Introduction to Special Issue on Digital Activism, Pedagogy, and Advocacy

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This special issue on Digital Activism, Pedagogy, and Advocacy showcases scholarship that builds on the strong connections that exist between composition studies and technical and professional communication to illustrate how socially just pedagogical approaches exist in relationship with digital activisms. The intersectional and transdisciplinary work collected here provides us with pedagogical frameworks for identifying, analyzing, and enacting activism pedagogies around digital activism in writing and technical communication classrooms.

Extending Conversations

The writers of these articles offer innovative thinking on advocacy and activism in composition studies, digital rhetorics, and technical communication. These articles emerge from important conversations at the 2022 Computers and Writing Conference on digital activism as well as the co-editors' work on a forthcoming edited collection, *Practicing Digital Activisms*, which brings together theories, methods, and cases for studying, understanding, and practicing digital activisms through digitally-mediated activist work and emerging digital activist genres. That collection advocates for the importance of studying, participating, and producing digital activist projects as part of understanding online communication, digital discernment, and emerging technologies that require generative AI and algorithmic literacies.

This special issue of *TCSJ* also extends the scholarship published in "Transdisciplinary Connections in Composition Studies and Technical and Professional Communication," a special issue of *College English* where the co-editors and scholars called for a reimagining of disciplinary boundaries to create more equitable and transformative approaches to writing studies (Gonzales, Shivers-McNair, & Bawarshi, 2020). The introduction to the issue pointed out the shared interests and connections of those in composition studies and technical and professional communication when it comes to language diversity and fluidity (Gonzales, 2020), commitments to writing processes, pedagogy, and research practices (Grabill, 2020), and building coalitional relationships and networks (Jones, 2020), among other topics. Jones (2020) characterizes these connections as productive because they bring together "scholars who are committed to more equitable, more accessible, more inclusive, and more socially just classrooms, academic organizations, and institutional programs" (p. 516). These connections remind us that centering technical communication and writing classroom spaces as sites for change is an exigent, socially just pedagogical project, and what better place to amplify these contributions to technical communication pedagogy than *Technical Communication and Social Justice* – especially given some of this journal's recently published work. For example, Powell and Wilson (2024) highlight social justice approaches to social media use and ask students to connect personal passions with technical communication skills for real social change, and Sehnal (2024) integrates social justice principles, advocacy and accessibility into a writing across the disciplines course focused on mental health. Clem (2023) presents a model for a professional editing class that privileges linguistic diversity and situates editing as an important social justice project. These articles, and the special issue by Gonzales and Nur Cooley on translations and social justice in technical communication, help provide a foundation for the incorporation of social justice theories, values, and approaches in our pedagogical work.

Readers will find in this issue an imperative to teach digital literacies as a common theme for social justice-oriented technical communication pedagogy. While some of the articles in this

special issue describe research and pedagogy emerging from composition courses, the authors expand their implications beyond the realm of composition, focusing on socially just pedagogy that informs technical communication courses as well as many other types of writing courses and technical rhetorics writ large. This is especially true when it comes to the intersection of digital rhetorics, digital literacies, and digital activisms.

The conversations in this special issue center the classroom as a critical site in the struggle over meaning-making and the ways it has transformed in recent years. Vaccine controversy continues five years into the COVID-19 pandemic; governments continue to target Black people with impunity through calls for "neutrality"; a coup took place in the U.S. Capitol and the members originally held accountable were recently pardoned; income inequality shot into space (literally), and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, policies, and offices are currently being erased from our universities and their curricula, along with DEI infrastructure in governmental and other organizations. Likewise, the writing of this introduction corresponds with various field-wide discussions and perspectives regarding the place and role of generative AI technologies in our writing classrooms. We see the intersection of writing studies, technical communication, and digital literacies as a vital place for taking up such crisis points in the war over meaning and misinformation. *TCSJ* is uniquely positioned to sponsor such conversations regarding the teaching of digital activisms and other rhetorical engagement to highlight the skills needed for digital engagement, discernment, and intervention. Technical communication is more important than ever in this endeavor, especially in disembodied digital spaces that operate on fear and anger.

The projects collected here practice digital activism and advocacy, and the authors write from their perspectives of pedagogues. We encourage wide imaginings of the terms *writing pedagogy* and *digital activism*. While some critiques from "influencers" and scholars alike have lobbed accusations of "armchair activism" at digital activism initiatives, digital rhetoricians and technical communicators are aware that this work represents yet another way that a broad cross-section of the global population engages with issues of personal and public concern and works to understand and communicate specialized information in the name of action to the audiences that need it. The digital and networked spaces that increasingly mediate so much of our daily lives have also become the spaces where acts of resistance begin or gain rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009).

This special issue highlights key tools and ideas that teachers can use to be more engaged in social and political projects, as well as with the technologies that shape their students' – and their own – lives and communities, ensuring that digital literacies are front and center in our writing and technical communication classrooms. Given the rise of "new" digital writing technologies like generative AI, the approaches in this special issue help scholars adopt pedagogical approaches that foster social justice approaches to digital activisms and technical communication.

Article Summaries

The first article in the issue, "Looking "Under the Hood" of SEO Conversion: Paradoxical Goals and Moral Dilemmas Faced by the Digital Age Rhetorician," by Katherine Mavridou-Hernandez

and Anna Khoury discusses the implications of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and advocates for the need to educate technical communicators and researchers about the injustices and prejudices woven into "objective" technologies. They emphasize the importance of sharing this knowledge with students across disciplines to promote digital literacy and activism. The article introduces the machine as a rhetorical audience ("persona 4.0") and suggests incorporating SEO into writing prompts to encourage students to examine the larger implications of their rhetorical choices. They also discuss the importance of considering algorithmic audiences and the implications of SEO for social justice.

Eva Jin, in the article "Interest-Driven Public Networks and Writing Pedagogy: Reframing and Harnessing Digital Spaces as Activism Playgrounds," introduces "interest-driven public writing pedagogy" as a model for harnessing these networks in writing instruction. She provides students with opportunities to engage in activist work while developing critical awareness of social justice issues based on their interests. Jin aims to bridge theoretical insights about digital publics with practical approaches to civic education and activism writing. She illustrates the importance of reimagining digital spaces created through shared interests as sites of civic engagement and bridges technical and professional communication with public writing pedagogy to help students develop the critical skills necessary to enact digital activism. She also provides examples and specific ways for us to incorporate this kind of pedagogy in our writing classrooms.

In "A Digital-Decolonial Approach to Writing Pedagogy," Shelby K. Ramsey offers a four-part heuristic for building a generative digital-decolonial approach to inform teaching practices. Ramsey first argues that any such work must find its foundation in digital rhetorics and pedagogy, intersectionality, and decoloniality before providing a toolkit for building a decolonial classroom. She suggests that teachers of technical writing should: 1) Teach digital rhetorics and technology as non-neutral; 2) Foster intersectionality, relationality, and community; 3) Promote Indigenous knowledges and methods towards activism and social justice; and 4) Privilege a kitchen-table approach that values students' languages and multilingualism. Importantly, Ramsey's work centers decoloniality as being about indigeneity and takes great care with positionality as a way of modeling ethical work for students.

Conversations about course delivery and learning management systems (LMS) are ubiquitous to any discussion of writing and technical communication pedagogy. In "Transcending Binaries of Course Delivery: A Transmedia Mindset as Resistance to a Single Standard and a Default Normal," Theresa Evans reenvisions the writing course as a transmedia, transgenre, transmodal, and translingual ecological system that enacts digital activism and advocacy to inform our writing courses "as a network of relations and a series of experiences" especially given the blurry boundaries of course modalities. She challenges these traditional binaries and rigid categories in course delivery, language practices, and media use by promoting fluidity, flexibility, and integration in pedagogical approaches and encourages instructors to consider the affordances and constraints of different media. This kind of approach illustrates for students how to use and subvert technologies to challenge dominant structures and create inclusive content.

Conclusion

As a whole, these articles contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of digital activism, pedagogy, and technical communication. They provide valuable frameworks, models, and strategies for educators and practitioners who seek to promote social justice and inclusivity in digital spaces. They also highlight the importance of critical thinking, ethical engagement, and continuous adaptation in a rapidly evolving technological landscape. This special issue showcases both the breadth and depth of digital activism work. The articles illustrate that teaching students about digital activisms is a technical communication project, and they demonstrate that writing classrooms are important spaces for thinking about digital activisms because of our obligation to engage in conversations around citizenship, public intellectualism and the public good, ethics, governance, belonging, and the rhetorical practices that contribute to these commitments and shared values (Bowdon, 2004; Walton & Agboka, 2021; Haas & Eble, 2019). We hope that readers will conclude, as we have, that digital activisms, done effectively, depend on socially just approaches to technical communication pedagogy.

Acknowledgements

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