 5 I propose a curriculum that articulates an even more explicit connection between those two concepts, culminating in the theorizing of a new term for use in the technical communication classroom: ethical professionalism. I contend that, when used to frame the practice of technical communication, this concept has the potential to encourage reflective, ethical practices and an accompanying sense of social responsibility in students from multiple disciplines, including but not limited to those who wish to pursue careers in technical communication.
FRAMES, RHETORIC, AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

While scholarship encouraging more ethical, professional, and civic-minded technical communication practices has been plentiful in the past 25 years, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how that scholarship has impacted classroom and professional practices. Publications provide anecdotal evidence of isolated pedagogies, and even when those texts provide materials intended for use in technical communication courses, there is no way to measure how often or effectively such materials are adopted. Quite simply, the only way to find out what teachers are doing in the classroom is to ask them. In the fall of 2007 I did just that, distributing an online survey to instructors of technical communication service courses through the disciplinary listservs of three professional organizations: Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication, and Council of Writing Program Administrators.

The IRB-approved online survey instrument contained eight demographic and twenty qualitative questions that asked instructors to provide narratives about their integration (or lack thereof) of ethics and professionalism as central concepts in undergraduate technical communication pedagogy. A total of 44 technical communication instructors from a variety of institutions, ranging from private associate’s degree-granting colleges to research-extensive universities, participated in the survey.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Survey participants were free to skip questions if they desired, leading to varying sample sizes from question to question. As a result, I have used percentages where appropriate to represent the frequency of
Responses were coded against one another to identify trends within and across narratives; participants were also encouraged to supply electronic copies of course documents to supplement their responses. I am aware that such a limited sample does not provide enough information to make broad generalizations about the state of the discipline, but because the narratives provided describe specific teaching practices, I believe they provide a valid starting point for conversations about the degree to which rhetorical frames influence technical communication pedagogy.

In order to analyze the scholarship and pedagogical narratives that I take as statements on what scholars believe should be done and what instructors report is being done in the classroom, I employ a methodology derived from the social sciences that contributes to rhetoric both a strategy for disseminating rhetorical messages and an analytic method that examines large-scale movements: frame analysis. Developed by linguistic anthropologists in the late 20th century, framing theory describes how issues are constructed linguistically to motivate a target population to act in a desired manner. This theory has a broad range of applications, from describing why some political movements are successful to analyzing how children interact in different social settings. In the technical communication classroom, framing is one method of metaphorically constructing the discipline for students so that they will engage with course materials and come to value the principles most important to members of the field. In the following sections I discuss the theory and practice of framing, focusing in particular on how certain types of response. I wish to emphasize that this was a qualitative survey—although I do provide percentages to demonstrate trends in responses, I do not attempt to prove statistical relevance or correlations.
framing is an inherent and important part of curriculum design and pedagogy. I also outline a methodology for frame analysis that can be applied to any social movement, large scale or small, and is utilized in the chapters to come to analyze how the discipline has been framed in the service course.

**Framing Theory and Rhetoric**

In its simplest terms, framing theory, developed by linguistic anthropologists following the lead of Erving Goffman, describes how language and symbols influence human perceptions of events and issues. Frames are “any system of linguistic choices […] that can get associated with prototypical instances of scenes,” where scenes are any coherent segment of daily life that are likely to be repeated (Fillmore, qtd. in Tannen 124). Framing theory also has a cognitive element: In *Framing in Discourse*, Deborah Tannen describes frames as “structures of expectation” or “cognitive schema,” explaining that individuals approach new situations by comparing them to previous knowledge and experience: “[I]n order to function in the world, people cannot treat each new person, object, or event as unique and separate. The only way we can make sense of the world is to see the connections between things, and between present things and things we have experienced before or heard about” (14-15). Framing theory thus encompasses both the act of discursive construction and the processes of cognition that allows humans to interpret events and situations based on previous experiences and input. Both have significant implications for the classroom.
For Tannen, frames serve as templates for experience, allowing individuals to draw parallels between current circumstances and those they have experienced in the past. In this way, frames shape expectations and behaviors, serving as a kind of cognitive filter that helps individuals determine what is relevant, real, and possible in any situation so they can act accordingly. Goffman describes the experience of referencing frames in everyday activities in practical terms: “[W]hen individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: ‘What is it that’s going on here?’” (8). The cognitive schema that allow individuals to assess “what’s going on” are developed through a combination of firsthand and received knowledge, in which lived experience can confirm or refute hypotheses about situations, events, issues, and even the nature of the world. Frames, like ideologies, can certainly be a factor in how individuals perceive the very nature of their existence, although framing theory typically focuses on how individuals apply frames in specific social arenas such as work, recreation, and cause-driven social movements. As part of a curriculum such as the technical communication service course, frames can be used to influence students’ perceptions of the value of the work they do and, if the frames are properly constructed, even transcend ideological and epistemological differences between disciplines.

Frames share common characteristics with ideologies and are often conflated in scholarship. Like ideologies, frames function both at and beneath the level of consciousness to influence individuals’ perceptions and subsequent actions. And like ideologies, frames involve “a systematically organized presentation of reality” (Hodge and Kess 15). Both frames and ideologies construct and limit the realm of the possible
and impossible: Expanding on her definition of frames as “structures of expectation,” Tannen writes, “At the same time that expectations make it possible to perceive and interpret objects and events in the world, they shape those perceptions to the model of the world provided by them” (21). But whereas ideologies underlie mundane, everyday actions and global conceptions of reality, frames are constructed and applied in specific social circumstances that require interpretation and resultant action, such as a moment of perceived injustice, a classroom setting, or even a single face-to-face meeting. And while ideologies are certainly socially constructed, it is typically impossible to identify a single source or moment of origination—there is no verb ideology-ing.

Ideologies are an important component of frames, insofar as they constitute one of the resources tapped when attempting to interpret a situation, but the two originate and function at different levels. For example, as Kristen Luker writes in her analysis of the politics surrounding abortion and motherhood, positions on abortion may be rooted in ideologies such as religious support for or proscription on birth control, but movements wishing to legislate abortion employ frames such as civil rights, separation of church and state, and scientific reasoning in their rhetoric. Frames thus may work with, and in some cases on, ideologies in what David Snow and Robert Benford call remedial ideological work (“Clarifying” 10). If positions within an ideology are inconsistent, or if a movement enlists members with ideological differences, frames may bridge those differences by tapping into themes that are shared across ideological positions. Such is the case in Owen Whooley’s study of the abolitionist movement, in which religious themes were used to bring together individuals from different economic, social, and political groups in a
unified effort to end slavery. This bridging potential of framing is particularly important in the service course, in which students with different backgrounds, goals, and even epistemologies must be guided in a common direction if the course is to have any value for the students—and if the instructor’s lessons are to be taken to heart.

Another conceptual comparison for framing is what Michel Foucault and others describe as *discourse*. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes that discourse is, among other things, a form of linguistic action, a “regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements,” that enables, excludes, and regulates speaking subjects (“enunciators”) and topics of conversation (“statements”) within an arena such as law or medicine (1445). Compare this to Goffman’s description of the role of frames in social settings:

> Taken all together, the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning principal classes of schemata, the relations of these classes to one another, and the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretive designs acknowledge to be loose in the world. (27)

The striking connection between these two descriptions is that despite the scholars’ different purposes—Foucault describes mechanisms of repression and exclusion, while Goffman and other framing scholars typically emphasize how frames empower groups and individuals—both acknowledge the power of language and other symbol systems to structure and limit human beings’ perceived scope of reality and as a result compel them to act in particular ways. To participate in the framing process is to help create a Foucauldian discourse community in the most positive sense, a community in which rhetors have the ability to initiate a conversation and in the process set the ground rules
for future avenues of speech, thought, and action. If discourse is, as Foucault writes in *The Order of Discourse*, “the power which is to be seized” (1461), framing theory teaches us how to seize the reins and craft a discourse community that empowers us and those around us.

Various incarnations of framing theory have been employed in fields ranging from sociology to law to media studies, in each case treating frames as conscious, widely distributed linguistic choices adopted to motivate people to act in a particular manner—hence the typical articulations *collective action frame* and *social movement frame*. Most commonly in the social sciences, frames have been treated as observable phenomena consisting of the literature, public speeches, and conversations that shape individuals’ perceptions of public issues. Examples of this type of study are manifold and include examinations of how issues such as abortion (Luker), progressive education (Davies), and slavery (Whooley) have historically been framed to encourage change. In other arenas such as legal mediation and business management, framing is treated as a learnable strategy for motivating others to act in the manner you desire. Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr’s *The Art of Framing*, for example, treats framing as a skill that business managers can learn to help spin stories and events and keep employees in line, in the process characterizing business leaders as “managers of the meanings for their world” (xi).

In each of these examples it is apparent that framing—the construction of frames by those who desire to motivate individuals to act—is an inherently rhetorical process. Framing is a symbolic process intended to persuade individuals to act, or at the very least, view an issue in a particular way. Robert Benford and David Snow typify framing as
“signifying work or meaning construction” (613) that is employed primarily to “mobilize and countermobilize” (612) individuals. When compared to Kenneth Burke’s definition of rhetoric as “the hortatory use of language, to induce cooperation by persuasion and dissuasion” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 28), or to Aristotle’s assertion that rhetoric “exists to affect the giving of decisions” (1377b), it becomes apparent that while social scientists and media scholars employing framing theory may not use traditional rhetorical vocabulary, their aims are very much the same as rhetoricians’: to describe or employ effective means of persuasion.

In its most common (and rhetorically most interesting) application, framing theory is about fostering change, about persuading people to act collectively to bring about some desired result. As Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston assert, “[F]rames become important in analyzing collective action insofar as they are shared by enough individuals to channel individual behaviors into patterned social ones” (40). Much of the scholarship on frames and framing reflects this interest in coordinating—some scholars characterize the act as influencing or shaping—the behaviors of individuals so that they act as a group (see Benford and Snow; Johnston and Noakes; Whooley). Hank Johnston writes that frames are “cognitive schemata that shape behavior,” but frames are only a factor in molding behavior (238). Frames constructed by movement leaders will ultimately only be integrated into an individual’s cognitive schema if they suit (or appear to suit) the needs of that individual. If, for example, technical communication is framed as a specific career path rather than a set of transferrable skills, students who do not plan to become professional technical writers will have no reason to invest in the daily
activities of a technical communication course. If, however, technical communication is
framed as a set of skills that transcend specific job titles or even disciplines, students
from multiple majors will be better able and more willing to “see” how the course fits
into their own lives and act accordingly.

In addition, individuals’ cognitive schemata are dynamic; as Deborah Tannen
writes, “expectations about objects, people, settings, ways to interact, and anything else
in the world are continually checked against experience and revised” (61). As global and
local circumstances change, frames may gain or lose salience with an individual or target
population. Those who wish to construct effective frames must therefore research their
audience and tailor their messages to that audience if they hope to motivate a target
population to act. Frame organizers must therefore be attuned to changes in their
audience or their situation and adapt accordingly, lest the frame become obsolete or
overpowered by another persuasive movement in what is commonly known as a “framing
contest” (Benford and Snow).

Framing contests occur when multiple frames are imposed on a situation or issue
and vie for dominance. Technical communication has already undergone several of these
contests, as when Patrick Moore and Carolyn Miller (among others) famously debated
the nature of the practice in the late twentieth century. In “A Humanistic Rationale for
Technical Writing,” Miller argues that technical writing, and indeed all science, is a
social construct and is therefore inherently rhetorical. She writes that technical writing is
“a persuasive version of experience […]. [I]f we pretend for a minute that technical
writing is objective, we have passed off a particular political ideology as privileged truth”
Patrick Moore’s “instrumental discourse” model, on the other hand, frames technical communication as a form of “nonrhetorical language.” Moore argues that “readers must believe that the objects designated by the words exist [as opposed to being social constructs], because if those objects do not exist or if those objects are ambiguously or erroneously specified by the words, then many kinds of undesired effects could occur” (111). These two frames represented and reified a significant division among technical communication scholars and practitioners that is still visible in scholarship and teaching practices to this day. The persistence of these frames has much to do with the persuasive language employed by movement leaders, but the fact that both frames tap into strongly internalized, preexisting ideologies of different audiences allows them to continue to resonate.

Collective action framing begins with rhetors—characterized as “movement activists” by Benford and Snow and “social movement entrepreneurs” by Johnston and Noakes—identifying an issue or problem and a target population they wish to mobilize. Movement leaders then consciously (and, if they are to be effective, carefully) select the language and symbols they will use to frame the issue from the “cultural toolkit” of the population they wish to motivate (Benford and Snow). Crafting messages is not enough, however; movement activists must initiate and maintain a conversation in the public domain that is both internally consistent and resonant with the experiences and desires of their target population. Since mobilization is possible only after persuasion, rhetorical concerns are paramount. Context, audience, and message must be attended to with great care. Rhetorical appeals and commonplaces provide building blocks for persuasive
communication. And movement leaders must seize a kairotic moment and speak while
the issue is relevant and the audience prone to mobilization.

When movement leaders use sound rhetorical principles to construct frames
regarding a specific issue such as civil rights or the usefulness of rhetorical theory for
technical communicators, they have the potential to impact individuals’ actions, society’s
perceptions, and even public policy. But cooperation is earned, not simply taken,
according to the framing model. Framing is not a form of brainwashing; frames must
resonate with the ideologies and lived experiences of the population being addressed if
they are to be persuasive, and even then, circumstances must conspire to make an
audience receptive to the idea of changing their beliefs or practices. This is certainly true
in the classroom, a space in which students may see their role as simply passing tests or
completing projects without needing to internalize the material as they progress through
the course. This study thus examines how the larger framing movements represented by
technical communication scholarship translate into the classroom in ways that are
intended to inculcate particular values in students. In some cases, this has meant framing
technical communication as an ethical practice and emphasizing critical reflection and
civic action; in others, this has meant framing the discipline in ways that emphasize
productivity and efficiency.

**Framing in the Classroom**

Nowhere is the potential of frames to work at the local level more evident than in
the classroom, where teachers introduce subjects, issues, and concepts with the explicit
knowledge that the impressions students form will color their future perceptions and actions. The technical communication service course is no exception; instructors must be aware that the course introduces most students to the concept, discipline, and/or profession of technical communication and act accordingly. First impressions are particularly influential for students deciding on majors and career paths; the ways in which a discipline like technical communication is framed for students can influence their perceptions beyond the scope of the course, including their decision to pursue (or not to pursue) technical communication as a major or career. But little published scholarship has explored the framing that goes on in the classroom. Instead scholars of framing theory have focused on larger-scale social movements, neglecting a fertile arena for studying the processes and effects of framing in a smaller, comparatively closed environment.

Consider the differences between the following two scenarios in terms of both the impression students form of the discipline and their likely behaviors in situations that require technical communication. In one classroom, the instructor emphasizes lessons on problem-solving, technology, and meticulous documentation, culminating in a large online documentation project. In another, the instructor follows a service-learning pedagogy that emphasizes work for non-profit organizations, features readings from Plato and Quintilian, and asks students to reflect extensively on the role of the technical communicator in his or her community. Putting aside judgment about the relative merits of these two pedagogies, it is obvious that students enrolled in the two sections will likely have very different expectations about the work they might do as professional technical
communicators. When asked to define “technical communication,” students from the two classes will surely emphasize different aspects of the practice and/or theory of technical communication. And most significantly for those who are concerned about practices, students from the two groups are likely to behave quite differently when asked to perform any task requiring technical communication—students in the second class might begin by listing the stakeholders involved in their project, while students from the first might first decide on the appropriate software to aid in writing.

While framing is no guarantee of compliance, even this most basic comparison demonstrates the potential of frames to motivate students. The cumulative process of framing happens every day in the classroom, regardless of any conscious intent by instructors to influence students’ behavior beyond the scope of the course. Instructors who pay close attention to how they construct the discipline in their own discussions and course materials, however, can help students build a robust, utile frame for future interactions that emphasizes aspects of the discipline (particular behaviors, theoretical leanings, a sense of play, etc.) they value. That framing theory and frame analysis have not been applied to the classroom is an oversight that this study attempts to remedy by articulating and modeling a methodology for frame analysis.

Frame Analysis

In his influential 1969 work on the value of rhetorical criticism, Edward P.J. Corbett writes that the goal of rhetorical analysis is “to ascertain the particular posture or image that the author is establishing in this particular work in order to produce a
particular effect on a particular audience” (xix). While this statement is somewhat shortsighted in scope—Corbett, like many of his peers and no small number of current rhetorical scholars, focuses his analytic gaze on a single author and a single work—there may be no more empirically observable demonstration of the use of language to produce a particular effect on a particular audience than collective action framing. An abundance of texts makes the framing process quite transparent and demonstrates the authors’ rhetorical choices across multiple documents, while social movements typically produce highly visible results such as changes in public policy or worker productivity. (The present study, however, lacks the benefit of a definitive “end result” as the framing contests affecting technical communication are still underway.) Rigorous frame analysis can thus build upon the rhetorical model espoused by Corbett and others and explicate how multiple authors composing multiple works can persuade and motivate a target audience.

Frame analysis utilizes many of the same methods as rhetorical criticism, and the two approaches are not difficult to reconcile. Developing and applying a methodology that is informed by both rhetorical and framing theory is a surprisingly natural process that stands to benefit scholars from both fields by expanding the analytic methodologies at their disposal. Corbett writes that rhetorical criticism is concerned with “the product, the process, and the effect of linguistic activity” (xxii, emphasis in original). Sonja Foss also emphasizes rhetoric’s products and processes in her 1996 treatise on rhetorical criticism, writing, “Rhetorical criticism is the process of systematically investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical
processes” (6-7). In order to help her readers accomplish these goals, Foss outlines a number of preferred methodologies—including neo-Aristotelian, metaphorical, and Burkeian Pentadic criticism—but while frame analysis does not appear on this list, it is consistent with the aims and goals of her other modes of analysis. At its most basic, frame analysis too is concerned with products (loosely defined to include multiple kinds of text), rhetorical processes, and the effects of those products and processes on audiences.

Unlike traditional methods of rhetorical analysis, however, frame analysis looks at a broad spectrum of artifacts, ranging from printed texts to personal testimony to movement imagery, to determine how events or issues are constructed through language. More specifically, frame analysis examines the symbols and messages that constitute and perpetuate a frame to determine what themes and concepts are used to encourage coordinated action. Goffman writes that the purpose of frame analysis is “to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events,” but what he calls basic frameworks are quite complex and even delicate (10). Frameworks must be reinforced by multiple sources to build structures of expectation and spur action in audiences. Frame analysis must therefore include examination of how multiple texts interact and build upon one another rather than treating them as isolated or even separate-but-related artifacts. This is particularly important in an educational context, wherein instructors often assume that a single lesson

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4 Frame analysis as it has been practiced in the social sciences shares characteristics with three particular methods Foss outlines: like narrative criticism, frame analysis examines how stories are told to impact audiences; like fantasy-theme criticism, frame analysis explains how characters and events are portrayed to build group cohesion; and like cluster criticism, frame analysis examines quantitative and qualitative patterns in communication to demonstrate how general impressions are formed.
or reading will be convincing or produce a noticeable effect in students. Rather, framing theory and frame analysis help to elucidate the cumulative effect of multiple persuasive (if not always consistent) sources on a target population.

Hank Johnston identifies five key principles of textual frame analysis in “Comparative Frame Analysis,” each of which is meant to ensure thorough and informative explication of a frame. They are

I. *The Context of Textual Production:* The researcher should examine the speech situation, “a bounded episode of talk in which there are recognized rules for what should and should not be said.”

II. *Pragmatics:* The researcher should consider the author’s intent—“what the speaker or writer is trying to accomplish in the text.”

III. *Role Perspectives:* The researcher should consider the role from which the author writes; for example, “one speaks differently as a social scientist than as a father or a teacher.”

IV. *Total Text:* The researcher should examine frame references throughout a text and across related texts (“distant”) in relation to one another, rather than as isolated incidents.

V. *Nonverbal Cues:* The researcher must also consider nonverbal cues such as inflection, tone, images, page layout, etc. (247)

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5 As with many forms of rhetorical analysis, the intentional fallacy is a danger here. In most social movements, intent can be clearly construed from the rhetoric itself—abolitionist rhetoric, for example, had as its object the outlawing of slavery. In less clear-cut contexts, intent must be deduced from available texts and supporting information.

6 This means that corroborating or conflicting references within any frame text should be considered. Analysis is thus limited only to the researcher’s rigor and criteria for qualifying texts.
Rhetorical scholars will recognize the first two principles, context and intent, as common to their own endeavors, while the third corresponds roughly to *ethos* in the standard rhetorical triangle. The fifth principle, too, should be familiar to modern scholars of rhetoric, as visual and other nonverbal rhetorics have recently become well-theorized topics of study. But the fourth principle described by Johnston addresses one of the weaknesses often present in literary and rhetorical analyses, particularly of single works and isolated passages. A rigorous frame analysis searches for recurring rather than isolated themes, which means examining how terms and concepts are used throughout and across framing texts, and in many cases across time as well. This study thus involves analysis of a range of texts common to the technical communication service course, including textbooks, course materials, and instructors’ own narratives about their teaching practices. It is my hope that such a broad range of data will support a more convincing argument about instructional practices and consistencies (or inconsistencies) in disciplinary messages than independent analyses of such texts.

**Framing Technical Communication**

In identifying a frame for study, the success of that framework is not the only measure of its viability for study. Not all frames succeed in gaining a following and motivating individuals to act, and the rhetoric of failed movements can be as interesting and instructive as those that gained a large following. Indeed, a number of movement studies follow frames that failed to motivate or outlived their utility (Whooley, Davies). Framing processes and contests in progress, likewise, warrant study as examples of
rhetoric in action even when the final effects of the movement can only be speculated at.

One such contest is the ongoing efforts to frame and re-frame technical communication as a “professional” or “ethical” discipline. These two master frames represent two related sets of concerns debated in a larger conversation about the role of the technical communicator and the place of technical communication in the workplace and the academy. Although there are many other ongoing framing and reframing efforts in technical communication (revisionist historiographies such as Jo Allen’s and the growing cultural studies movement that emphasizes power dynamics in corporations and communities, for example), I focus on ethics and professionalism as two well-articulated and highly nuanced frameworks that illuminate the processes and potentials of framing in the classroom.

A collective action frame requires a focal issue such as professionalization and ethical practice within the discipline, a diagnosis of a problem, and a prognosis for a solution to that problem (Johnston). Movements need group leaders (activists, entrepreneurs) and a target population, either specifically or broadly conceived, toward which movement leaders direct their rhetoric in the hopes of inspiring action. Steven Katz, in his highly influential “Ethic of Expediency,” diagnoses a specific problem in technical communication: a focus on efficiency over “human considerations” in modern business practices (272). He cites as symptoms the intentional cover-ups of the faulty Ford Pinto design and the Pan American Airlines bomb threat (others have cited the Challenger and Three Mile Island disasters and General Motors’ dangerous side-saddle gas tank design). His prognosis, his attempt at a solution, is for scholars, practitioners,
and teachers to appeal to humanitarian concerns and reevaluate the *ethos* they associate with technical communication. But the power of his message is limited to readers of *College English*; for the frame to be successfully diffused, instructors must distill his words for an audience of students and provide a classroom experience that supports his argument. That process is discussed throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

One appealing consequence of viewing the classroom as a site for collective action framing is that doing so empowers instructors regardless of tenure or other markers of professional status, casting them as movement leaders in a public dialogue about the discipline. Through their curricula, instructors of all ranks have the ability to frame the role of the technical communicator in the lessons they teach, the stories they tell, and the texts they select. They craft arguments about appropriate behaviors, decision-making strategies, and what situations requiring technical communication entail, all the while “making practical decisions in response to the styles, forms, and normative codes of the target audience,” their students (Johnston and Noakes 7). In so doing, they help to structure students’ expectations for their own professional activities and interactions.

Of course, instructors are not the only movement leaders at work in the classroom. Published scholars are certainly at the forefront of movements to reframe the discipline for both practitioners and students, but their work only reaches students if it is assigned as a text or distilled as part of the instructor’s pedagogy. Textbook authors too contribute to students’ nascent frameworks and, moreover, are often viewed as the ultimate authority in the classroom by both students and instructors. Authors are granted a certain *ethos* simply by being assigned in class, even when their body of work is known
to neither teachers nor students (Ehrensall). In addition, such texts typically present the
discipline in straightforward, uncomplicated terms that integrate easily into students’
nascent frameworks. Administrators and curriculum designers may also have a say in
how the discipline is framed, whether on their own terms or in negotiation with other
units on campus. Such negotiations are often present in the service course, where writing
program administrators must balance their own goals and desires for the course with
those of the departments maintaining their enrollment. And though their identities may
not be known to end users, the authors of technical documents ranging from instructional
manuals to professional websites influence students’ perceptions of the discipline and
expectations for the kinds of task they may be called upon to perform in the future.

Though this list is by no means exhaustive, it does suggest the number of sources
that may be involved in framing the discipline of technical communication for students.
More than any of the others, instructors and textbook authors seem to be true leaders in
framing contests in the classroom—instructors have rhetorical influence in this setting
that may only be superseded by the mythical, disembodied authors of the almighty
textbook. This authority influences how students receive and integrate messages from the
most visible components of framing contests: movement texts.

Frame analysis consists primarily in the deconstruction of texts because, as Hank
Johnston affirms in “Comparative Frame Analysis,” “written and spoken words are the
best evidence we have for frame content and structure. […] Because social movement

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7This scenario occurred recently at the University of Arizona when a team of Writing Program
administrators and interns met with representatives of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, by far
the largest feeder of the service course, to determine what assignments and outcomes they deemed
important. Not surprisingly, the most highly valued assignments were the résumé, the report, and the
service-learning collaboration.
frames are cognitive structures, a window of access exists through the spoken words of participants and written texts of social movement organizations” (245). The key to frame analysis is to select “social texts that are collectively produced and generally accepted as representing a group’s position [or] rely on narratives of activists and participants [to] reconstruct the content of a collective action frame” (240, emphasis added). While the documents analyzed in the following chapters—scholarly articles, textbooks, syllabi, assignment sheets—are authored by a broad range of individuals and groups within the discipline, I contend that they can be seen as “collectively produced” if they are viewed as a collection rather than as independent entities. I also extend Johnston’s criteria to include documents and practices, such as case studies and service-learning pedagogies, that are generally endorsed by those within the discipline.

Like any other discipline, technical communication is framed via a number of channels, both within the classroom and without. Certainly scholarly publications contribute to students’ and practitioners’ impressions of the discipline and influence their future behaviors, but scholarly journals cater to an audience of instructors and researchers rather than students enrolled in their first technical communication course. More significant for these students are the messages and symbols that make up their daily interactions with the discipline. Classroom lectures and assignments, syllabi and other official course documents, examples of technical documentation they encounter as consumers or students in other courses, conversations with their peers, and even the pedagogy employed by an instructor can contribute to the cognitive schema that students apply to technical communication in the classroom and beyond. Recent scholarship,
supported by my survey data, also highlights one of the more common types of evidence provided in business and technical communication classes: on-the-job experience passed along by instructors who are former or current practitioners (Bridgeford; Ehrensal). This received knowledge is just as important in constructing a framework of understanding as any other text; in fact, students may grant more credence to anecdotes and other narrated experiences than to textbooks because they more convincingly represent the “real world” and bridge any perceived gap between theory and practice or the academy and the workplace. Of course, each of these texts must confirm the others’ worldview; inconsistencies between texts within a collective action frame can cause the movement to stall or fail completely (Benford and Snow 5).

This study looks in detail at three sets of texts that, when viewed collectively, provide insight into technical communication scholars’ and instructors’ attitudes toward the key concepts of ethics and professionalism. The first consists of published scholarship, which establishes a record of ongoing conversations in the field. The second is technical communication textbooks, the repository and distillation of decades of research on and theorization of technical communication practice and pedagogy. Examining textbooks as a window into classroom practices is not a novel concept; studies by Kris Hartung, McKenna and Thomas, and Barker and Matveeva have done just this, and Hartung asserts that textbooks are “a reasonable starting point for determining what students are being taught” about the discipline (363). That the positions articulated in

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8See Bridgeford for a discussion of the value of storytelling in the technical communication classroom as “articulation of everyday practice” (111). See Andeweg et al. for a discussion of the effectiveness of anecdotes.
textbooks are generally accepted is open to some debate—Cezar Ornatkowski writes that “textbooks do not represent the profession and […] to cite them as representative of what ‘we’ hold is presumptuous, if not wrong,” before conceding that textbooks do “represent the standard ‘paradigm’ of current classroom practice” (175)—but there is no doubt that textbooks are a major factor in developing students’ impressions of the field. In addition to sheer volume—the publishers of Mike Markel’s *Technical Communication*, now in its eighth edition, claim that it is “the best-selling tech comm book on the market,” selling more than 68,500 copies of the seventh edition alone,9 while John Lannon’s *Technical Communication* is described in promotional materials as “the bestselling text of its kind”10—prior to the 1958 foundation of *IRE Transactions on Engineering Writing and Speech*, the first disciplinary journal, textbooks represented the primary storehouses of disciplinary knowledge. These texts housed arguments about the scope and nature of technical communication that were distributed to students long before formal disciplinary scholarship existed.

Because the existence, sales, and even adoption record of a textbook do not indicate the degree to which it is utilized in classrooms (my survey data suggest that instructors use less than 65% of the material in their required textbooks), those texts are corroborated in this study against a composite of qualitative survey data and course materials used in technical communication service courses at a variety of institutions across the country. The survey questions focused on ethics and professionalism as master

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10 Quote taken from the textbook’s description on the publisher’s website: <http://www.ablongman.com/catalog/academic/product/0,1144,032146768X,00.html>. 
concepts in the technical communication service course and sought to determine if and how these concepts influence pedagogy and curriculum design. Responses were coded and scrutinized to determine the degree to which instructors’ teaching methods reflected an investment in ethics and professionalism as key concepts used to guide the development of fledgling technical communicators. Participants’ survey responses were supplemented by course materials that some participants contributed in order to demonstrate how these frames were applied in practice.

Narratives and course materials also help contribute to an overall picture of instructors’ pedagogies. Pedagogy itself can be an important factor in framing: An instructor’s choice of pedagogy can have as much influence on students’ perceptions of the discipline as the texts and lecture materials he or she provides. Pedagogies that emphasize professional genres such as reports, websites, and documentation match up well with the job descriptions of many technical communicators, often without providing realistic contexts for those writing tasks. Case models and other pedagogies that emphasize problem-solving often portray technical communicators as case-by-case troubleshooters, sometimes casting them as cleanup artists called upon to fix situations that existed before they arrived and then disappear into the night after the job is done. Pedagogies emphasizing service, on the other hand, portray technical communicators as members of a community who work to solve society’s ills—a portrayal which is not always in line with the mundane activities of professional technical communicators.

In addition to the ways in which an instructor’s enacted pedagogy portrays the discipline, classroom activities guide how students experience the discipline. Homework
assignments, in-class discussions, and time spent reflecting on their experiences all contribute to students’ expectations for future technical communication situations. And just as importantly, students’ personal experiences can validate the frames provided by other sources: As Benford and Snow assert, “the more experientially commensurate the framings, the greater their salience, and the greater the probability of mobilization” (620). When students’ lived experiences reinforce the content of course readings and lessons, as is the hope in service-learning pedagogies like that espoused by Dubinsky and Henson and Sutliff, students are likely to take those lessons to heart; when experiences contradict the frameworks students encounter in the classroom, those messages are doomed to fall upon deaf ears.

Teachers must therefore take greater responsibility for the framing work done in their classrooms. We constantly frame and re-frame our discipline for our students, telling them who we are and who they should aspire to be, whether we are conscious of the effects of our work or not. Students internalize these messages—to the degree that their experiences validate them—and use them as the basis for future technical communication actions and interactions. But what exactly are we telling them about the discipline? How are we preparing them for future situations that require technical communication? And are our classroom messages consistent with the recommendations we make at the level of scholarship?

The methodology and theoretical framework described in this chapter are applied to specific artifacts—scholarship, textbooks, course materials, and instructors’ testimonials—in the following chapters to answer these questions. In chapters three and
four, framing theory is used as a lens to help articulate how two key frames, *ethics* and *professionalism*, impact teaching practices in the technical communication service course and frame fledgling technical communicators’ experiences with the discipline. The framing processes discussed are then applied to a new frame for the discipline in chapter five, in which I demonstrate how instructors can take advantage of the full potential of framing by carefully and consciously organizing the messages we convey to our students regarding the work of technical communicators so that they highlight civic responsibility, ethical practices, and professional behavior.
3.
THE SHIFTING “GOOD” OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION:
A FRAME ANALYSIS OF SCHOLARLY AND
PEDAGOGICAL DISCUSSIONS OF ETHICS

The modern conception of ethics as “doing what is right to achieve what is good” has interesting ramifications for historical studies of technical communication (Allen and Voss 5). This basic definition leaves a great deal of room for interpretation of what “right” and “good” mean, allowing for examinations of practices and pedagogies to allow for context in determining whether those practices and pedagogies can be called ethical.11

Studying ethics in the context of technical communication is thus to study what the members of the discipline—scholars, practitioners, and instructors—posit as the good and bad, the right and wrong, of the practice in a particular era or setting. As Stephen Katz notes in “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust,” for roughly the first century of the discipline’s existence, the “good” of technical communication was articulated in terms that prioritized profit and efficiency. But beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a significant change in technical communication practices and the language used to describe them has unfolded as scholars and instructors have come to acknowledge our “disciplinary responsibility of preparing

11 See Friedman, “The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits,” for one example of a set of values that might be deemed unethical according to today’s standards but matched an ethos gaining prominence at the time.
students to meet citizenship and workplace responsibility with integrity as well as with knowledge and skill” (Staples 161).

In this chapter I examine two rhetorical frames that have been used to articulate the ethical goals of the discipline in our scholarship, textbooks, and classrooms: the economic efficiency frame, which emphasizes the ideals of capitalist production and consumption, and the ethical practices frame, which prioritizes human relations and stakeholder interests. I then present the results of a 2007 survey of technical communication instructors in order to demonstrate how these two frames have influenced current teaching practices regarding ethics and technical communication. I conclude by arguing that the transition from a dominant ethic of economic efficiency to one of ethical practices is far from complete; rather, textbook accounts and survey data reveal conflations between the two concerning the end goal of technical communication that have significant implications for the future of the discipline.

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<th>Economic Efficiency Frame</th>
<th>Ethical Practices Frame</th>
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<td>Efficiency</td>
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Prominent in early scholarship about
- “best practices”
- style and mechanics
- new technologies

Prominent in post-1980 scholarship about
- pedagogy
- research methods
- professional identity

Table 1. Tenets of the Economic Efficiency and Ethical Practices Frames
Although published scholarship sheds some light on how academics and practitioners view the ethics of technical communication, how ethics is discussed in the classroom is an important and less-often studied component of the development and maintenance of our discipline. Textbooks help to fill in this gap, as they are the primary sources from which students and even some instructors receive their introductions to technical communication. Particularly during the discipline’s nascent period in the early twentieth century, little formal scholarship was being produced and attempts to articulate a direction for the discipline were largely left in the hands of instructors and textbook authors. Because of the widespread distribution and potential impact of these texts, and because they are the primary texts remaining from a period that predates our formal disciplinary scholarship, I treat these texts as representative of the discipline around the time of their publication.12 Furthermore, I contend that when textbooks are examined as a collection rather than as independent texts, they meet Johnston’s criteria as “social texts that are collectively produced and generally accepted as representing a group’s position,” and are thus central texts in the early framing of the discipline (240). Moreover, because early textbooks were often written as introductions for undergraduate students as well as handbooks for practitioners, I treat textbook authors as social movement leaders who articulate the tenets and goals of the discipline with the explicit goal of influencing students, teachers, and practitioners.

12 I am aware that textbooks typically lag several years behind leading-edge scholarship due to lengthy publication processes. Their widespread adoption does, however, imply that they fairly accurately represent what is being taught in classrooms. Particularly during the discipline’s early years, but even today, textbooks represent the most widely distributed storehouses of disciplinary knowledge.
Instructors, too, may model their own sense of ethics simply by taking attendance or evaluating students’ work according to a particular rubric. These practices establish a code tailored to an instructor’s sense of what is “good”—for the students, the discipline, or both. The corpus examined by this study thus includes instructors’ reports of their own teaching practices as represented in qualitative survey data. One section of the 2007 survey of instructors of introductory and service courses in technical communication asked open-ended questions specifically about participants’ understanding and use of ethics as a frame for the discipline; in response, instructors provided narratives about their own teaching practices as well as some supporting materials (syllabi, assignment sheets, grading criteria) from their courses. These responses demonstrate both a lack of agreement about what ethics means and a residual effect of the economic efficiency frame outlined below. In addition, survey responses indicated a number of significant impediments to teaching a curriculum centered on ethics. These results are discussed in depth at the conclusion of this chapter. But before analyzing survey responses, I must explicate the two frames that inform that analysis.

**The Economic Efficiency Frame for Technical Communication Education**

The discipline of technical communication has long been dominated by the tenets of capitalism, including an overt emphasis on efficiency, profit, and the cycles of production and consumption. The prominence of these values is not surprising given the history of the discipline: As Robert Connors and Teresa Kynell (“Technical,” *Writing*) have demonstrated, the field came into existence because of the need to create
documentation for technologies developed during the American Civil War and came to prominence in part because of the need to repurpose wartime technologies for consumer use. As the core values of efficiency and profit drove early workplace practices, technical communication instructors designed and employed pedagogies to prepare their students to meet those expectations. Those values are thus strongly reflected in what I call the economic efficiency frame for technical communication: a consistent use of the language and ideals of capitalism, especially efficiency and profitability, to frame the practice and pedagogy of technical communication for practitioners and fledgling practitioners alike. This frame is particularly noticeable in early texts that seek to introduce students to the discipline and its guiding principles.

Samuel Chandler Earle’s *Theory and Practice of Technical Writing*, published in 1911 and widely acknowledged as the first technical communication textbook designed for use in the classroom, espouses a strongly reader-centered approach (Connors 80). Earle writes, “[T]he first principle in all technical writing is to express ideas so that they will be understood by the readers accurately” (29). But additional references to the reader reveal that Earle’s interest is not in that reader’s desires for the document or safety but, in line with nineteenth-century scholar Herbert Spencer’s philosophy of communication, based on a sense of economy: “[I]t should be easy for the engineer to appreciate how uneconomical it is to make it unnecessarily difficult for a reader to get the meaning”

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13 In “The Philosophy of Style,” Spencer attempts to prove in scientific (that is, psychological) terms that effective communication depends on an “economy of the mental energies” (1154). In essence, Spencer claims that humans have a finite capacity for reading and absorbing knowledge; the extra effort required to read imprecise prose taxes those limited resources and interferes with the transmission of the message. While Spencer’s theory was contested even by his own editor, Fred Newton Scott, it is representative of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement toward scientizing the study of communication.
(119, emphasis added). Additional references to readers’ uses of technical documents underscore Earle’s philosophy of communicative economy, as when he writes that the technical writer should “express what he does undertake to explain in every case so that his readers will get his ideas without unnecessary effort” (16). Much of Earle’s discussion of readers is framed in explicitly capitalistic terms, as when he writes, “The unskilled laborer may not understand why he is putting together two parts of sand and one of cement in one case and three parts of sand and one of cement in another; but he must be directed so that he will do the work right” (80). This economic frame is consistent with the ethos of a rapidly industrializing nation and was no doubt reinforced by the “normative codes of the target audience” (Johnston and Noakes 7); indeed, the industrial and wartime developments of the next several decades—Henry Ford’s mainstreaming of the assembly line model of production, the strongly capitalist propaganda circulated during the two World Wars, the belt-tightening imposed by the Great Depression—would provide language and ideological imperatives that guaranteed this frame’s continuing salience for engineers and educators (see Connors for an extended discussion of the impact of the Great Depression and World Wars on the discipline of technical communication).

Despite efforts to humanize engineering curricula by incorporating more English courses in the intervening years (Connors 83-86), J. Raleigh Nelson’s Writing the Technical Report relies considerably on the economic framework seen in Earle’s text. In
the second edition, published only two years after the conclusion of World War II,\textsuperscript{14} Nelson’s textbook frames audience awareness as a technique for conserving resources. When discussing the expository nature of report writing, Nelson writes, “Exposition aims to \textit{economize} the readers’ attention to the utmost, to save him all possible confusion, and to give him such help as he needs in order to \textit{get quickly and easily} the ideas presented without being burdened with superfluous comment” (5, emphasis added). Elsewhere Nelson writes that the goal of the report writer should be to “make the reading of his report as easy as possible” and “to economize the reader’s time and attention” (27, 71). The economic efficiency frame is extended to the writer himself when Nelson asserts, “It is apparently hard for some writers even to get started without a good deal of waste motion” (46); Nelson also writes that his “method of [report] production [. . .] will give reasonable assurance of satisfactory results with the greatest economy of effort” (viii). The economic efficiency frame undergirds almost all of Nelson’s discussion of report writing, whether he is providing grammar tips or expounding upon the limited attention span of readers, and that frame is fleshed out by a complementary emphasis on utility. Nelson repeatedly stresses that reports exist to be used by others, as when he asserts that “a report is no appropriate place for a parade of literary skill but [. . .] a \textit{practical} document made for \textit{use}, which, like anything else made for use, must be planned to serve its purpose effectively” (x, emphasis added). Again, Nelson’s choice of framing language is consistent with the political climate of his time: Conservation and efficiency had been

\textsuperscript{14} The year of publication locates the book in the context of a strongly procapitalist and prodemocracy postwar America, a setting that no doubt influences the specific word choices that comprise and extend the economic frame. Of note, Nelson refers to the standardized forms becoming popular in corporate settings as “fascist methods” (viii).
overriding themes of the civilian war effort during World War II, and Nelson’s readers were certainly familiar with that language. Over and over, Nelson’s word choices reinforce this notion of efficient utility: the writer should “plan his report for every possible requirement of service” (x); a report is “the communication of practical, useful information” (6); such language recurs throughout the text. Like Earle, Nelson is consistent in framing the work of technical writers as an endeavor that unreflectively supports the capitalist ideals of efficient production.

As these texts demonstrate, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, American technical communication courses were dominated by a focus on efficiency. Some textbook authors even attempted to standardize the human element of the writing process in order to increase efficiency. In one notable example, Gordon Mills and John Walter’s 1954 *Technical Writing* includes an appendix titled “The Decision-Making Process,” which offers a “mathematical procedure” for assessing a situation and making a quick decision. This procedure prioritizes productivity and specifications and breaks evaluations into simple binaries so that “no shades of choice are required—only a yes or no decision for each evaluation” (555). For Mills and Walters and their contemporaries, language was not the only element of the communicative situation that could be quantified and streamlined.

The economic efficiency frame would continue to dominate through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—the period of technical communication’s exponential growth in terms of course offerings, enrollment, and scholarship. Early disciplinary scholarship focuses on “best practices” for efficient communication, or as J. D. Chapline terms it in the 1958
debut issue of *IRE Transactions on Engineering Writing and Speech*,

efficiently “transfer[ring] thoughts from one mind to another” (6). In the same issue, Lennox Grey asks, “Does [a technical document] communicate clearly with a minimum of linguistic ‘stress-and-strain’ for the purpose at hand?” (2). Scholars routinely tap into economic framing language well into the 1970s, as when Carlton Brett offers “economy of presentation” as one of his “Six Keys to Better Technical Writing” in the 1971 debut issue of *The Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*; Henry Lewert emphasizes the role of effective communication in developing overseas business ventures in “Communication Across Language Barriers” in the same issue. Textbooks in the 1970s likewise emphasize tactics to increase efficiency, as is demonstrated in the rigorous discussions of outlining and dedication to hard-and-fast rules found in Hardy Hoover’s 1970 *Essentials for the Technical Writer*. Hoover regularly cites the imperative for economy in technical communication in such statements as “a wordy spec [is] a waste of company time”—indeed, these are the final words of the textbook-proper (157). Hoover also asserts the need for technical writing in a capitalist economy, stating that technical specifications are important to “an expanding civilization” (147).

At the close of the 1970s, the economic efficiency frame disseminated for more than half a century was still prominent in the discipline, although there are indications that the language used to describe technical communication was beginning to shift. In *Technical Writing: Principles and Forms* (1978), Deborah Andrews and Margaret Blickle continue to propagate a code of technical communication ideals that emphasize

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15 Later renamed *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*. 
use value and economy over human concerns. They assert, “Scientific and technical literature at its best—in its leanness, calculated simplification, and inherent interest—represents some of the finest prose created in the language” (vii). The characteristics that Andrews and Blickle choose to describe as the “best” in technical communication—brevity, simplicity, and use value for the audience—once again emphasize efficiency and economy of presentation. In Andrews and Blickle’s model, even the planning stage is guided by these overarching concerns: “This gathering [of research] is shaped by [. . .] what it is to do for the reader [use value] and for the company or industry [profitability]” (9). The economic efficiency frame can be seen frequently throughout the text, especially in sections on “clarity and economy” in writing, the need for brevity in abstracts (authors should “scout for words that are not carrying their weight” [183]), the capitalist function of proposals (referred to as a “sales document” [217]), and correspondence (“Correspondence is what keeps the wheels of business and industry running. [. . .] Letters are a means of carrying on business efficiently” [345]). But for Andrews and Blickle, the economic frame is tempered by an acknowledgement of responsibility for the content and end use of one’s writing. In a section titled “Weighing and Considering,” the authors allow that information can become “polluted [or] distorted to suit a political or commercial cause” (45). This recognition is emblematic of a shift in thinking across the discipline, a move away from purely economical ideals and toward a redefinition of the role of the technical writer in the workplace and in society.

The Rise of the Ethical Practices Framework for Technical Communication
The economic efficiency frame had consequences for the development of the discipline that proved troubling to a growing number of scholars, instructors, and practitioners by the final decades of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1980s, and in large part inspired by the public outcries spurred by the Watergate, Three Mile Island, Challenger, Pan Am Airlines, and Tylenol scandals, members of the discipline started to regularly publish materials questioning the field’s reliance on accepted workplace models and practices. The third quarter 1980 issue of *Technical Communication*, the journal of the Society for Technical Communication, features a cluster of articles on ethics that follows the 1979 release of the STC “Code of Communicators” and the reestablishment of the society’s Ethics Committee.¹⁶ According to the editor of the special section, the Code “deals largely with steps, somewhat limited, toward achieving professional competence” but “offers little in the way of guidance or standards of conduct for technical communicators faced with ethical problems in the exercise of their profession” (Schaefer 4). In that same issue Frank Radez, a practitioner and member of the STC Ethics Committee, writes, “The Society must realize that within its area of influence and responsibility there is a need to consider behavioral codes affecting the professionalism of the technical communicator” (5). He calls for a formal code of ethics to be developed and adopted by the organization, “by which members could judge the correctness or propriety of their own actions when faced with pressures on the job” (6). This emphasis on professionalism would soon spread throughout the discipline, leading scholars and practitioners alike to reconsider their role in society as well as business.

¹⁶ The STC had previously drafted a set of “Canons of Ethics” in 1958, but the effort was quickly abandoned (Schaefer 4).
A new strain of scholarship and teaching practices exploring the role of the technical communicator in society clearly emerges during the final decades of the twentieth century, often linking the practice to the tenets of classical rhetoric: Carolyn Miller uses the classical Greek term *praxis* to describe the work of technical communicators, writing that they must exercise “prudential judgment, the ability (and willingness) to take socially responsible action” (“What’s Practical” 23). Thomas P. Miller also discusses technical writing as a form of *praxis* in order to “develop a broader social perspective on practical writing, a perspective that includes not just the social context of the company or profession but the larger public context as well.” He continues to explicate the social role of technical communicators, writing that they can “say the right thing at the right time to solve a public problem because they know how to put the shared beliefs and values of the community into practice” (57). Dale Sullivan employs the ancient Greek notion of *phronesis* to describe the kind of “practical wisdom” that he believes technical communicators should practice. Steven Katz traces an ethic of technological expedience from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* to writing produced in Nazi Germany to the uncritically teleological bent of modern practice, asserting that the discipline must acknowledge “the essentially ethical character of all rhetoric, including our writing theory, pedagogy, and practice” and accusing teachers of propagating a system that values efficiency over human concerns (272). These articles provide the language and historical precedent for criticism of the discipline on ethical grounds to take shape, and indeed, by the final years of the twentieth century, instructors and practitioners saw a wealth of scholarship encouraging them to scrutinize both the guiding principles of the
discipline and specific practices. This scholarship provides the foundation for what I term the *ethical practices* frame for technical communication.

The ethical practices frame is imposed upon a broad range of practices beginning in the late 1980s, particularly those deemed troubling, problematic, or overtly immoral. Katherine Riley’s “Telling More Than the Truth: Implicature, Speech Acts, and Ethics in Technical Communication” and Brenda Sims’s “Linking Ethics and Language in the Technical Communication Classroom,” both published in 1993, focus on the ways in which language can be used to elide, imply, and manipulate information in order to persuade audiences. Gender-biased language and classroom practices in particular are criticized in 1990s disciplinary publications by scholars such as Jo Allen (“Gender”), Lee Brasseur, Hall and Nelson (“Sex-Biased Language”), and Mary Lay. Nancy Allen discusses the potential for images to mislead in “Ethics and Visual Rhetorics: Seeing’s Not Believing Anymore,” and TyAnna Herrington examines the misleading use of charts and graphs in “Ethics and Graphic Design: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Document Design in the Report of the Department of the Treasury on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Investigation of Vernon Wayne Howell also Known as David Koresh.” Even the practice of teaching ethics is criticized by David Russell in “The Ethics of Teaching Ethics in Professional Communication: The Case of Engineering Publicity at MIT in the 1920s,” in which Russell argues that students need to learn the

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17 Paul Dombrowski summarizes this scholarship in “Ethics and Technical Communication: The Past Quarter Century,” categorizing authors’ arguments as espousing either a “professional perspective” that emphasizes relativism and immediate applicability, an “academic perspective” that values theory and history, or a “systematic perspective” that seeks to categorize ethical systems without espousing any single code (5).
ethics of (and from) their individual disciplines rather than from instructors with literary backgrounds.

Instructional texts published in the mid-1990s begin to integrate the ethical practices frame, albeit inconsistently. Markel’s *Writing in the Technical Fields* begins to address the ethical dimension of technical communication through a focus on honesty. Markel lists honesty as his first rule of effective writing and underscores its importance with statements such as “Your first responsibility as a writer is not to lie,” and “Honesty is the best policy, both ethically and financially” (7, 8). He offers little support for such claims, however, and the rationale he does provide draws on the economic efficiency frame developed almost a century earlier, as when he writes, “Modern trends in liability suits encourage complete honesty in communication” (8). Markel does acknowledge other motivations for being honest, such as the Golden Rule—“You owe it to your readers to be honest with them, just as you want them to be honest with you”—but even this statement is tempered by a warning: “[Y]ou are in serious trouble only when it is also discovered that you weren’t straight-forward” (186). Such imperatives reflect what Allen and Voss call the “prudence” model of business ethics, which posits that ethical behavior is “the smart thing to do” (19). This model is common in attempts to bring ethics discussions into professional settings and taps into powerful motivations (profit, professional success, and so on) germane to those contexts. But most contemporary scholars will agree that while ethical behavior is a worthy end regardless of the motivation, a genuine concern for the consequences of one’s actions on others is likely to produce more consistently ethical behavior in the future.
An extreme version of the prudence model of ethics can be seen in David Fear’s *Technical Communication* (1977). Fear asserts, “Human relations are an important factor in all communications—even technical!” But although on the surface Fear seems to be encouraging a sense of respect for one’s audience, he soon makes it clear that this strategy is meant to help secure good will—in this case, from a “disliked, dictatorial superior” (14). Later, Fear reiterates this recommendation to appear humane: “When dealing with the general public, try to humanize your letters. People rebel at being treated as numbers” (135). Elsewhere, when discussing the difference between “photographic language” (impartial, broadly detailed language) and “impressionistic language” (details selected to cause the reader to form an impression), Fear warns against fostering misleading impressions as “the careful reader will realize that he is being deceived and will at the very least resent it” (23). Here and elsewhere, Fear essentially warns against getting caught manipulating details and readers’ emotions, not against a practice that might itself seem to be unethical. Even his discussion of persuasion is presented in terms that channel economic competition—Fear describes the act of successful persuasion as “winning your point,” and his first illustrative example is that of a car salesman making up a story to sell a car. Of using “slanted language” under these circumstances, Fear writes, “Aside from the obvious ethical question [a question he never actually addresses], distorting the facts can get you into trouble” (107).

Moving into the twenty-first century, a number of scholars have attempted to develop a more consistent frame for ethical technical communication by redefining the objectives practitioners should strive to accomplish—the “good” that drives the actions of
technical communicators—to include contributions to the local community rather than simply to the bottom line of a for-profit organization. James Dubinsky follows the tradition of ancient Greek and Roman oratory when he defines the ethical goal of technical communication as the civic good in his service-learning pedagogy. A number of scholars echo his assertion of the public, and therefore necessarily ethical, value of service learning, as when Henson and Sutliff frame service-learning pedagogy as working “for the benefit of society” (189). Service learning is just one disciplinary development intended to infuse technical communication with an ethical dimension, however; usability testing (Barnum), stakeholder theory (Burton and Dunn; Kimme Hea), and the case method (Hays; Schultz; Mendelson) have all been incorporated into disciplinary scholarship and pedagogies in order to foster critical reflection and a sense of civic responsibility. Each of these models taps into the larger conversation about what it means to be an ethical technical communicator, suggesting that professional writers can work toward ends other than profit and help enact positive change in their professional and local communities. In each case, the goal of these pedagogies is to inculcate those values in students and thereby infiltrate the ranks of practitioners in the field.

Following the increasing focus on ethics in technical communication scholarship and pedagogy, textbooks have taken to discussing much more explicitly the nature of ethics and the importance of ethical action and decision-making for technical communicators. Virtually all introductory technical communication textbooks published
since the turn of the millennium\textsuperscript{18} now feature sections and even entire chapters devoted to ethical decision-making. As with earlier textbooks, however, the treatments of ethics found in textbooks from the mid-2000s rely heavily on the ideals of the economic efficiency frame. The 2007 eighth edition of Markel’s *Technical Communication* provides ethical guidelines for students but fails to consistently provide justification or practical applications of the value systems implicit in those guidelines. Unsupported generalizations like “[Y]ou have to tell the truth and not mislead your reader [because] it’s the right thing to do” attempt moral prescription rather than developing heuristics for making informed decisions (10). Although Markel devotes an entire chapter to ethical issues, he conflates ethical with legal throughout; his approach in this chapter is to foreground legal responsibility and formal codes of conduct before offering a few general rules such as “tell the truth” and “don’t mislead your readers.” But outside of his discussion of particular legal constraints such as copyright laws and binding contracts, these rules are neither theorized nor supported. In another unsupported attempt at moral prescription, Markel writes, “Obviously, lying—knowingly providing inaccurate information—is unethical,” without saying why or according to what criteria (cultural, religious, legal, philosophical) such a practice is unethical (26). Kris Hartung terms this approach moralism because it “prescribe[s] how we ought to behave ethically, with no justification” (378). Such a simple system of rules can be followed without the need for complex and time-consuming debate, but this decision-making framework must be

\textsuperscript{18} Most technical communication textbook publishers offer at least one introductory textbook titled simply *Technical Communication* alongside a range of more specialized texts.
adopted uncritically if it is to be effective as it provides little room for variation to suit a particular context.

The 2007 edition of Paul Anderson’s *Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach* offers a variation on the ethical practices frame: a “process strategy” that requires technical communicators to “at every step […] consider your decisions from the viewpoint of your personal ethical beliefs about the ways you should treat others” (88). Anderson’s approach to ethical behavior also requires communicators to identify and consider “human consequences,” in particular the interests of stakeholders (22); on the few occasions when he does prescribe particular values as hard-and-fast rules, he couches them in terms of stakeholder impact. Anderson writes, “Don’t Mislead […] If you mislead your readers […] you deprive your readers of their rights,” and “Don’t Manipulate […]. Persuasion is ethical only if it will lead our readers to get something they truly desire,” suggesting that misleading and manipulation are unethical insofar as they have negative consequences for others (144). This position follows from Anderson’s central thesis: “[W]riting is a social action […]. When writing, think constantly about your readers” (10). Indeed, unlike Markel’s system of rigid rules and adherence to policy, Anderson’s approach encourages change-oriented social action: When confronted with unethical practices, Anderson suggests that the professional communicator “plant the seeds of change” by asking questions about ethical dimensions of those practices (295). This approach is more consistent with recent scholarship on ethics than Markel’s and provides a flexible framework for decision-making that, at least in theory, empowers students and stakeholders alike. But Anderson’s stakeholder-
centered schema is just one in a great range of ethical decision-making frameworks forwarded in disciplinary texts.

As with introductory textbooks, a cluster of specialized texts on ethics and technical communication produced since the late 1990s provide inconsistent, though detailed, treatments of ethics and ethical decision-making. Allen and Voss’s *Ethics in Technical Communication: Shades of Gray* develops a method of value analysis intended to help students decide what the “right” course of action might be in any situation. For Allen and Voss, such decisions are difficult but possible with the proper methodology: “When confronted with thorny ethical conflicts in technical communication, we can apply a logic process to impose order, assess priorities, and make the best possible decisions” (13). In addition to affirming that ethical communicators can make ethical decisions, the authors assert that technical communicators have a responsibility to act ethically: “Unusual capability [in this case, with language] carries with it higher responsibility [. . .] to expose ethical issues to public scrutiny and debate” (9). Markel’s approach in *Ethics in Technical Communication: A Critique and Synthesis* is to analyze existing theories of ethics in order to build an argument for a single approach to ethical decision-making, arguing that ethics “is a rational rather than divine or intuitive enterprise” (viii). But rather than supplying heuristics, Markel’s goal is to define a *discursive process*; in his opinion, “What [technical communicators] need are clearheaded discussions of the dilemmas we face as communicators” that include all involved stakeholders and decision-makers (21). Dombrowski’s *Ethics in Technical Communication* is concerned with “what is problematic and cannot be assumed because
[of] the need to weigh and deliberate” (x). After acknowledging that “due to the social, situation-specific nature of ethical judgments, no single ethical theory or approach will always be best for all situations,” Dombrowski encourages students to develop their own ethical perspectives (8, 74). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Dombrowski refuses to simply provide a value system for students and practitioners to follow, insisting rather that they become firmly grounded in ethical theory before making their own decisions about what actions are acceptable.

Clearly, textbooks echo recent scholarship in suggesting that ethics are important to technical communication practice and pedagogy, even though the field has not yet settled on a method of effective ethical instruction or inquiry. This inconsistent use of the ethical practices frame in scholarship and textbooks leads to a number of important questions about how (and whether) ethics is actually being taught in the classroom: Has recent scholarship on ethics increased instructors’ incorporation of the concept into their own teaching? If so, which scholarship? That is, which version of ethics is being used in classroom discussions? The rest of this chapter attempts to answer these questions by examining the results of a 2007 survey of technical communication instructors.

2007 Survey on Ethics and Professionalism in the Technical Communication Introductory Course

Tracing the development of competing frames in scholarship and textbooks can be informative, but more importantly for this study, the movement to frame technical communication as an ethical discipline has direct consequences for classroom practices.
To examine current classroom practices, I gathered firsthand information about teaching from teachers via an online survey. The results demonstrate a strong sense that ethics is important to the technical communication classroom, but that sense of importance is tempered by significant conceptual and material impediments to teaching an “ethical practices” approach in line with recent scholarship. Most significantly, survey data indicate uncertainty about how to clearly articulate the concept of ethics: Some respondents discussed ethics as a code established in course policies, for example, while others discussed ethics in terms of moral guidelines, general behaviors, or decision-making criteria for technical communicators. Additional constraints on applying the ethical practices frame to the classroom, as noted by survey participants, include a lack of time and support for curricular revisions. Finally, the survey responses demonstrate a significant reliance on the economic efficiency frame even when discussing ethics, most notably when instructors introduce the concept through discussions of negative examples such as plagiarism, illegal practices, and ethical lapses with financial consequences.

Not surprisingly given the prevalence of the ethical practices frame within the discipline, the survey data indicate that ethics as a concept is a significant concern for current instructors. Respondents indicated that a sense of ethics influenced everything from textbook choices to lesson plans to grading practices. Eighty-nine percent of the survey respondents indicated that their course policies or grading criteria contained ethical components, with nearly half focusing on plagiarism and other forms of academic “cheating” as their primary point of ethical accountability. The perceived need for discussions about ethics in the technical communication classroom was a consistent
theme among instructor responses. When asked, “How does the concept of ethics influence your pedagogy and/or curriculum design?” instructors were quick to enumerate their reasons for broaching the subject: “There is ample evidence that work ethic is severely lacking in all areas of the workforce, so it is important to debate and discuss ethical issues and put teeth into consequences for unethical practices”; “[E]thics doesn’t just come into play when a problem arises; it’s a constant driving factor in the professional sector, and I want [students] to be aware of that”; “[I]f students haven’t been challenged to consider ethical principles and decision-making, then the university has failed them.”

These responses highlight two noteworthy trends in the field of technical communication: the perception of an ethical “lack” at the level of students and practitioners, and the assumption that instructors can and should address the problem. The tendency for instructors to focus in on plagiarism as the primary subject of ethics discussion presupposes that students are likely to cheat due to a lack of knowledge or values, and that it is the technical communication instructor’s responsibility to address the problem. This perceived lack also becomes apparent in the stories instructors tell: Although 76% of respondents reported citing their own personal or professional experiences to demonstrate how ethical issues arise in the workplace, nearly one-third of those instructors indicated that they talk primarily about negative experiences, often typified as “dilemmas,” “breaches,” “lapses,” or “violations.” One respondent in particular demonstrated an awareness of the tendency to use negative examples, noting, “It seems that good or positive ethical behavior often goes unreported or unnoticed.” This
assertion is supported by the popular media and in disciplinary literature, in which the topic of ethics rarely arises unless a perceived violation has taken place.

Some of the more telling differences in instructor responses emerged in how the ethical practices frame was disseminated in the classroom context. When asked to define ethics as they employed it in their classes, respondents seemed to fall into two broad categories. There was a general agreement that ethics refers to what is “right” or what technical communicators “should do” within their workplace context (many survey participants used such moralistic terms in their responses), but participants disagreed about whether ethics governed specific choices and actions (25% of responses fell into this category) or general behaviors and practices (36%). For example, as noted above, half of the respondents cited plagiarism as the primary focus of ethical discussion in the classroom—many without reporting any discussion of decision-making strategies or the value systems behind the notion that plagiarism and other forms of cheating are “wrong.”¹⁹ Sixteen percent, conversely, defined ethics as considering a network of factors in decision-making, including “multicultural perspectives,” “the human and the nonhuman,” “stakeholders,” “the needs of others in the community who might not have the standing to speak,” how to “help users,” and “the larger situation.” Still others equated ethics generally with honesty much like Markel does in his introductory textbooks, although surprisingly, none of the respondents who relied on the term honesty reported using his textbook. While these definitions are not incompatible—plagiarism

¹⁹ It bears noting that the fact that instructors did not report additional activities does not mean they do not engage in them. While analyzing survey responses, however, I worked on the assumption that instructors reported their own highly valued and/or common classroom practices. It follows that while teaching certainly involves activities not included in participants’ responses, those activities were not deemed important enough to include in responses.
and other forms of cheating are defined according to complex social mores that often involve consideration of the impact of one’s actions on others—the difference between teaching ethics through punitive measures and teaching ethics as a more general “way of being” is significant. Establishing consequences for plagiarism and other forms of cheating privileges the view that specific behaviors are unacceptable; examining the various competing pressures exerted upon technical communicators provides a framework that is meant to influence decision-making strategies and general behaviors.

Reasons why students should behave ethically also varied. In addition to noting public scandals like Enron and the Martha Stewart trial that serve as negative models, some instructors recommend ethical behavior because of its inherent virtue, as when one respondent wrote, “My hope is that my students will always take the high road.” Others seem to employ the “prudence” model of business ethics discussed earlier. This mindset is typified in two instructors’ responses that focus on the concept of ethos: In response to the question “How would you like your students to understand the concept of ethics as it affects professional or technical communicators?” one instructor wrote, “[R]eputation is everything—if people know that you work hard and charge reasonable prices, and record your hours worked accurately, they are more likely to recommend you and continue using you.” Another instructor wrote that ethical practices (or at least, the perception thereof) can help technical writers build a successful business ethos: “Ethical writing and ethical business practices are key to successful people and successful endeavors in this area of the country [. . .] because people perceive that we live in small towns.” While some might argue that the source of students’ motivation is less important than their actions—Markel
writes, “[M]ost of us would agree, if reluctantly, that treating people with dignity because it will improve the bottom line is better than not treating them with dignity at all” (*Ethics* 124)—the difference in approaches once again demonstrates the power of the economic efficiency frame and the influence that it still holds within our discipline. As these responses demonstrate, even calls for ethical behavior can be subsumed under admonitions to maintain economic solvency.

Other trends exhibited in survey responses indicate that the ethical practices frame for technical communication has yet to be fully integrated at the level of curriculum design. One of the more troubling trends uncovered by the survey was that although nearly every instructor surveyed indicated that the concept of ethics influences their pedagogy to some extent, only about a third (36%) reported being influenced by published scholarship on ethics in technical communication. Participants’ explanations for their lack of engagement with scholarship ranged from a lack of time ("I have not had time to review any recent scholarship on the issue") to a perceived dearth of useful scholarship on the subject ("There’s a huge gap in scholarship about ethics, and when someone does write about it, I don’t ever feel they explore the nuances of it") to not being a technical communication scholar in the first place ("Until we hire a tech comm specialist, I function as the campus tech comm person; however, my professional development is more focused in [...] other areas"). These responses seem to demonstrate two obstacles to teaching ethics that warrant further research: a need for more engaging scholarship on ethics, and a need for better distribution of disciplinary knowledge. These
obstacles are potentially compounded by the practical limitations inherent in teaching a service course, as several instructors noted in their responses to the survey.

The survey also revealed a need for further mentoring among faculty and between faculty and administrators in the development of curricula for the introductory course. When asked, “Have you been encouraged to include more lessons or classroom components on ethics [. . .] by your peers or supervisors?” 86% of the respondents reported that they had not. Only 18% of the instructors who answered the question reported having any dialogue with their peers or administrators about the ethical components of their curricula, and one admitted that she had been discouraged from adding an ethics unit to her syllabus and dismissed as “naïve.” Another instructor lamented, “[A]lthough I have wanted to include more specific unit(s) on ethics and/or professionalism [. . .] I have particular course goals and a sample syllabus I have to follow, so I can’t deviate much from that.” This lack of critical engagement in the introductory course can be attributed both to the pragmatic approach to technical communication instruction noted by Katz and others and to a lack of administrative and theoretical investment in a course that often “serves” other departments. There are also significant logistical concerns: Two instructors in particular lamented the time constraints that kept them from discussing ethics at greater length in their classes, writing, “I want to discuss ethics in class, but I usually can’t, as presenting basic information about the document types we’re working on and then giving the students a chance to practice on the documents eats up all the class time,” and “Unfortunately, we do not get a chance to do much ethics in a 6 week, online summer course.” I suspect that a broader survey of
instructors who do not subscribe to professional listservs would uncover many more cases like these.

**Conclusion: Framing the Discipline for Students and Practitioners**

If rhetorical frames do create “structures of expectation” and therefore mold behavior patterns as Tannen asserts, what can students of technical communication expect in their professional lives? What patterns of behavior would we expect to see based on the ways that the discipline has been framed for them? Although individuals throughout the discipline of technical communication are reshaping technical communication to focus on more ethical practices, the texts and qualitative data examined in this chapter indicate that an underlying emphasis on economic efficiency still permeates our scholarship and our classrooms. The ethical practices frame represents a movement within our discipline that has influenced business and teaching practices as well as more theoretical discussions about the role of the technical communicator in society, but the conceptual shift this frame entails is far from complete. Some movement leaders continue to affirm that technical communication aids productivity and increases profit; others emphasize the notion that technical communicators work with and for communities beyond their immediate employers. Furthermore, the textbooks instructors rely on necessarily lag significantly behind leading-edge scholarly discussions of the nature of technical communication and the role of the technical communicator in the workplace and beyond.
The 2007 survey of instructors of introductory technical communication courses reveals a number of trends in the implementation of the ethical practices frame. The first is that, like the scholars on whom they rely for information about developments in the discipline, technical communication instructors have yet come to a consensus about how to discuss ethics, although most can agree that it is an important set of concerns for technical communicators. While there is a general sense that technical communication instruction can help address a perceived lack of ethics in the corporate world, there remains some disagreement about whether ethical codes should be prescribed (as in the case of proscriptions on plagiarism and assertions that honesty is the best policy) or involve consideration of a complex web of factors such as societal mores, personal beliefs, and the short- and long-term welfare of all parties involved in a communicative context. While the latter model has become more prevalent in scholarship in recent years, survey data indicate that the two are employed nearly equally in the classroom.

A second significant finding is that instructors discuss ethics primarily through negative examples. This practice is inspired by the perception of unethical practices in the workplace and in the classroom as well as media and textbook accounts of ethics that highlight historic ethical violations. In addition, an institutionally supported emphasis on plagiarism as a breach of ethics motivates students *not to be unethical* rather than encouraging them to think critically or develop heuristics for future ethical decisions. One consequence of this mindset is the merging of the ethical practices frame with the economic efficiency frame into a model for prudent ethics—that is, a model that encourages ethical behavior because it is more efficient or more profitable than unethical
behavior. While the end result might be the same—students considering the ethical dimensions of their work and acting with others’ interests in mind—some scholars may take exception to the reliance on economic efficiency as the motivation behind those actions. They argue, convincingly I believe, that such training leaves students ill-prepared to deal with unforeseen ethical dilemmas in the workplace and prone to repeat the unethical behaviors that have been featured so prominently in the media. In addition, such a mindset does not lend itself to the kinds of civic engagement that have become an area of emphasis in scholarship and pedagogy, a trend that is discussed in more detail in chapter five.

A final observation about the use of the ethical practices framework in the classroom is that it is not always valued or prioritized. A number of factors impede the frame’s ability to influence curriculum design and classroom practice. Some respondents indicated that they did not have the time or interest to read recent scholarship on ethics, while others lamented the quality and applicability of ethics scholarship to the classroom. Some instructors pointed out that meeting students’ needs for the course consumed all of their available resources, while others indicated that institutional constraints such as standardized syllabi and course outcomes prevented them from implementing lessons on ethics. And perhaps most troubling of all, few instructors reported being encouraged at any level to revise their curricula to incorporate recent scholarship. All of these factors seem to indicate that the spread of the ethical practices frame (or any other frame) from scholarship to the classroom will be a slow one.
4. THE PROBLEM OF PROFESSIONALISM:
POSITIONING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS AS PROFESSIONALS AND THE DISCIPLINE AS A PROFESSION

In a 2008 posting to the listserv of the Council of Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication, council president Kelli Cargile Cook asked “what changes or new directions” the organization’s members saw the discipline moving in as they thought about the future of technical communication. The on-list response showed a surprising amount of consistency: Every response indicated that increased professional standards were the most important issue facing the discipline. In some respects, this consistency of purpose should not be surprising; after all, the concept of professionalism has been central—both implicitly and publically—to technical communication’s development as a practice and an academic discipline. Members of the discipline have debated their role in business, in the academy, and in society since the field’s foundation, and one of their primary strategies for articulating the value of their work has been to frame technical communication as a “profession” and its practitioners as serving the ideals of “professionalism.” But professionalism can represent a variety of different concerns, ranging from demonstrable workplace competence to a set of conditions that enable market dominance. Indeed, responses to Cook’s query suggested tactics as diverse as defining the domain of the discipline in order to strengthen academic programs and establishing a certification program for practitioners in order to “[remain] competitive in
a global world” (Davis). These differences in perspective, even among such a closely affiliated group of disciplinary scholars, are indicative of a larger problem for the field of technical communication: how to conceptualize, practice, and teach the concept of professionalism.

Scholars, practitioners, and instructors have yet to agree on what the ideal of professionalism entails. As Frank Smith wrote in a 1980 editorial in *Technical Communication*, professionalism is a multifaceted concept:

> In the broadest sense, anyone who gets paid for doing a job is a professional. In another broad sense, anyone who does a job well is called a pro […]. In a more restricted sense, anyone who must apply special skills and formal education to do his [sic] job is a professional. And in a fairly narrow sense, a professional is one who must be licensed or certified to practice. (2)

The ephemeral nature of professionalism can both enhance and impede its use as a frame for teaching technical communication. A flexible definition allows for professionalism to serve as a guiding concept in diverse contexts with their own standards for appropriate or desirable behaviors, and organizations certainly must certainly be allowed to set standards for their own members and employees. But there are common values underlying all professional practices—responsibilities to customers and employers, for example—that must be conveyed to nascent practitioners if the standard of professionalism is to have any social significance.

I contend that the positive potential of the *professionalism* frame for technical communication is inhibited by a current state of confusion about what that concept means within the field. For a frame to be successful in motivating a target population to act, it must resonate both internally and with other messages and experiences; inconsistencies
will quickly render a frame unpersuasive (Benford and Snow). Among other consequences, I believe that a lack of cohesion in defining professionalism for the discipline is a significant reason why the certification and legislation processes argued for in the social role (and legal status) model described below have largely proven unsuccessful.

Unclear and inconsistent framing of the discipline is of particular consequence in the classroom: Because introductory and service courses expose students from a variety of backgrounds to technical communication, the stakes for the future of the discipline are particularly high. The service course in particular is a large component of the discipline; it is the primary teaching responsibility of academics in the field and may recruit students from other fields into technical communication. It is therefore important that members of the discipline work together to construct a clear but flexible definition of what professionalism entails that can serve as a guiding principle for pedagogy, scholarship, and practice. Such a definition would also help clarify (or at the very least, better articulate) technical communication’s role in the academy, the workplace, and society.

Developing a clearer definition of professionalism for technical communication necessarily involves an understanding of what it means to be (a) professional. Some technical communication scholars, instructors, and practitioners treat professional as an adjective synonymous with workplace, choosing to focus on the broad applicability of professional writing skills to different workplace contexts—often in opposition to the perceived limitations of academic writing. Others use the term to signify an ethos of responsibility and trustworthiness (qualities embodied by individuals rather than inherent
to a particular occupation) and may only invoke those when practitioners fail to reach them. And some describe technical communication as a unique discipline with a social role that should be recognized and regulated as an institutionalized profession, much like medicine, clergy, or law have been historically. While these models are certainly not mutually exclusive—laws restricting practice require standards of competence, for example—the implications of these three major models of professionalism on technical communication pedagogy and practice are significant and thus warrant individual discussion.

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<th>Model</th>
<th>Key Values</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Classroom Application</th>
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<td>Workplace Competence</td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Measured in classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethos</td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Modeled in classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Role</td>
<td>Contribution to society tied to marketplace dominance</td>
<td>Legislation</td>
<td>Cannot be modeled or measured in classroom</td>
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Table 2. Versions of the Professionalism Frame

**Professionalism as Workplace Competence**

The origins of technical communication as a form of professional training for aspiring engineers are well documented (see chapter one; also Kynell; Connors); one of the strengths of technical communication as a discipline—indeed one of the primary reasons it continues to thrive in an era of budget cuts and competition for resources—continues to be its explicit connection to the workplace. Although in recent years scholars and practitioners have worked to expand the scope of their work beyond the standard
forms of workplace writing (the ethical practices frame discussed in chapter three is one example of such efforts), many within the field and without continue to frame technical communication as a catchall for the kinds of communicating students must prepare to perform in a variety of future careers. The emphasis on skills allows for clear measures of professionalism such as performance-based tests or contracts, but comes at the expense of discussions about the social nature and implications of professional communication.

Scholars and instructors employing the *workplace competence* model stress the broad applicability and importance of technical communication skills in many (some argue all) workplace contexts. This approach to the discipline is often built into undergraduate curricula—many students from other disciplines enroll in technical communication courses because members of their field have deemed the curriculum useful in professionalizing students for their future careers and thus made technical communication a required or recommended writing course. This position is also reflected in the common conflation between *technical* and *professional communication* (or *writing*). While the two may carry distinct meanings, across and even within institutions those designations may be used interchangeably in course and program descriptions.20

The conflation of *technical, professional, and workplace* is not unique to course descriptions composed by administrators and other non-specialists; many within the discipline also associate technical communication primarily with the working world. A

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20 A 2008 discussion on the ATTW and CPTSC listservs, for example, offered Professional Practices, Technical Communication, and Business and Technical Report Writing as titles for introductory courses falling under the general category of technical communication at various institutions (England). The 2007 survey likewise uncovered a broad range of course titles for service courses, including Technical Writing, Professional Writing, Technical Communication, Professional Communication, and Professional and Technical Writing.
recent edited collection titled *Innovative Approaches to Teaching Technical Communication* begins by pondering “our pedagogical responsibilities [. . .] to prepare students for work in the twenty-first century” (5-6). The editors claim that students need to develop learning strategies in addition to “mastery of the forms and typical genres of technical communication” if they are to succeed in capitalism’s “new work order” (6). In an essay in the same collection, W. J. Williamson and Philip Sweany write, “We [the authors] see the introductory course in technical communication as an ideal site for connecting disciplines and emphasizing professional development” (61). These statements highlight one implication of the workplace competence model that has roots in the origins of the discipline: Technical communication is often framed for instructors, students, and practitioners alike as a field with no specific content that defines it; rather, technical communication courses offer techniques and forms that help individuals accomplish other, professional, goals.21

A commitment to professionalizing technical communication students by training them in the basic skills expected of them in the workplace is clear in early technical communication education practices and scholarship. Early textbooks such as Samuel Chandler Earle’s *Theory and Practice of Technical Communication* and Mills and Walters’ *Technical Writing* accomplish this task not through explicit discussions of what it means to be a professional or what the social role of the communicator is, but rather through descriptions of what workplace writing is expected to look like. Earle writes that the engineering writer’s task is to “get his [sic] ideas on paper in satisfactory form” and

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21 Scholars of rhetoric and composition will immediately see parallels to historical treatments of rhetoric as style, technique, or, as Plato writes, a knack, rather than a discipline of its own.
that he thus needs instruction in the “special forms of engineering writings” (v). Mills and Walters similarly emphasize the “special techniques of technical writing” rather than discussing the context or consequences of that writing and thus provide primarily stylistic lessons for students of technical communication.

This emphasis on form and basic skills rather than on context or consequences is common in the workplace competence frame as it has manifested in scholarship as well: Since the early issues of *IRE Transactions of Engineering Writing and Speech*, technical communication scholarship has typically focused on increasing workplace efficacy through improved communication skills. J. D. Chapline’s “Tricks of the Trade,” published in the first issue of *IRE Transactions*, offers one editor’s sentence-level suggestions for clarifying and improving the readability of reports and other office documents; John R. Peirce’s “The Challenging Field of Engineering Writing and Speech,” published in the same issue, offers an overview of the kinds of equipment (overhead projectors, film) engineers can use to improve their research presentations. As recently as 1996, Patrick Moore proposed an “instrumental discourse” model for technical communication that emphasizes basic communication skills, arguing that academics’ increasing focus on rhetorical concerns (as opposed to practical applications) in the 1980s and 1990s was insufficient or, worse, misleading for students and practitioners tasked with composing simplified, clear documentation.

Modern textbooks, too, often emphasize workplace proficiency in their framing of the discipline. Mike Markel’s *Technical Communication* explicitly presents technical communication as a skillset that is beneficial to students going into a variety of career
tracks. The first paragraph of the 1996 edition states, “Technical communication is workplace communication. Regardless of what field you enter, your success will depend, to a large degree, on how well you can write and speak [. . .]. A professional is a person who communicates with others about a technical subject” (3). In the 2007 edition of Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach, Paul V. Anderson writes often about communicating technically at work, noting that “writing at work differs from writing at school” and “at work, writing is an action” (5, 10). Anderson notes that while students in a technical communication course may in fact pursue different “professions,” they will all benefit from the workplace-oriented skills they gain during the course. John Lannon likewise typifies technical communication as workplace communication in the 2008 edition of his textbook, Technical Communication (xxi). Lannon writes, “Even if you don’t anticipate a ‘writing’ career, expect to be a ‘part-time’ technical communicator. [. . .] [T]he higher your career goals, the more effectively you need to communicate” (8). He then elaborates: “All professionals specialize in solving problems [. . .]. But whatever your specialty, when you communicate on the job, your main problem is this: ‘How do I prepare the right document for this situation?’” (15). Each of these examples exemplifies the workplace practices model of professionalism, demonstrating how deeply it is ingrained in the culture of technical communication education. Introductory textbooks are often the earliest exposure students have to

22 Anderson writes, “Professionals in your field of specialty have probably developed a code of ethics,” acknowledging that readers of his book on technical communication will likely not choose technical communication as a career (20).
technical communication as a discipline, and these texts clearly articulate that technical communication is a means to improved standing in the working world.

The consequences of the workplace competence model for technical communication are significant. On one hand, associating technical communication with professional development increases the public perception of the value of technical communication, which is invaluable in constructing arguments for additional (or even continued) funding. At the same time, however, framing the discipline in these terms devalues the work done to distinguish technical communication as a discipline in its own right, with its own goals and theoretical and pedagogical models. The value of technical communication specialists is therefore elided in this model in favor of broad applicability. By framing technical communication as a tool to increase jobsite proficiency, instructors and scholars reduce the discipline to a series of skills and competencies necessary to function in any workplace.

More troubling even than the reduction of technical communication to a series of broadly applicable skills is the uncomplicated way in which this model frames the practice. The social role and nature of technical communication are not acknowledged as part of the workplace competence model; practitioners’ motivations for completing a contract on time or proofreading a document are not necessarily even addressed. The values tacitly espoused by this model are akin to those described in my discussion of the economic efficiency frame: namely, workplace efficiency and increased profitability. To find overt discussions of professionalism as a set of values rather than practices, we must turn to a different model, the *professionalism as ethos* model.
Professionalism as Ethos

A variation on the professionalism frame involves establishing professionalism as an ethos, an ideal that practitioners should strive to live up to—or appear to live up to—in all aspects of their practice. This version of professionalism is evident in statements like Mike Markel’s 1996 imperative that technical communication students “must be careful that all your writing reflects the highest standards of professionalism” (8). Professionalism in this model involves more than simple competence; it is an aura that surrounds the practitioner, a reputation for excellence, trustworthiness, or other qualities deemed desirable in a coworker or the provider of a service. This professional ethos is multifaceted and can be hard to pin down; as H. Lee Shinberg notes in “Technical Communicators and Moral Ethics,” “Professional behavior toward one’s peers is usually unnoticeable; unprofessional behavior is as evident as a compound fracture” (10). Nonetheless, scholars and instructors have long worked to promote sets of specific criteria for establishing a professional ethos. While discussions of professionalism framed using this model may touch on the specific tasks that professionals perform, the primary difference between the ethos model and the workplace competence model is that this version of professionalism is centered on qualities perceived as being inherent in an individual or an organization rather than a description of specific skills or knowledge.

Some versions of the professionalism as ethos model present the technical communicator as an extension of an institution’s ethos—often as a representative of his or her employer and that organization’s goals, practices, and image. Shinberg argues just that in his 1980 essay, writing,
The professional work ethic demands extremely high loyalty to the organization. That is, you must work with enthusiasm for your organization whether you approve or disapprove of the goods or services it provides, whether you endorse or oppose its labor practices, and whether or not the organization’s perception of your contribution is sufficiently elevated. (11)

Here Shinberg exemplifies one of the more problematic elements of an organization-centered definition of professionalism: A slavish devotion to the task at hand, to the ideals of a corporation, or to one’s immediate supervisors leaves no room for critical reflection upon the ethical dimensions of one’s own work. Moreover, wholly subordinating the individual to the ethos of a corporation can prevent that individual from reflecting on whether a course of action recommended by his or her employer is just or warranted. This directly contradicts the message of the ethical practices frame discussed in chapter three, although it bears noting that Shinberg’s usage of *ethic* is consistent with Allen and Voss’s more general definition of ethics as “doing what is right to achieve what is good,” as he clearly establishes the will of the organization as an ethical ideal (5).

Perhaps as a result of discomfort with the notion that an individual’s ethics should be wholly determined by his or her employer, some scholars and practitioners emphasize the standards of a community of practitioners rather than the standards of an organization in their definitions of professionalism. James Dubinsky, for example, writes of professionalism as “conduct becoming the discipline” (“Status” 18). David Russell similarly calls professionalism the “ethos of the profession,” noting that “professional communities must initiate new members and teach them to make the rhetorical choices that will project the image that serves the profession.” Russell writes that professionalization can be seen as the process of “acquir[ing] deep loyalties to the values
and perspectives of [one’s] profession” (167). Organizations such as the Society for Technical Communication and Association of Teachers of Technical Writing function to define these standards and imbue their members with the *ethos* of the organization; however, it is up to the individual practitioner him- or herself to exemplify those ideals in public.

Since ethos can only be assessed by observing outward appearances, some scholars and instructors attempt to quantify professionalism by outlining positive behaviors that should be emulated. Mike Markel does so throughout his introductory textbooks, including “professional appearance” in his list of “basic measures of excellence” for technical communication. In the 1996 edition of *Technical Communication: Situations and Strategies*, Markel elaborates on his idea of professional appearance, writing, “[Y]ou must be careful that all your writing reflects the highest standards of professionalism” because “[i]f the documents looks attractive and professional, the reader is more likely to read it and more likely to form a positive impression of you” (8, 10). In later editions of his textbook, Markel expands his notion of professionalism to include other qualities desirable in an individual producing a technical document while still emphasizing that these qualities must be *demonstrated*:

> Once you have shown that you understand readers’ needs and can offer a well-conceived plan, demonstrate that you are the kind of person (or that yours is the kind of organization) who is committed to delivering what you promise. Convince readers that you have the pride, ingenuity, and perseverance to solve the problems that are likely to occur. In short, show that you are a professional. (2007 edition, 412)

Markel then provides specific examples of how to demonstrate one’s professionalism in writing a proposal, including citing one’s credentials and work history, providing a
timeline for one’s work, describing measures for quality control, and providing a detailed budget. Again, Markel’s discussion focuses on the outward expression of inner qualities such as work ethic and responsibility, whether or not one actually values or engenders those qualities. What matters in his view is appearance—preparation of documents, outward behaviors—and the impressions that appearances foster.

Hall and Nelson view this ethos model of professionalism as limiting and problematic, writing in “Integrating Professional Ethics Into the Technical Writing Course,” “If we teach our students to write like professionals in their chosen fields, we have imbued them with professional ethos but not necessarily with the ethical implications of what is written” (47). Software engineer D. L. Parnas recognizes this problem as well and suggests that true professionalism requires individuals to take greater responsibility for the ethical dimensions of their own decisions and actions: “As a professional [. . .] I am responsible for my own actions and cannot rely on any external authority to make my decisions for me. [. . .] I cannot ignore ethical and moral issues. I must devote some of my energy to deciding whether the task that I have been given is of benefit to society” (qtd. in Dombrowski, “Evolving” 315). These scholars reject the implications of the model of professional ethos outlined above, in which the individual represents an extension of the organization rather than an autonomous being capable of making his or her own decisions. They argue that professionalism involves qualities beyond those that are externally visible, some ability to judge right from wrong and contribute to communities large and small. I call this the social role model of professionalism.
Professionalism as a Social Role (and Legal Status)

Another version of the professionalism frame entails formally articulating the public necessity of technical communication. To some degree, all professions involve being paid to interact with the public—the Latin *professio* signified “public declaration”—but a select few professions are generally accepted as necessary to a functioning society. The social role model of professionalism thus requires its proponents to argue that technical communicators provide a service that others cannot (and should not be allowed to) perform, much like doctors, lawyers, and clergy do. In this epistemology one could say that the professional performs tasks that nonprofessionals lack the skill, knowledge, and status to undertake; the practice must therefore be legislated to protect both the discipline and the public from fraudulent practitioners. The argument that technical communication is such a discipline has proven highly contentious in the discipline, however, and extremely difficult to teach in courses for majors and nonmajors alike.

Discussions about the social necessity of the technical communicator have persisted since as early as 1974, when E. A. Cogan wrote in an article in *Technical Communication* that professionals are “a set of people performing socially useful, specialized services for the public. These services require special skills and knowledge, and social mechanisms are developed to validate the competence both of the training programs and of the members of the profession” (15-16). For scholars and practitioners of technical communication, this definition raises a set of difficult questions. What are the special skills, theories, and knowledge unique to the discipline?
contributions make technical communication a profession rather than simply a practice, or worse, a job? And what “social mechanisms” exist or must be created to validate technical communicators’ work?

The answers to these questions have long been a source of contention among technical communication scholars, resulting in a number of attempts to redefine the scope of the discipline in order to improve its professional status (see Kynell-Hunt and Savage’s *Legitimacy and Power in Technical Communication* series for an extended treatment of this struggle). David Dobrin catalogs a number of attempts to circumscribe the professional territory of technical communication by redefining it as “writing about a subject in the pure sciences or applied sciences [. . .] through an objective presentation of facts” or as “the rhetoric of the scientific method” (109). Dobrin’s own suggestion, “Technical writing is writing that accommodates technology to the user,” attempts to carve out a professional space for technical communicators as liaisons between technology and the public (118). Other scholars have attempted to expand the scope of technical communication even beyond the boundaries of communication, as when Johndan Johnson-Eilola argues in “Relocating the Value of Work” that scholars and practitioners should “rearticulate technical communication as symbolic-analytic work” in an attempt to build esteem for technical communicators as information managers (260).23 Each of these articulations rework the boundaries of the discipline in order to clearly

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23 In contrast, Jo Allen hesitates to define the discipline at all, claiming that to define technical communication would be to emphasize limited features, types, and technologies of the practice and neglect the “variations the future will bring” for technical communicators (“Case” 76).
define what makes technical communication special and valuable—what the professional
domain of its practitioners and scholars is.

But domain alone is not enough to warrant professional status according to this
model; Cogan’s definition and others that emphasize the social nature of professions
require that the profession be “socially useful” and include “social mechanisms” that
regulate practice. Many believe that technical communication as a discipline certainly
meets the first condition: Thomas P. Miller, for example, writes that technical
communicators can “say the right thing at the right time to solve a public problem
because they know how to put the shared beliefs and values of the community into
practice” (57). Sullivan and Porter, too, argue that technical communication entails a
social and ethical responsibility to tailor communicative solutions to the public, writing
that the goal of the practice “is not to better represent the company to the public but,
rather, to help the company better understand the needs and interests of the public” (414).

The discipline of technical communication also espouses some mechanisms that
establish standards for practice, such as professional organizations, graduate and
undergraduate programs and certificates, and journals and conferences that distribute
disciplinary knowledge. But by and large these organizations operate independently;
while they may look to one another for guidance and even share common members,
organizations such as the Society for Technical Communication and the Association of
Teachers of Technical Writing have their own officers, codes of conduct, conferences,
and publications. The broader standardization required for formal, legal recognition as a
profession has been the subject of much debate within the discipline: In 1980, the STC
Ad Hoc Committee on Certification reported on a member survey that revealed barely more than half of STC members supported investing time and energy into developing a certification program for technical communicators (5). The Fellows and Associate Fellows of the organization voted 26-1 against developing such a program, concluding among other things that “[t]here does not appear to be a clear need to protect the public from the hazard of an uncertified technical communicator in the same sense as the need exists to protect it from an unqualified doctor, lawyer, or engineer” (6). In addition, a certification program has the potential to foster elitism and alienate those not privileged by the certifying body: Among the objections lodged by STC members were the “[p]ossibility of supervisors feeling threatened by certified employees” and the threat of a small group monopolizing certification (5).24

The larger social implications of formal professionalism have also been a source of much discussion within the discipline. Brenton Faber writers that the consequences of professionals’ “ethical responsibility to achieve market dominance” include “creating an elitism that forms an antagonistic relationship with democracy, suppressing knowledge to gain monopoly power, and enforcing an ethic that requires withholding knowledge to gain both symbolic and material currency” (322, 320). Gerald Savage too notes the elitist potential of professionalism, writing, “Professionalization is an exclusive process; it requires the undemocratic presumption that, as the basis of expertise, certain kinds of knowledge should not be freely available to everyone.” Because of this, Savage writes, any discipline “must demonstrate that it has fundamentally altruistic goals and […] that

24 For other perspectives on the 1980s debate about professional certification, see Harbaugh; Malcolm.
it is in society’s best interests for professional practice to be regulated by those who understand its complexities” (3). The former is one of the primary functions of both the ethos model of professionalism and the ethical practices frame described in chapter three; the latter has yet to be resolved within the discipline of technical communication.

The internal debates about the viability of technical communication as a distinct profession have understandably led to inconsistency in instructors’ treatment of the subject. In John Mitchell’s 1962 Handbook of Technical Communication, the author distinguishes between, on the one hand, scientists and engineers, and on the other, “a growing number of professional technical writers, science writers, and journalists” (3). Mitchell writes that the difference between the two types of “profession” lies in their role in the workplace:

The work of the second group—professional technical writers, science writers, and journalists—is essentially a service function. These writers do not usually conduct research themselves; they report the work of scientists and engineers to others. They are essentially communications specialists skilled in translating technical information into a language and form that can be understood by readers with different backgrounds or less training than the men who did the original work. The value of their services lies in the fact that they release highly trained—and highly paid—research men from some reporting obligations. (4)

Mitchell clearly views the work of the technical communicator as subordinate to the “three professions” of engineering, medicine, and law, though he does use the same term to describe all four disciplines (300). Vestiges of this distinction between technical communicators and other “professionals” linger today. The 2007 edition of Mike Markel’s Technical Communication distinguishes between “technical professionals,” who are “technically trained [and] do a lot of writing, including e-mails, letters, proposals, and
reports,” and “technical communicators,” who create the documents typically associated with the field of technical communication, such as manuals, proposals, and reports (4).  

Clearly both authors, separated though they are by some 45 years, reflect contemporary debates about the professional status of technical communication by drawing lines of inclusion/exclusion and opening doors for the kinds of legitimization and certification many practitioners desire. In the classroom, however, such discussions are just as likely to cause confusion about where students fit into such a schema.

In addition to being troublingly egalitarian, the social role model is difficult to employ in a field as diverse as technical communication due to the broad range of skills and specialized knowledge possessed by practitioners and students. Specialists ranging from web designers to legal writers to teachers may consider themselves part of the field, and developing a set of certification criteria (let alone implementing a process) amenable to all of those individuals has thus far proven too large a challenge for leading members of the discipline. In the classroom, discussing this form of professional status amid disciplinary controversy may prove misleading or simply confusing. Even if the certification issue were resolved, formal professionalism has the potential to foster divisions among students as they come to envision themselves as part of (or excluded from) a privileged professional class. In the case of the service course, in which students come from numerous disciplines come together to learn skills that will help “professionalize” them as they pursue diverse careers, discussing potential certification and legislation options specific to the discipline can prove entirely counterproductive.

25 It bears noting that in this example, Markel uses the term “professional” to refer to practitioners who are not part of the discipline-proper of technical communication.
The use of professionalism as a frame for technical communication practice and pedagogy is more nuanced than one might expect. Although the word is tossed about casually in a variety of contexts, articulating precisely what it means proves difficult even within the confines of a single discipline. The three models of professionalism discussed above can function independently or together to frame the discipline of technical communication for students and practitioners, but each has potentially negative implications that accompany the positive ideals it entails. While the workplace practices model offers a set of guidelines for positive professional behaviors, it does not address the social nature and consequences of technical communication or any other practice. The ethos model does address the values that underlie particular practices, but it too can foster ethically questionable actions undertaken in the name of positive appearances. And the social role model can inculcate a sense of social responsibility, but it also carries the potential to divide practitioners along lines of inclusion/exclusion in the profession. So how can instructors, and particularly instructors of courses for nonspecialists such as the introductory and service courses in technical communication, make productive use of this concept that is so crucial to students’ transitions to the workplace? That question was raised in my 2007 survey of instructors, the results of which are discussed below.

Professionalism in the Service Course: An Analysis of Original Survey Data

As one might expect given the lack of agreement about professionalism in scholarship and textbooks, the 2007 survey of instructors reveals that the professionalism frame is inconsistently employed in the classroom. As was the case with ethics (discussed
in chapter three), survey participants largely agreed that professionalism was an important concept for students of technical communication. Sixty-six percent of the respondents stated that their course goals or grading criteria explicitly included standards for professionalism, while another thirty-one percent indicated that their course contained an implicit requirement of professionalism. In some cases, that professionalism requirement manifests in requirements that students write in flawless Standard American English or format their documents according to a given set of genre conventions. In many cases, however, the “professional” component of the service course was framed in the terms discussed above, using what I have termed the workplace competence model, the ethos model, and the social role model. While responses did not always fall clearly into a single category, the language and values of these models come through quite strongly in instructors’ narratives about their teaching practices.

The workplace competence model manifested frequently in participants’ responses to questions about professionalism, often in descriptions of the classroom as a simulation of a workplace environment. Typical articulations include, “I try to emulate work environments as much as possible,” “[M]y grading standards are based on workplace standards,” and “I expect students to write documents the same way that they would write to someone in the workplace.” Survey participants also referenced the competence component more specifically, writing, “[P]rofessionalism is about doing your job and doing it well,” and “fulfilling the contract.” While it is unclear how students respond to these attempts to model the workplace in the classroom, it is clear that instructors are trying to professionalize students by holding them to standards that they
believe reflect expectations in the business world. One instructor outlined specific behaviors that do not meet the criteria for professional competence: “I don’t accept whining, excuses, or laziness—no lectures, simply lost points.” These responses are not surprising given the context of participants’ teaching: In a service course, the workplace competence model is likely to resonate with students trying to professionalize themselves as they prepare to enter the workplace. In this context, some students may actually prefer a list of acceptable and unacceptable practices to lengthy discussions about social responsibilities or rhetorical analysis.

The ethos model was also frequently employed in survey responses. Some instructors referred to the rhetorical concept of ethos specifically, as when one participant wrote, “Every behavior that students engage in, and every document they create, is a reflection of themselves, and they need to establish a positive ethos in order to succeed in any avenue of life.” Others wrote about professionalism more generally as a means of building (or displaying) one’s reputation: “[P]rofessionalism is the basis of one’s reputation and largely affects the quality of the work”; “[W]e discuss professionalism in the sense [that] your writing reflects you and your organization.” Instructors used professionalism to refer to an embodiment of an organization’s ideals in several responses, as when one participant wrote, “I use the term decorum and matching your appearance and actions to what is expected within [. . .] organizations.” Again, the presence of the ethos frame should not be surprising given the context of the service course. Like the workplace competence model and more so than the social role model, the ethos model is easily adaptable to an audience of nonmajors who primarily wish to
improve their status in various disciplines; the value of making oneself appear to be proficient and virtuous is not a hard sell for this group.

The social role model of professionalism also appeared in several survey participants’ narratives, although some respondents noted its problematic implications for the service course. For many, professionalism entailed a sense of responsibility to one’s community, as when one respondent wrote that students’ behavior “goes beyond just affecting them but affect[s] others as well.” Other instructors wrote of expanding students’ awareness beyond the specifics of the task at hand, stating that students should “understand that it [professionalism] means being responsible and aware that meaning occurs in the interaction with texts, not in texts” and “think about the big picture, not just take orders.” But instructors acknowledged the difficulties of a more formal articulation of the social role of the technical communicator, particularly in the context of the service course. One instructor wrote, “In some cases (although not often because it gets beyond most students’ frame of reference) I may raise questions about the real social value of professions.” Distilling this version of professionalism for nonmajors proves to be a challenge for many instructors, and led many respondents to avoid this version of the frame altogether.

The problems with discussing professionalism as a formal legal status granted to a select group of practitioners were noted by many instructors. Some survey participants chose not to discuss technical communication as a specific profession, instead focusing on the ways in which technical communication skills can benefit those in other fields. Indeed, when asked if they discussed technical communication as a profession, half of the
participants indicated that technical communication skills are important to all professions, whether they discussed technical communication as a profession of its own or not. One respondent expressed exactly this, writing, “Most of my students are already ‘tracked’ to a different profession. I spend more time convincing them that all professionals, no matter the field, have to write well.” When asked how they account for students’ different majors in the service course, most respondents took a similar approach, writing that while some people are professional technical communicators, other professionals employ technical communication: “I stress that there is a profession, but I also stress that all people who write and communicate as part of their jobs (i.e., everybody) can be considered a technical writer. I try to stress that […] we all use components of the field in our daily work products.” This sentiment is echoed in numerous responses, suggesting that instructors must reframe their discussions of technical communication (perhaps in the form of one of the other frames discussed here) in order to reach an audience of students who do not wish to make technical communication their formal profession. For many, the need to reframe their work for this audience complicates the ways in which they can discuss—or even conceive of—what it means to be a professional technical communicator.

One of the more surprising trends revealed by the survey involved whether instructors considered their own work to be “professional technical communication.” When asked if they considered themselves to be professional technical communicators, a majority of the respondents (63%) indicated that they did. When asked why or why not, respondents fell into two main camps: Many of the participants that elaborated on their
response indicated that they considered teaching to be a form of technical communication, as when one respondent wrote, “I am a professional technical communicator. Because I translate information (research, best practices) to a new audience each semester, I think that fits the definition well.” But a greater number (nine as compared to eight) indicated that they consider themselves professional technical communicators separately from their teaching. Responses that distinguished teaching from professional technical communication focused on several points of difference. Some made the context of their work the distinguishing characteristic, as when one respondent wrote, “I am a teacher of technical communication but I do not work in industry.” Others distinguished between the types of work done in the academic work and the workplace: “Yes […]. Not because of my academic training, but because of my experience in business and industry.” One respondent wrote, with no apparent irony, “I teach writing, but I rarely practice communication about technical subjects.” Yet another respondent distinguished the two along more philosophical lines: “My teaching is a labor of love; my work as a professional technical communicator pays the mortgage.” And one respondent located the difference in identity politics, writing quite simply, “No, I’m an academic.”

These responses are noteworthy in at least two ways. First, they indicate that the workplace/academy binary remains prevalent in the perceptions of practitioners and instructors. This should not be surprising to those familiar with the history of the discipline; however, it bears noting that this distinction is being perpetuated by those who work at the intersection of those two spheres. Conversations about the professionalization of the discipline often include plans for certifying practitioners and academic programs,
indicating that instruction is an important component of the development of the field. But it seems that many of those surveyed prefer to identify themselves as members of either the academy or the workplace rather than as part of the larger profession. The more surprising trend highlighted in these responses, however, is that many respondents did not recognize their own work as instructors as constituting technical communication at all, much less “professional” technical communication.

In light of the internal debates about certification processes and criteria in technical communication, it makes sense that some instructors would feel like their work does not fit the definition of “professional technical communicator.” But many instructors (several survey participants and myself included) see teaching as a specific incarnation of technical communication. It thus comes as something of a surprise that the workplace/academy dichotomy is so heavily ingrained that even those who teach basic technical communication courses (in the case of the service course, distilling the discipline for an audience of nonmajors) do not always see their own work as involving those very same concepts and skills. One might wonder: If instructors aren’t participating in the field of technical communication, why would they be inclined (or qualified) to teach it? That question falls outside the scope of this project, but it does seem to hold promise for future lines of research.

The course materials submitted as part of some participants’ contributions to the survey revealed another interesting trend: Syllabi and assignment sheets predominantly use the term professional to distinguish the difference between the classroom and the environments in which students are preparing to work. The distinction between student
work and “professional” work was both overt and implied, appearing in grading criteria and course policies such as “This document [should be] suitable to distribute in a professional setting or publish” and “Because attendance in the professional world is expected without tardiness and without excuse, your attendance in class is expected without tardiness and without excuse.” These statements create a firm distinction between the classroom context and the workplace, emphasizing the fact that students have not yet earned “professional” status but are building toward it. One submitted syllabus (and doubtless many unrepresented curricula) also emphasized the distinction between student work and professional work by requiring students to compose application materials for a “professional position”—that is, any career-track job. In these terms, professionalism is something that students can acquire only when they graduate to the working world.

Instructors can model desirable practices and workplace situations, but real professionals exist in a different sphere—one in which, if the previous finding holds, instructors themselves do not participate.

Much like the analysis of scholarship and textbooks above, the 2007 survey of instructors revealed a general inconsistency in the manner in which professionalism is used as a master term in technical communication courses. Although instructors did not generally appear to be inconsistent in their own uses of the professionalism frame, across responses there is a great deal of disagreement about how (and even whether) the frame should be employed in the classroom. Because the instructors surveyed all teach introductory or service courses, their framing of the discipline has particularly high stakes: The course is likely to be the first (and perhaps only) exposure students have to
technical communication, and first impressions can prove important in recruiting and retaining members of the discipline. In addition, the inconsistency revealed in survey responses indicates that while students may not be confused by the messages produced within a single classroom, the chances that those messages will not resonate with others received during their time as students and (for those who choose to pursue a career in technical communication) practitioners are quite high. In the end, that makes it likely the frame will not be effective in guiding expectations or practices, thus negating the power of the frame to foster consistent behaviors or change.

**Conclusion: The Promise and Perils of Professionalism**

Debates over the professional qualifications and contributions of technical communicators have been a hallmark of the discipline since its inception. One survey participant encapsulated the debate nicely: “Are we just super-admins who can ‘make it look nice’ or do we offer a specific range of skills that add value and quality to an overall product or effort?” The professionalism frame has served as one means for practitioners, scholars, and instructors to articulate answers to that question while at the same time justifying their existence, scholarship, and need for resources to outsiders and administrators. Within the discipline, the frame can also serve as a source of common pride or a rallying cry for increasing standardization and, perhaps, legislation. But inconsistent use of the frame such as the varying versions described above hinder instructors’ and practitioners’ ability to work together to realize that vision. It is telling
that the instructors who participated in the 2007 survey did not even agree on whether they themselves belonged to the profession of technical communication.

Professionalism as a frame for the discipline is further complicated when employed in the service course. Discussions of professional status as constituted by social recognition, certification, and supporting legislation are problematic even when those involved share a common discipline; they may prove divisive as students from various disciplines—some less culturally privileged than others—come together in the classroom. Even discussing strict standards for quality and type of work holds little utility for students whose professional expectations will likely depend on their career choice. As one survey respondent wrote, “I have too many students from different fields to hold them to any one standard of professionalism. Instead, I try to have them act appropriately for a classroom.” These concerns are very real for instructors who work daily to engage students from different disciplines in common activities with common goals and teachable (and gradable) standards for performance.

This is not to say that the professionalism frame cannot be constructively employed in technical communication courses; on the contrary, the notion of professionalism, if consciously and consistently employed within the classroom, can engage students in discussions about standards and expectations for their own work outside of the classroom. Two of the variations on the professionalism frame identified here, the workplace competence model and the ethos model, both attempt to professionalize individual practitioners and thus translate easily to the service course, although not without some significant implications. The workplace competence model
elides concerns about the context and impact of one’s work, focusing instead on specific behaviors that enhance productivity and workplace value. And while the ethos model argues for a more socially conscious approach to practice, it has the potential to either reduce the practitioner to an extension of their employer’s image or foster superficially ethical behaviors for the sake of appearances.

The greatest potential of the professionalism frame for technical communication—especially but not exclusively in the context of the service course—may lie in the intersection of the social role model discussed above and the ethical practices frame discussed in chapter three. If technical communication is understood as a broadly applicable practice with an ethical dimension and a real social value, formal legislation such as that discussed by Faber, Savage, Cogan, and others may not be necessary. Instead, students and practitioners in disciplines as disparate as journalism and engineering can focus their efforts on improving their professional and local communities through the application of lessons learned in the technical communication classroom.

Rather than becoming an exclusive space with rigidly defined boundaries, technical communication can become a resource that allows professionals of all types to distribute their disciplinary knowledge to a wide range of audiences; to, as one survey participant wrote, facilitate “[l]earning, valuing and utilizing specialized knowledge in a way that helps to solve problems.” This potential is addressed by another frame, the ethical professionalism frame, discussed in chapter five.
5. ETHICAL PROFESSIONALISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

The previous chapters have analyzed a number of frames used to describe the nature and value of the work done by scholars, teachers, and practitioners of technical communication. My goal throughout has been to develop a rhetorical framework that can be brought into the classroom to teach disciplinary values and contextual awareness to students in introductory and service courses. This framework must provide guidance for future professional behaviors as well as the flexibility needed for practitioners to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and take actions with real human consequences. In this chapter I will explicate such a frame, which I call *ethical professionalism*.

At their most basic level, all classrooms are exercises in framing. They provide a lens (theoretical, methodological, epistemological) for students to interpret events and texts, to determine what they are seeing and “what’s going on” both in the classroom and, eventually, in the workplace (Goffman). Frames permeate scholarship, teaching practices, and curriculum design—anywhere messages are communicated that help students create structures of expectation for what their academic and professional futures will hold. Frames may be modified or bridged together to suit a particular context, but when the messages that comprise the frame substantially contradict one another or lived experience, the frame loses salience and persuasive power. If our disciplinary values are to be passed on to students, then, instructors, scholars, and practitioners must all work
together to build and disseminate a frame for the discipline that will prepare them to “meet citizenship and workplace responsibility with integrity as well as with knowledge and skill” (Staples 161). As the previous chapters have demonstrated, members of the discipline have developed and disseminated a number of frames that attempt to realize this goal, but conflicts and inconsistencies between those messages inhibit their ability to foster real change.

The *ethical practices* frame discussed in chapter three has gained some traction in the past quarter century, positing that the values driving technical communication need not be profit and efficiency. Scholars and instructors employing this frame suggest that concepts such as stakeholder involvement and civic responsibility better represent the current ideals of the discipline than the historical emphasis on capitalist production and consumption. What exactly those ideals entail—and how they differ from those of what I term the *economic efficiency* frame—is a matter of some debate among practitioners and scholars, however. Scholars and textbook authors have forwarded dozens of different ethical frameworks espousing values ranging from the Kantian categorical imperative to postmodern contextual ethics to an uncritical ethic of prudence. For teachers and students alike, it can be difficult to sort through all of the available ethical schemas to determine what the right course of action may be in a particular situation; for practitioners the stakes are even higher, as they are tasked with making on-the-spot decisions amid often-conflicting responsibilities to employers, customers, and other stakeholders. Without a consensus about the ethical ideals of technical communication, it is no wonder that practitioners occasionally make questionable choices under those circumstances.
The *professionalism* frame discussed in chapter four also posits a set of expectations for the workplace, in this case behaviors that further practitioners’ own reputations and status as well as those of their discipline. The specific behaviors that meet those expectations as well as the ultimate goal of those actions vary depending on the model of professionalism employed: Some versions simply list activities, such as accurately recording completed work and carefully proofreading documents, that practitioners should incorporate into their daily routine; other models argue for certification and legislation as the measure of professionalism for a discipline. This latter model in particular has proven divisive among scholars and practitioners and is even more problematic in the context of the technical communication service course, which caters to students unlikely to ever be certified technical communicators.

In light of the benefits and problems associated with these frames, I propose that scholars, instructors, and students can benefit from disciplinary discussions that examine the intersection of the two master terms, *ethics* and *professionalism*. To that end, I propose a new frame for the practice of technical communication: *ethical professionalism*. Implementing such a frame does not require any significant restructuring of curricula; rather, it requires members of the discipline to selectively choose the language they use to describe the discipline, its practices, and its pedagogies. It is my intent that the ethical professionalism frame be employed to initiate conversations about the social role of technical communicators, both as individual practitioners and as members of communities ranging from corporations to professional organizations to the citizenry. Those conversations lay the foundation for students’
expectations about the scope and nature of their future work and for critical approaches to professional practice.

The Intersection of Ethics and Professionalism

While the previous two chapters have out of necessity treated the two as discrete sets of concerns, ethics and professionalism have a long history of association in disciplinary discussions about technical communication. Scholarship often connects ethics and professionalism, although scholars rarely theorize the intersections between the two. Gerald Savage writes that the process of professionalizing technical communication requires an “emphasis upon technical communication ethics and our responsibility to society beyond our employers or our own interests.” Savage argues that formally articulated ethics are important for any profession because they “demonstrate that it has fundamentally altruistic goals and demonstrate as well that it is in society’s best interests [for the profession] to be regulated by those who understand its complexities” (3). Elsewhere, Brenton Faber’s analysis of scholarship about professionalism in technical communication includes “ethical awareness” as one of his three categories of emphasis, writing that professionals engage in “self-conscious discourse about values, conduct, and what is perceived to be proper action” (314).

The professionalism frame’s emphasis on ethics in the professionalization of technical communication is tempered by market concerns, however: Faber notes that, according to this model, “[A]lthough professionals espouse a self-conscious ethical awareness, a central concern of this ethic is to protect the profession’s monopoly on its
knowledge and practice” (319). These concerns with regulation and market dominance are certainly prudent for leading members of a discipline still working to establish its place in the business world, in the academy, and in society. But such concerns can prove distracting and even counterproductive to the daily activities of students and practitioners, who require a framework for ethical decision-making in diverse rhetorical contexts.

Practitioners too seem to have recognized the connection between ethics and professionalism: The Society for Technical Communication and the Association for Teachers of Technical Communication, like their counterpart professional organizations in other fields such as the American Medical Association, have adopted formal codes of ethics. These codes provide standards for practitioner communities and, just as importantly, publicize the ethical values of the community for external audiences, aiding in the process of developing a professional ethos. Recent public events such as the Enron and Halliburton scandals have also forced organizations and practitioners in a variety of professions to revisit their own practices and values lest they be subject to intense public scrutiny. But clear definitions of ethics and professionalism that transcend specific organizations are hard to come by—even individual businesses may espouse their own codes of ethics or professional behavior.

The 2007 survey revealed that many instructors also see ethics and professionalism as intertwined. When asked, “How would you like your students to understand the concept of professionalism?” several respondents specifically referred to institutional codes of professional ethics. But when asked to articulate the relationship between ethics and professionalism (if they thought there was one), survey respondents
provided responses ranging from “to be professional is to be ethical” to “I think one can be professional but not ethical or ethical but not professional.” Several respondents indicated dismay at the possibility that one might not necessarily entail the other: One participant wrote, “A professional without a sense of right and wrong is a frightening prospect. I hope that I do not encourage that kind of behavior,” while another indicated that “[p]rofessionalism without ethical behavior […] is hollow.” Some respondents suggested that the two concepts intersect in an awareness of the consequences of one’s actions on others. Participating instructors wrote about “the displacement of the self from the center of one’s decision-making” and “behaving responsibly to oneself and others.”

These answers demonstrate that the instructors surveyed perceive that there is a relationship between ethics and professionalism, but they do not necessarily agree on what that relationship is. Several point to something akin to an understanding of stakeholders’ needs, while others simply associate the two conceptually without being able (in the space provided) to articulate the relationship more specifically.

When these various sources cannot agree on what ideals like ethics and professionalism entail, they are unlikely to motivate individuals to change their beliefs or practices, or to act at all. Indeed, inconsistency in the messages produced by advocates of formal professionalism may well be one of the reasons that internal movements for increased standardization and certification in the discipline have thus far proven unsuccessful. I therefore call not only for a reconsideration of the ways in which discussions of ethics and professionalism inform one another, but also for more unified and consistent efforts to frame the discipline in line with those values.
Ethical Professionalism as a Frame for Technical Communication

I contend that because professional communicators in a variety of careers produce documents that affect people’s lives, it is imperative that they develop a sense of the consequences of their work, a set of concerns typically encompassed under the frame of ethics. Although scholars, instructors, and practitioners seem to agree that ethics and professionalism are important and intertwined, the two sets of concerns are often articulated separately. By instead focusing on the overlap between the two—the responsibility of public agents to others and to themselves—the discipline can better situate its practitioners to act rhetorically in the various communities and contexts they will find themselves in. This set of values, which I call ethical professionalism, must be clearly and consistently articulated throughout the discipline if it is to foster change.

Ethical professionalism is an approach to everyday applications of technical communication that requires students and practitioners to be aware of the role that technical communication plays in building and maintaining communities large and small. The “community” I invoke here is a social construct, “an ethical reference point located between, on the one hand, the potentially undemocratic, impersonal, and bureaucratic state and, on the other hand, the equally impersonal technical/economic rationality of industry and the market,” and I thus use the term broadly to refer to any social formation (Ornatowski and Bekins 253). Making students aware of the role of rhetorical communication in maintaining these formations is paramount: Documents produced by technical communicators can serve the various purposes of articulating a social formation’s identity, recruiting new members and employees, and recommending or
conveying public policy. As Ornatowski and Bekin write, “helping technical communication students become more civically aware may involve […] helping them understand that they construct communities as part of their professional writing activities” (265). Of course, communities are by no means homogenous, and people often belong to multiple communities. Technical communicators are no exception; they belong to workplace communities, professional organizations, and local communities. Just as significantly, their work has consequences for other associated groups: Employers, customers, users, and citizens may all be affected by technical communicators’ actions. Since rhetoric is foundational to the formation and maintenance of any social formation, I wish to emphasize that technical communicators (whether they consider themselves a part of the discipline or not) have the ability to foster change in any of those contexts.

Ethical professionalism as a frame is a logical extension of concepts already circulating within the discipline. In addition to valuing the ideals suggested by the ethical practices frame—such as civic responsibility and stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes—I maintain that the emphasis on building professional communities found in the professionalism frame provides students and practitioners alike with a unifying ethos and a common motivation to live up to those ideals. Unlike the versions of the professionalism frame currently circulating in the discipline, however, the social role of the technical communicator in the ethical professionalism frame is not a legal status, nor is it subject to the “hegemonic nature of accreditation and market closure” (Savage 3); rather, it is an awareness that technical communication consists of rhetorical strategies that can be used in various contexts for various ends and is therefore subject to significant
forethought and scrutiny. In the end, this complex awareness can lead practitioners to develop stronger solutions to problems requiring technical communication—and take greater pride in their own work.

One of the benefits of the ethical professionalism frame is that many existing practices and processes already fit into its value structure. Practices such as usability testing, stakeholder analysis, and participatory action research represent the ideals of ethical professionalism made manifest; framing those practices in these terms simply clarifies their value to stakeholders and practitioners alike. Usability testing, for example, requires designers to work directly with the users of a product before its completion, but the questions those designers ask during a usability trial may cover anything ranging from the mechanical ease of use to perceived value of the product. When usability testing is framed as an act of ethical professionalism, however, the questions designers ask may also cover the role of the product in enabling relations between users and between users and others (designers, employers, community members, etc.). Ethical professionalism also provides a framework for civic engagement pedagogies that seek to involve students in conversations about the function of technical communication in building and maintaining communities ranging from businesses to organizations that serve to improve local conditions.

As the previous chapters have discussed, formal scholarship can initiate productive discussions and prove quite influential among scholars, but scholarly discussions do not always translate easily into classroom practices. The reasons for this disconnect are many: Some scholarship does not outline a practical application; other
scholarship simply goes unread by instructors due to the rigors of teaching or because of a lack of disciplinary investment (see chapter 3 for a discussion of material conditions that prevent scholarship from influencing classroom practices). Pedagogy, on the other hand, can reach students one classroom at a time, potentially influencing future generations of practitioners, scholars, and even instructors. Our choice of pedagogies is thus important to the development of the discipline, as teaching practices directly affect students’ experiences and expectations. The remainder of this chapter will therefore discuss pedagogical applications of ethical professionalism in an attempt to develop a teachable framework for the discipline.

**Ethical Professionalism and Civic Engagement Pedagogies**

Although ethical professionalism is an appropriate frame for day-to-day activities in a technical communication course, its value is perhaps best realized when used to frame pedagogies that involve student interaction with real clients and/or real community issues. Like James Dubinsky and others, I term such pedagogies *civic engagement pedagogies* (see the 2004 special issue of *TCQ* edited by Dubinsky for multiple perspectives on civic engagement in technical communication). According to Dubinsky, civic engagement involves “exercis[ing] political power by pursuing goals concerned with ‘human life and conduct’ that benefit the common good” ("Guest" 245); civic engagement pedagogies thus typically ask students to work with community partners to address some community-based “common good.” Employing the *ethical professionalism* frame in such a setting allows instructors to focus on decision-making processes and the
role of the technical communicator in building and maintaining communities, all within
the scope of course that must out of necessity teach students about specific genres and
technologies valued in the workplace. As Eble and Gaillet write about civic engagement
pedagogies in general,

In providing educational settings that encourage students to develop a
civic mindset, we help alleviate disciplinary tension between teaching
practical skills and teaching rhetoric as a civic virtue. As a result of this
approach, students will be prepared to apply their educational experiences
to the communities in which they live, work, and serve. (351)

Ethical professionalism can enhance these pedagogies as well as those with a less specific
focus on civic engagement by addressing the social values and consequences inherent in
students’ work, while at the same time asking instructors (as ethical professionals
themselves) to reflect upon the values underlying and propagated by their own
pedagogies.

The most common civic engagement pedagogy employed in technical
communication courses is service learning. Service learning typically entails students
working with community partners (sometimes cast as “participant organizations” or
clients, partners are typically campus or nonprofit organizations) on projects of value to
both student and partner organization. Service-learning proponents cite experiential
learning and the fostering of social awareness as two of the primary benefits of the
pedagogy for students (see Huckin; Henson and Sutliff; Matthews and Zimmerman;
Dubinsky “Service”). But as Matthews and Zimmerman rightly point out, the framing of
such learning as “service” often leads to confusion about the purpose of the work. Clients
and students alike may misunderstand the nature of such work as charitable or voluntary,
leading to, among other things, unequal expectations about each side’s role in completing a project and unequal investment in the usability of the final deliverables. J. Blake Scott agrees that service learning has been miscast by its advocates in terms that devalue civic engagement, writing, “When framed in terms of student motivation and self-discovery […] the civic aspects of service-learning can be muted” (243). By instead focusing on the social nature of technical communication in a service-learning curriculum in the ways described below, I believe that students and participant organizations alike can learn valuable lessons about the power of writing to bring about real change.

Another pedagogy designed to foster civic participation is the civic simulation, a pedagogy I explicate along with Brian Jackson and Erik Juergensmeyer in a 2006 issue of *Composition Studies*. In that essay, we argue that “rhetorical literacy—the ability to perform eloquently and analyze critically in different situations for practical purposes—can and should be taught to undergraduates in order for students to develop the kind of character, wisdom, and civic virtue required for a progressive democratic culture” (111). Toward that end, we offer a pedagogical model in which students research the various communities affected by a current public controversy, take on the roles and values of a stakeholder, and develop and implement a strategy for fostering change through public acts of technical communication. Although the participants in this model are all students—no actual stakeholders were involved in the project described in the 2006 essay—our goal of developing rhetorical civic literacy in students was enabled by incorporating a mock town hall meeting involving public presentations, a question and answer period that held students accountable for their public arguments, and a final vote
via anonymous ballot. This simulation was largely successful in motivating students to envision themselves as agents of change, although our limited definition of “public performance” meant that students were unable to actually enact that agency. That weakness can, I believe, be addressed by framing the pedagogy as an incarnation of ethical professionalism and involving community members more closely in the process.

A number of other educational models explicitly attempt to foster civic engagement in students. Participatory design (PD) and participatory action research (PAR) are both increasingly employed as models for collaboration between technical communicators and community partners, and both have great potential as pedagogies for undergraduate courses in technical communication.26 PAR, an approach to working with communities to uncover and solve problems that require expertise they lack, shows particular potential as a methodology for building civic awareness in students; but as of this writing, PAR has primarily been articulated as a methodology for research (see Crabtree and Sapp for one example of PAR in an undergraduate curriculum). Andrew Mara has articulated a series of assignments called charrettes, which are intended to foster “interaction between place-specific citizens [the nonacademic community] and practice-specific professionals [students], especially in an intense public collaboration” (222). Much like the civic simulation described above, Mara’s charrettes require students to design solutions to community problems and present them in public; but unlike the simulation, students are required to work with and present to representatives of the

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26 See Spinuzzi for a description of PD in technical communication. See Clark’s “Is Professional Writing Relevant?” and Paré’s “Keeping Writing in Its Place” for applications of PAR in technical communication research.
community and thus take on the “triple role of citizen–professional–neighbor” (226). There are no doubt many other educational models employed in technical communication to encourage social action, as well as many as yet unthought-of pedagogies soon to be developed. I contend that any of these pedagogies can be enhanced by consciously framing the work students and teachers undertake as acts of ethical professionalism.

By framing their pedagogies—including class discussions, assignments, course policies, and other messages disseminated to students—as forwarding the values of ethical professionalism, instructors can guide students’ development as nascent practitioners in ways that befit the current values of the discipline. In particular, by focusing on social structures and the repercussions of communicative decisions on those structures, instructors can foster a sense of civic awareness and responsibility in students that is likely to translate to their practices once they enter the workplace. As part of any of the pedagogies outlined above, students can be required to research an issue or problem and the various stakeholders—local citizens, community organizations, employees of a company—affected by that issue. Students can be asked to articulate the various forms of communication that circulate among those populations and the ways that those forms of communication drive community-building and decision-making. The local newspaper may distribute information and announcements to the citizens of a small town, for example, while internal documents such as reports and memos serve those functions within a corporation. Depending on the pedagogical model, students may then either propose both a solution to the problem and the persuasive strategy to bring about that change—a community initiative and supporting promotional materials, for example—or
compose documents specified by the instructor or community partner with that research serving as the foundation for invention.

Course policies can also be framed as fitting into the value structure of ethical professionalism. Rather than simply imposing a point deduction for assignments handed in after the deadline (or not accepting them at all), instructors can discuss why late assignments are socially unacceptable: Among other consequences, they disrupt the flow of work for the entire class, foster negative impressions that can color future interactions between student and teacher and among students, and detract from the student’s ability to contribute to the discussions and common efforts of the class as a whole. Other policies and behaviors, such as required contributions to class discussion or collaboration on group projects, can be framed in the same terms—that is, as contributing to or detracting from the classroom community. Discussions framed in these terms reveal the social structures that student communication enables, which in many ways model the social structures students will become part of in the workplace.

Instructors too must model the values of ethical professionalism if the frame is to resonate for students. Teachers might begin by articulating their own role in the educational process: role model, arbiter, consultant, even surrogate employer in some pedagogical models. Whatever the pedagogical model, if technical communication is understood as a practice that works to advance the values ethical professionalism, an instructor’s role is to facilitate learning, working, and community-building rather than simply evaluating students’ work. Under this value structure, instructors should also be prepared to discuss the role of their own writing in fostering and maintaining the
classroom community. Syllabi, for example, are drafted by instructors (and in some cases administrators) in order to establish guidelines and expectations for the course. Teachers and students alike are held to these standards, and failure by either party to live up to the expectations laid out in the document can prove detrimental to the community as a whole; if instructors fail to live up to the standards established by the syllabus—course content, schedule for class meetings, grading policies—they are subject to just as much disapproval and legitimate complaint as students who fail to meet assignment deadlines. The guidelines and expectations laid out by a syllabus or assignment sheet can of course be modified to benefit members of the class, but only if those changes are agreed upon by both instructor and students, the members of the classroom community. Discussing classroom documents in this way sets a precedent for students to treat documents they compose in the workplace as serving human relations rather than as tasks that must simply be completed as quickly and efficiently as possible.

All of these pedagogical practices help structure the technical communication classroom as a site for discussions about the role of writing and other forms of communication in the various communities students do and will belong to. Rather than uncritically completing projects specified by their instructor or community partners, students can investigate the values underlying and propagated by those assignments and organizations. Students can also be asked to articulate their own role, as budding professionals, in aiding those organizations in accomplishing their goals. Of course, these discussions must occur concurrently with lessons about the particular technologies and skills required to produce (and view) the documents students are asked to produce. But
even those technologies can be discussed as serving or inhibiting social structures by distributing information only to those with access to the necessary resources.

**Ethical Professionalism, the Service Course, and the Future of the Discipline**

Scholars, instructors, and practitioners of technical communication have worked for over a century to build a discipline that is both practically useful and socially relevant. As a result, technical communication has experienced exponential growth and resulting recognition in academic and workplace circles. Even in today’s economic crisis, the discipline continues to thrive as its members demonstrate their ability to, as one survey participant wrote, “act […] ethically when designing unique answers to fit [professional] situations.” But maintaining the discipline’s status in the workplace and in the academy depends on our ability to clearly articulate what it is that we do—what we contribute to organizations, to society, and to students’ education that makes us unique and justifies our use of resources in a rapidly changing workplace and an increasingly competitive economy.

The *ethical professionalism* frame represents not a drastic restructuring of technical communication curricula or scholarship, but rather a reframing of existing practices in terms that reflect the shared values of the discipline. Scholarship produced in the past twenty-five years recommends some actions and processes as suiting the best interests of the discipline, or the local community, or even the practitioner him or herself, depending on the framework applied. The value of ethical professionalism as a
rhetorical and ideological frame for the discipline is that it distills those conversations into a coherent, broadly-applicable set of values and guidelines for practice and pedagogy. I believe that this frame’s emphasis on the role of communication in building and maintaining communities can allow it to engage a broad range of students and practitioners, including those in disciplines outside of technical communication.

This brings us back to the technical communication service course. Whether of their own volition or because the course is a requirement for their major, students from a variety of disciplines and career tracks enter the service course looking for lessons that will aid in their professional development. One of instructors’ primary tasks in this setting is to convince students that the assignments and lessons they encounter in the classroom are valuable to their success regardless of the career path they choose. While this situation might be seen as an imperative to forgo discipline-specific material such as discussions about certification processes for technical communicators, or to stretch the curriculum to present students with a broader range of documents that suit various career paths, I believe it actually provides an opportunity to broaden the horizons of the discipline itself and develop approaches that are suitable for a variety of rhetorical and professional contexts. In addition, the service course provides an opportunity to reach out to students and practitioners in a variety of other fields and build relationships that bridge disciplines.

I believe that the rhetorical, civic, and professional dimensions suggested in my discussion of the ethical professionalism frame can help technical communication instructors accomplish these goals. By emphasizing the role of technical communication
and rhetoric in building and maintaining communities, instructors draw students into a
conversation that extends beyond specific skills and job descriptions such as technical
writer or documentation designer. In addition, by situating approaches to technical
communication in larger conversations about the importance of ethics and professional
development, instructors tap into the commonplaces students see in the world around
them. The service course may actually provide students’ first formal exposure to these
principles, particularly if those students come from disciplines outside of the humanities.
If students see these lessons and discussions as applicable to their future careers,
whatever those careers may be, their appreciation of the value of the course and of the
discipline can only increase.
AFTERWORD

It is my sincere hope that members of the discipline of technical communication, from practitioners to scholars to instructors and those whose work lies at the intersections of those spheres, can come together to advance a common vision for the discipline that is in line with the ideals expressed in this dissertation. It is only through concerted effort that we can foster the kinds of civic engagement, ethical reflection, and professional community-building that many within the discipline see as the future of the discipline. The process is complex and time-consuming: Everything from scholarship to organizational mission statements to course goals and outcomes statements must be in line in order to effect a cultural shift. Such a shift may take a generation or more, as students steeped in these values become practitioners in their own right and spread the influence of the frame beyond the classroom and influence other practitioners, scholars, and future students.

Instructors take on a particularly large burden in the plan outlined herein. Every message that we disseminate to students, from scholarship to syllabi to daily conversations held during class or office hours, must be consciously constructed and reflect the ideals of ethical professionalism if the frame is to foster any real change. Inconsistent messages, poor timing, unforeseen events, and competing frames may conspire to prevent a frame like ethical professionalism from effecting significant change on a global scale. But at the very least, inculcating these values in students one classroom
at a time cannot but improve the work, the standing, and the sense of community of the discipline as a whole.


England, Peter. “Number of Service Courses?” Email to ATTW and CPTSC listservs. 17 Dec 2008.


