1. Common Thread, Varied Focus: Defining Workplace in Technical and Professional Communication

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Abstract

Despite a strong, long-standing connection between the workplace and technical and professional communication (TPC) as a practical field, workplace-oriented scholarship in TPC has demonstrated significant variability in how the workplace is conceptualized. What's more, many of those concepts have been implicit, with no unified or codified parameters for the workplace as an object of inquiry in TPC scholarship. In this chapter, the authors perform a metasynthesis of workplace-oriented scholarship spanning approximately four decades, examining how scholars have researched and written about the workplace conceptually, methodologically, theoretically, and philosophically. Noting specific trends, patterns, and challenges in their findings, the authors argue for a working definition of workplace in TPC designed for long-term applicability and relatability to both academics and practitioners.

Keywords

workplace, definition, technical and professional communication, practitioner, history, work context

Technical and professional communication (TPC) pedagogy and scholarship are inherently related to the workplace. However, what exactly does the concept of *workplace* entail? Despite being a common thread in pedagogy and research, no unifying notion of *workplace* as a construct of study in TPC exists. Likely every scholar, student, and practitioner asked would give a definition of *workplace* reflecting different philosophical and functional underpinnings. It is difficult to conduct sustainable (Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019) workplace research without agreeing on the contexts being studied.

Therefore, in addressing the following research questions, this chapter seeks to conceptualize the *workplace* construct as it has evolved in TPC, leading to a tenable definition for use in TPC scholarship and pedagogy:

- How have sites of workplace research in TPC evolved over time?

- What key parameters of *workplace* are common to the discipline?
- How might TPC scholars contextualize workplace research in ways that help strengthen the connections between academia and practitioners?

Through an analysis of a large sample of published workplace-oriented TPC research from 1980–2019, this chapter traces the notion of *workplace* through multiple moments in TPC's evolution. This analysis provides the basis for a definition of *workplace* that can build cohesive parameters for future TPC workplace-oriented scholarship and further the conversation regarding how TPC research, pedagogy, and practice can align and synergize (St.Amant & Melonçon, 2016b). In advancing a definition of *workplace* that can help fill practical gaps, this chapter suggests ways in which TPC researchers can both conceptualize work contexts and better address the needs of the workplace as it evolves.

Workplace and TPC: A Long-Standing Relationship in Academic Study and in Practice

TPC has always been associated with addressing workplace needs. Well before its emergence as a distinct field of practice with corresponding job titles and full-time employment opportunities, TPC served engineering students needing writing skills. By 1899, some engineering schools had separate English departments (Connors, 1982/2004). Textbooks and handbooks specifically devoted to technical writing also began to appear. For example, Samuel Chandler Earle's (1911) *The Theory and Practice of Technical Writing* focused on teaching engineers the "logical structure" (p. vii) of typical types of writing (e.g., descriptions, narratives, directions), pointing out in its preface that such a book was needed because an engineer uses "a form of expression no less special than that of the lawyer, the novelist, or the poet" and "needs special training in writing, over and above all that he may get in general composition" (p. vi). Earle's (1911) text also covered "practical applications" such as "addressing general readers" and "addressing specialists" (p. vii). Another book of the era, *A Guide to Technical Writing* (Rickard, 1908) was aimed at professionals in science and engineering "who wish to write clearly on technical subjects" (p. 3) and focused largely on word-level issues, such as abbreviations, numbers, hyphens, and word choice.

Additional developments in TPC's relationship to workplace practice took place from 1920–1950. In addition to curricular growth and the publication of additional textbooks, practical and philosophical developments occurred in what were in effect TPC curricula (Connors, 1982/2004). The practical development involved textbooks specifically about technical report writing. During the Great Depression, technical writing courses continued to grow, and with them, the perceived importance of serving STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) majors (Connors, 1982/2004).

During the 1950s, technical communication arguably came of age in workplace contexts (Connors, 1982/2004; Durack, 2003). In 1953, the Society of Technical Writers formed, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute began offering a master's degree in technical writing (Durack, 2003). In 1954, the first issue of *Technical Writing Review* (the journal that later became *Technical Communication*) was published, and empirical workplace research began appearing (Connors, 1982/2004). When the 1957 launch of Russia's *Sputnik* marked a period of technological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the emphasis on technological advancement became a boon for technical writing as a field (Connors, 1982/2004). With these developments, technical writers became increasingly commonplace in American workplaces during the second half of the 20th century. Correspondingly, those who taught and researched technical writing began trying to define its purpose and scope (see Britton, 1965; Miller, 1979).

The significant growth in TPC workplace-oriented research that started in the 1980s provides a strong basis for conceptualizing the concept of *workplace* in field-specific terms. Classic TPC workplace studies, such as Dorothy Winsor's (1996) *Writing Like an Engineer: A Rhetorical Education* and Gerald Savage and Dale Sullivan's (2001) *Writing a Professional Life: Stories of Technical Communicators On and Off the Job*, often focused on specific workplaces, such as engineering, healthcare, and technology-centered sites. Since the early 2000s, TPC workplace studies have addressed a larger range of topics, including the role of visual communication in workplace technical writing (Brumberger, 2007), social media communications in distributed work (Pigg, 2014), work-related instant messaging within a virtual team of a global consultancy company (Darics, 2014), and more theoretically-framed arguments about how equality is enacted in non-hierarchical workplaces (Colton et al., 2019). This range can be seen as both a strength and a challenge: a strength because it demonstrates the growing variety of work contexts in which TPC takes place and a challenge because it brings up questions about how those work contexts are characterized and studied. Because of the ubiquity of the concept of *workplace* in TPC over time, it is difficult to capture every nuance of how *workplace* as a concept has evolved. However, the following discussion uses studies focused on TPC to characterize significant trends in that evolution.

■ Method of Analysis: Metasynthesis

The following discussion analyzes the concept of *workplace* in TPC literature using metasynthesis, which, according to Denis Walsh and Soo Downe (2005), is an examination of literature that "attempts to integrate results from a number of different but inter-related qualitative studies" (p. 204) and "[bring] together qualitative studies in a related area [enabling] the nuances, taken-for-granted assumptions, and textured milieu of varying accounts to be exposed, described and explained in ways that bring fresh insights" (p. 205).

Employing a purposeful sampling method (Koerber & McMichael, 2008), the following steps were used in this analysis:

1. Identify studies (articles, books, chapters of edited collections) by keywords (e.g., "technical communication," "workplace") and reference listings.
2. Examine each identified study for conceptualization of workplace, while noting any methodological and theoretical perspectives used.
3. Determine whether each study fits with the inclusion criteria shown in Table 1.1.
4. Determine whether the study should be excluded based on the exclusion criteria shown in Table 1.2.

From an original list of approximately 170 studies, as shown in Table 1.3, 150 were included in the corpus: 94 peer-reviewed articles, 47 book chapters, and 9 full-length books. Data from the review were maintained in Google Sheets.

Table 1.4 shows the breakdown of the 94 included articles by time period and journal. Journal acronyms are as follows: *IEEE* (*IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*), *JTWC* (*Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*), *JBTC* (*Journal of Business and Technical Communication*), *TC* (*Technical Communication*), *TCQ* (*Technical Communication Quarterly*), *JBC/IJBC* (*Journal of Business Communication/International Journal of Business Communication*).

Table 1.1. Inclusion Criteria for Studies

To be included, a study must meet at least one of the following criteria:
The study uses a work context as a basis for empirical research.
The study makes a significant philosophical or theoretical argument about work contexts in technical and professional communication.
The study incorporates research involving working professionals (such as a survey of people in the workplace).

Table 1.2. Exclusion Criteria for Studies

Remove a study from the corpus if it meets one or more of the following criteria:
The work context is not a significant or integral construct in the research or argument. For example, a study that makes an argument for applying a theory to future workplace research—but does not approach such an argument in detail itself—would not be included.
The study is primarily rooted in a classroom- or pedagogy-based study or argument.
The study is (a) not related to technical and professional communication *and* (b) cannot be related to technical and professional communication in a tangible way that another study *within* the field can achieve.
The study, if included, would provide an oversaturation of specific data points within the corpus (e.g., multiple instances of an author using the same or a similar method and work context without making a substantially new argument).

Table 1.3. Number of Sources by Type, Organized by Decade

Decade	Source type		
	Article	Book chapter	Book
1980s	19	3	0
1990s	22	33	4
2000s	21	8	4
2010s	32	3	1
Total	*94*	*47*	*9*

Table 1.4. Number of Articles by Decade and Journal

Decade	Journal	Number of articles
1980s Total articles: 19	*IEEE*	3
	JTWC	3
	JBTC	2
	TC	3
	TCQ/Technical Writing Teacher	2
	JBC/IJBC	5
	Other	1
1990s Total articles: 22	*IEEE*	2
	JTWC	1
	JBTC	4
	TC	2
	TCQ	3
	JBC	6
	Other	4
2000s Total articles: 21	*IEEE*	2
	JTWC	2
	JBTC	4
	TC	4
	TCQ	4
	JBC/IJBC	2
	Other	3
2010s Total articles: 32	*IEEE*	2
	JTWC	3
	JBTC	4
	TC	8
	TCQ	9
	JBC/IJBC	4
	Other	2

The following categories of analysis were recorded for each of the studies included in the corpus: citation, publication year, work context(s) studied, method(s), theoretical framework(s), whether an empirical component was included, and additional details about the empirical component if present. An additional category, focus, was included based on the primary intent of the study (see "Foci" section).

Sources from 1980–2019 were included in the initially analyzed corpus. Obviously, these sources were published before the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. As we examined additional sources before the publication of this chapter, we noted some workplace-oriented publications that had been published since 2020. These sources included Julia Gerdes' (2023) "Diagnosing Unsettled Stasis in Transnational Communication Design: An Exploration of Public Health Emergency Communication" from *Technical Communication Quarterly*, E. Ashley Rea's (2021) "'Changing the Face of Technology': Storytelling as Intersectional Feminist Practice in Coding Organizations" from *Technical Communication*, Patrick Danner's (2020) "Story/telling with Data as Distributed Activity" from *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and Amy Hodges and Leslie Seawright's (2023) "Transnational Technical Communication: English as a Business Lingua Franca in Engineering Workplaces" from *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*. In addition, a series of articles, each fewer than 2,000 words, published in a January 2021 special issue of *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* "[blurred] genres that bring together academic analysis and the public scholarship of shorter, more accessible pieces" (Frith, 2021, p. 2) and featured some sources with workplace-relevant connections. For our metasynthesis, we elected to include sources through 2019, as including additional sources would not have altered our metrics significantly and, based on our analysis, would not have changed the definitional argument we make later in this chapter. We do, however, believe subsequent study of these sources would be helpful in mapping the continued evolution of the workplace phenomenon in TPC.

▪ Findings and Observations from Metasynthesis

This section summarizes findings based on the primary categories of analysis described earlier and then describes larger trends and developments over time. Many of these points, such as examples of work contexts studied, are taken from specific fields in the corpus spreadsheet, while other points are derived from formulas and calculations within the spreadsheet.

▪ Work Contexts Studied

Not surprisingly, many different work contexts have been studied in TPC. Several have been studied empirically and immersively through direct experience, such as via an ethnography of a given workplace setting (e.g., Burnett, 1991; Winsor,

2006). Others have been studied by examining artifacts—usually communications produced by or associated with the organizations or persons in question (e.g., Winsor, 1990b). Still others have been written about in theoretical terms, as when a scholar offers a theoretical basis for future study building upon existing work or theory (e.g., Selzer, 1993; Spinuzzi, 2008). Finally, some studies in TPC consider workplaces broadly, such as in research using surveys of individuals in different workplaces (e.g., Blythe et al., 2014) or treating workplaces in a more generalized way that allows for broad application of a given theoretical framework or concept to multiple workplaces (Spinuzzi, 2013).

Consider this representative range of work contexts discussed in TPC literature:

- County department of social services (Odell et al., 1983)
- R&D group within Exxon's Intermediate Technology Division (Paradis et al., 1985)
- Agricultural and engineering companies (Casari & Povlacs, 1988)
- Medieval workplace and nuclear power plant (Richardson & Liggett, 1993)
- Nursing department in a hospital (Dautermann, 1993)
- Academic department, corporate office, and manufacturing plant (David & Baker, 1994)
- "Moderately sized" government organization (Henderson, 1996)
- Medical writing, freight industry safety, editing, marketing, civil engineering, and R&D (Savage & Sullivan, 2001)
- Traffic work in Iowa (Spinuzzi, 2003)
- Regulated industries, such as coal (Sauer, 2006)
- Medical device manufacturer (Breuch, 2010)
- German multinational technology company (Ehrenreich, 2010)
- Workgroups within a research university (Friess, 2011)
- Israeli high-tech startup (Fraiberg, 2013)
- Coffeehouse (Pigg, 2014)
- Automotive repair shop (Cushman, 2016)
- Generalized work settings or workplaces described not specifically, but *writ large* (Dilger, 2006; Walton & Jones, 2013).

The list is wide-ranging. Examining the work contexts discussed in the corpus, one can see evidence of a gradual expansion in the nature of work contexts studied. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, much scholarship focused on engineering, medical, and "technology-intensive" workplaces (e.g., Dautermann, 1993; Doheny-Farina, 1992; Paradis et al., 1985; Winsor, 1999)—the kinds of work contexts with which technical communication as a field within industry has historically been associated. While that trend largely continued into the 2000s, nonprofit contexts, such as risk management (Grabill, 2006) and environmental communication (Waddell, 1995), received increasing attention. In the 2010s, work

contexts featured in TPC literature expanded even further: e.g., information and communication technology for development (ICTD) projects led by academic or corporate researchers in India (Walton, 2013), an independent coffeehouse using networked communications (Pigg, 2014), Agile Scrum teams in a mid-sized software engineering firm (Friess, 2018), and six "coworking" spaces in the United States, Italy, and Serbia (Spinuzzi et al., 2019).

Throughout 40 years of workplace-oriented TPC scholarship, some work contexts maintained their relevance. For example, there was noticeably strong attention to public and government organizations (e.g., Dayton, 2004; Henderson, 1996), suggesting that these types of organizations have remained an enduring basis for workplace scholarship in TPC. Even as the types of work contexts studied expanded in the 2010s, there was still considerable attention to some of the traditional sites of workplace practice (e.g., Breuch, 2010; Brumberger & Lauer, 2019; Wisniewski, 2018). Therefore, even as times have changed and workplace emphases have evolved, some consistency exists in the sites of TPC workplace research.

▇ Research Methods Used to Study Workplace

Table 1.5 shows the research methods that were noted throughout the corpus. These methods were not mutually exclusive; for example, a study may have included both surveys and interviews (e.g., Brumberger & Lauer, 2019). Within the studies examined, a number of research methods were used in order to empirically obtain data for analysis; the most common methods used in the non-empirical studies were literature review and what was termed "explication"—the advancement of a particular approach to research, practice, or pedagogy (e.g., St. Amant & Melonçon, 2016a; Sullivan & Porter, 1993).

As shown in Table 1.5, other common methods included ethnographies, interview-based studies, and observational studies. Ethnographies involve immersion in a work environment over an extended time period and typically use multiple research methods, including interviews and observations. In-person, phone, or video interview can be used as a method outside of a full ethnography, but can also be used in conjunction with other methods, such as content analysis. Observational studies involve watching and noting work practices and can be used on their own or as part of an extended ethnography.

▇ Theoretical Frameworks

For the purposes of this metasynthesis, a theoretical framework was defined as a theory or concept used to frame an argument or study. Of 150 studies in the corpus, 114 (76.0%) incorporated a theoretical framework of some kind. A wide variety of theoretical frameworks was used. Examples include genre theory (Smart, 1993), cultural studies and critical theory (Scott et al., 2006b), politeness theory (Darics, 2014; Friess, 2011), and social network analysis (Lauren & Pigg, 2016).

Some studies (24.7%) did not use a theoretical framework (e.g., Kleimann, 1993; Lanier, 2018). Notably, several studies that used survey research did not include a theoretical framework (e.g., Blythe et al., 2014; Brumberger, 2007; Fenno, 1987; Sageev & Romanowski, 2001; Whiteside, 2003). Studies that advocated for a specific theory as a corollary of the research were not counted as having a theoretical framework but were instead classified as having a theoretical focus, as discussed in the next section.

Table 1.5. Breakdown of Methods Noted in Study Corpus

Method	Number	Percentage of corpus	Example(s)
Ethnography or autoethnography	29	19.3%	Schreiber, 2017; Winsor, 1989
Case study	35	23.3%	Doheny-Farina, 1992; Gurak, 1999
Interview	57	38.0%	Lauren & Pigg, 2016; Whiteside, 2003
Survey	23	15.3%	Brumberger, 2007
Observation	15	10.0%	Friess, 2011
Content, discourse, or textual analysis	29	19.3%	Brown, 1996; Friess, 2013
Rhetorical analysis	13	8.7%	Bowdon, 2014
Genre analysis	3	2.0%	Wahl, 2003
Historical/archival	10	6.7%	Petersen & Moeller, 2016
Literature review	31	20.7%	Longo, 2006; Spinuzzi, 2007
Explication	41	27.3%	Spinuzzi, 2015
Method not otherwise mentioned	18	12.0%	Leydens, 2008 (phenomenological analysis); Schneider, 2002 (think-aloud protocol); Silker & Gurak, 1996 (focus group); Spinuzzi, 2003, 2008 (genre tracing)

Foci

Table 1.6 shows seven foci, or overarching intents, of research that were identified and coded throughout the analysis:

- **Philosophical:** Advocating a philosophical approach to workplace studies and/or concepts of workplace.
- **Theoretical:** Developing a theoretical framework for workplace research or for thinking of the workplace in practical application—66.7 percent of studies with a theoretical focus were non-empirical.
- **Methodological:** Advocating a new or rethought methodological

approach to workplace research—78.9 percent of studies with a method-ological focus were also non-empirical.

- ▪ **Functional:** Describing, in concrete terms, the functional characteristics of a workplace, including its social dynamics; rhetorical, communicative, or other practices; and/or its relationship to TPC—97.4 percent of studies with a functional focus were empirical.
- ▪ **Applied Practice:** Emphasizing implications for practical application —88.0 percent of studies with an applied practice focus were empirical.
- ▪ **Analytical/Interpretive:** Analyzing or interpreting a workplace situation, phenomenon, or writing—92.7 percent of studies with an analytical/interpretive focus were empirical.
- ▪ **Programmatic/Pedagogical:** Emphasizing implications for TPC pedagogy and/or programs—66.7 percent of studies with a programmatic/pedagogical focus were empirical. For this metasynthesis, studies with this focus used the work context as the primary emphasis of the research; studies emphasizing the classroom or pedagogy were not included in the corpus.

These research foci, as coded, were not mutually exclusive. Some studies had one focus (e.g., Amidon & Blythe, 2008, coded as analytical/interpretive); some had two (e.g., Lauren & Pigg, 2016, coded as both analytical/interpretive and applied practice); and a few had three or four (e.g., Spinuzzi, 2008, coded as analytical/interpretive, functional, and theoretical).

Table 1.6. Breakdown of Foci Noted in Study Corpus

Focus	Number	Percentage of corpus	Example(s)
Philosophical	3	2.0%	Durack, 1997
Theoretical	30	20.0%	Moses & Katz, 2006
Methodological	19	12.7%	Doheny-Farina, 1993
Functional	38	25.3%	Gonzales & Turner, 2017
Applied Practice	50	33.3%	Fisher & Bennion, 2005
Analytical/Interpretive	110	73.3%	Amidon & Blythe, 2008; Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010
Programmatic/Pedagogical	18	12.0%	Haas, 2012

▪ Trends and Developments Noted in Research

Trends and developments noted in the corpus were analyzed by decade. While grouping by decade risks oversimplification, it nonetheless provides a consistent

unit of time by which to evaluate and describe important developments. By its nature, a metasynthesis provides a broad qualitative view of how a given phenomenon is conceptualized over time. In this case, that phenomenon is the concept of *workplace* in TPC.

The corpus of 150 studies included 22 from the 1980s, 59 from the 1990s, 33 from the 2000s, and 36 from the 2010s (see Table 1.3). Below are some high-level observations from the data.

Decrease in Time Spent Studying Single Work Contexts

The amount of time that TPC researchers have spent studying a single workplace (e.g., spending time on site, interacting with research participants and/or artifacts) seems to have decreased over time. While this analysis did not attempt to quantify the time spent studying a given work context, it was observed that particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, many workplace-oriented studies were longitudinal and/or involved detailed empirical study of a specific work context. For example, Dorothy Winsor's work (1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2006) was highly ethnographic and longitudinal. Stephen Doheny-Farina (1992) conducted detailed ethnographic case studies of technology transfer in four different organizations. Other research during this time also exhibited that trend (e.g., Dias et al., 1999; Kleimann, 1993; Richardson & Liggett, 1993; Waddell, 1995).

The corpus shows evidence of declining time spent studying a single work context and the reduced longitudinality of the research. Since the mid-2000s, most empirical studies in TPC seem to represent "one-off" studies with little to no future engagement with the work context or studies that call for less time spent directly immersed in the work setting, such as a survey, one set of interviews, or textual analysis, rather than full mixed method ethnographic studies; researchers tend to spend less time in the work settings than did scholars like Winsor, Doheny-Farina, and Patrick Dias and colleagues. Reasons for this trend could include changes in budgets or funding and less ease of access to organizations due to proprietary and/or security concerns. This trend may also be the result of the changing nature of the construct of *workplace* itself.

Alternatives to and Critiques of "Typical" Workplace Structures

In the 1980s and 1990s, much workplace-oriented TPC research focused on work sites typically associated with TPC practice: those involving engineering, manufacturing, health and medicine, and technology-centered work. In contrast, much of the workplace-oriented research published since the early 2000s has increasingly diverged from traditional sites of work in TPC.

Studies that are (a) critical of workplace norms or typifications or that (b) offer alternative models to such norms or typifications, even without direct critique of them, have notably existed for more than 20 years. Over time, at least three trends can be noticed:

1. Studies that take up novel or recontextualized work contexts in TPC have often coincided with scholarly turns in the academic part of the field (see Figure 1.1 in this chapter).
2. The relative volume of such studies seems to have increased over time.
3. The studies are often associated with alternative sites of workplace practice in TPC—those outside the oft-studied work contexts of IT, engineering, and health/medicine that were especially common in the 1980s and 1990s.

Like most of the other observations in this subsection, these trends emerge in academic scholarship yet are not always taken up in industry practice. This phenomenon not only highlights the need for greater connection between academic scholarship and industry practice, but also points to differences in priorities and reward structures in the academy and in the workplace. An academic career path in TPC has generally not tended to provide much reward for direct engagement with the field's practical contexts (Blakeslee & Spilka, 2004), unlike other fields where the academy and the workplace are more easily interconnected, such as medicine.

Informality or Ambiguity in Conceptualizing Workplace

In TPC research, levels of precision can vary in terms of description of research methods (Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019). Some authors describe their methods in significant detail, while others do so more concisely. The same principle applies to descriptions of work contexts. Some studies incorporate detailed descriptions of the work contexts; any of Winsor's work and much of the work by Clay Spinuzzi (particularly the books) provide good examples of that kind of detail. In the corpus, studies that included a *functional* focus (described previously in the "Foci" section) were more likely to include detailed descriptions (e.g., Friess, 2018; Henderson, 1996; Kleimann, 1993), as were studies using ethnographic and/or observational methods (e.g., Walton, 2013). However, such detailed descriptions were not always provided. For example, Vincent Brown's (1996) observation-based piece included a rather light description of the work setting, focusing instead on the kinds of writing and persuasion taking place within that setting. Even though a detailed description of work context may not always be needed, such descriptions can help scholars achieve greater clarity in the collective understanding of *workplace* in TPC.

Importantly, too, even those studies that detail work context most extensively rarely engage directly with *workplace* as a construct within TPC. This observation is extremely important because it further illustrates the relative informality or ambiguity of how *workplace* is defined as a term within TPC. Indeed, some moves have been made toward conceptualizing *workplace,* or toward workplace-inclusive themes such as "workplace writing." For example, Jon Leydens (2008) stated that, in his work, *workplace* referred to "an academic, industrial,

or other workplace" and categorized "workplace writing research" as that based on "activities associated with ongoing workplace writing," "workplace texts," "in-depth interviews with workplace practitioners," surveys, and/or examinations of "cultural and/or historical origins of a discipline and/or field" (p. 243). To set up an argument about broadening concepts of *workplace* to better include multinational and cross-cultural considerations, Rebecca Walton (2013) defined "workplace studies of practice" as follows:

> Workplace studies of practice occur at the intersection of academic inquiry and practical challenges regarding "work, interaction and technology in complex organisational environments" (Heath & Luff, 2000, p. 8). Unlike much sociotechnical research, workplace studies of practice do not focus primarily on society-level issues such as power distribution and the influence of technology on democracy. Workplace studies that involve technology instead focus on the practical, day-to-day use of technology and information within organizations and the ways that people use (or do not use) technology to accomplish professional tasks. (p. 411)

Walton (2013) went on to say

> Workplace studies is a productive area of inquiry for technical communication because many technical communicators seek not only to meet immediate workplace needs but also to produce research that can improve work practices (Spilka, 2000). To do so, scholars must uncover and understand current practices. (p. 411)

In their article "Redefining Writing for the Responsive Workplace," Claire Lauer and Eva Brumberger (2019) define the "responsive workplace":

> A "responsive" workplace is one in which writers must adapt to making meaning not just through writing, but across a range of modes, technologies, channels, and constraints. To some extent, writers have always had to be "responsive" to changes in technologies, audiences, and contexts. But what sets the responsive workplace apart at this time is the sheer range of responsive action that is now practiced across a vast landscape of contexts and rhetorical practices, affecting our very notions of what writing is and how it gets done. (pp. 635-636)

While these examples were helpful and valuable, the kind of specificity they provided in conceptualizing *workplace* as a construct of inquiry in TPC was the exception, not the rule. In most sources, the meaning was implied, or it seemed to be presumed that the audience understood the construct experientially or intuitively. This observation has important implications for the definitional approach to *workplace* discussed later in this chapter.

> Intrinsic Connection Between Perceptions of Amount of
> Workplace Research Over Time and the Conceptualization
> of Workplace and Workplace-Oriented Research

Some scholars may conclude that workplace-oriented research has decreased in quantity over time. Whether this is correct depends on how TPC scholars define *workplace* and *workplace-oriented research*. A broad view encompasses a number of different sites or contexts of work. A narrower view is logistically bound to the more specific parameters of what might constitute a *workplace*. Each view has benefits and risks for TPC as both an academic field and a field of practice. A broad view enables TPC to be positioned as applicable to a variety of industries and having growing research potential; however, that broad view also risks diluting the identity of a field that has long struggled with issues of professional identity. In contrast, a narrower view can help pinpoint more precise elements of professional identity yet risks missing legitimate opportunities to expand TPC's practical application and prospects for scholarly research.

All of these observations concerning concepts and definitions of *workplace* and *workplace-oriented research* are important not only in the corpus, but also in developing a consistent notion of *workplace* within TPC—a move that is important for sustaining and building upon workplace-oriented research in the field.

Challenges for Conceptualizing *Workplace* in TPC

The observations gleaned from this metasynthesis provide data-driven evidentiary support for many positives in TPC workplace-oriented research. For example, workplace studies continue to be done; journals continue to publish workplace-oriented scholarship; and TPC scholars have, over the time period studied, taken a broad interest in workplace-oriented themes in empirical, theoretical, and methodological terms. Though workplace research may not be the "hottest" trend, the link between workplace and TPC remains present and viable for the foreseeable future.

This metasynthesis also draws attention to challenges for TPC relating to construct conceptualization, research sustainability, professional identity, and the relationship between academic study and professional practice, including the following:

1. There has been no consistent concept of workplace in TPC.
2. In terms of workplace realities in TPC, there are few, if any, metrics or guidelines for determining (a) the extent of engagement between academics and practitioners and (b) the extent to which academic research holds meaning to practitioners and to workplace trends.
3. Greater efforts are needed to engage with practitioners to help conceptualize work contexts in which TPC practice does or can take place.

In point #3, the words *does* and *can* emphasize the idea that the understanding of TPC's potential in varied work settings must be expanded.

While these challenges are not insurmountable, they will need to be addressed over time. And they must be addressed if academics are to contribute more effectively and more consistently through workplace engagement and research that is both sustainable and beneficial to TPC as a field of workplace practice. To help further the efforts to address these challenges, the following definitional approach to *workplace* in TPC is proposed.

▮ Toward a Working Definition of Workplace in TPC

The findings of this analysis suggest that how TPC researchers have conceptualized *workplace* has changed; the tendency, as discussed above, has been toward expansion of the *workplace* construct in TPC. This is not an expansion in one direction—toward studies involving nonprofits in major cities, for example. Rather, this is a multidirectional, multifaceted expansion.

Figure 1.1 depicts examples of the growth of the *workplace* construct in common TPC research over 40 years. For reference, we have included points on the bottom line of the figure depicting approximate dates when scholarly "turns" in the field took place: for instance, the humanistic turn (e.g., Miller, 1979), the social turn (e.g., Blyler & Thralls, 1993), the cultural turn (e.g., Longo, 1998), and the social justice turn (e.g., Haas, 2012). Though we are not suggesting that the scholarly turns necessarily compelled the study of particular work contexts with each specific turn, we do find it helpful to map notable growth in the study of such contexts temporally, and the turns provide relatable reference points in the scholarly history of TPC.
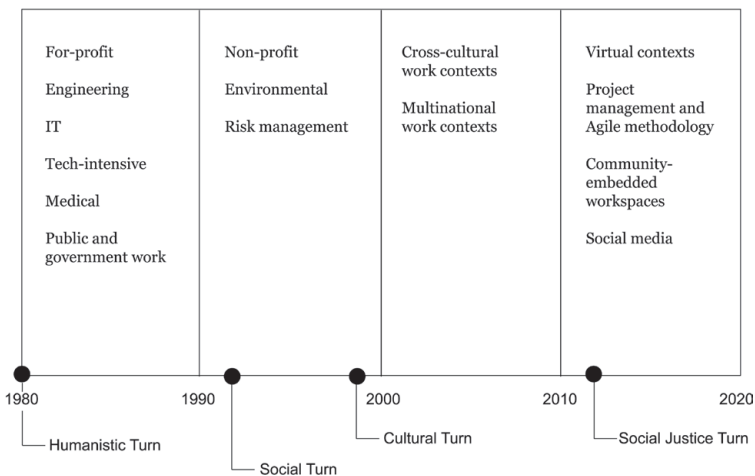

*Figure 1.1. Examples of growth in commonly studied
work contexts in TPC, 1980–2019.*

This evolution is important not only for the value of the observations themselves, but also for the purpose of thinking about where workplace research is likely to go in the future. As a relatable analogy, the scholarly literature has for decades implied or outright argued for variable and at times incongruous concepts of what the field of TPC actually is (see, for example, Allen, 1990; Dobrin, 1983; Henning & Bemer, 2016; Kimball, 2017; Rutter, 1991). In their argument for focusing on collective identity rather than variant definitions for TPC, Lisa Melonçon and Joanna Schreiber (2022) note the "necessity of thinking about the field's present and future in terms of sustainability" (p. 7), tracing that necessity as far back as Robert Johnson's (2004) argument for sustainability in program development in which he stated that sustainability "suggests growth/life but . . . also invokes the inevitable problem of limits" (as cited in Melonçon & Schreiber, 2022, p. 7). The significance of this balance between growth and limits, Melonçon and Schreiber (2022) say, "brings a cautious vitality to merging sustainability with the field's need for a more flexible identity" (p. 7).

Melonçon and Schreiber make good points in arguing for a sustainable identity for the field; they also do justice to this necessity by noting the importance of balancing growth and limits in building such an identity. In arguing for sustainable identity, they resist movements toward definition in the field because, in their view, "definitions in the field have largely been either too broad to offer the field a sense of structure or too narrow to allow for diverse perspectives and emerging practices" (Melonçon & Schreiber, 2022, p. 5). Ironically, for a field so intrinsically tied to workplace practice, concepts of workplace are arguably more tacit and diffuse than concepts of the field of TPC itself (whether those concepts are expressed in terms of a definition or an identity). In terms of *workplace* in TPC, we argue that a mediating concept is needed that will be applicable over time and help bridge the gaps among past, present, and future in TPC workplace research; provide a conceptual basis for a more cohesive understanding of *workplace* in TPC; and relate to both academics and practitioners. And while a definition for a field may be overly limiting, we argue that a flexible definition for a construct such as *workplace*—specifically in TPC—can help achieve those essential goals in productive and sustainable ways. This is the goal we seek to achieve in this section.

◼ Applicable Over Time

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, the *workplace* construct in TPC has changed from a fairly focused construct centered in engineering, IT, medicine, and fields where TPC initially found application to one that is increasingly dispersed over a broad spectrum of fields and economic sectors. Over the years, TPC competencies have expanded and evolved, as have the fields in which those competencies have been used (Rosselot-Merritt, 2020). Furthermore, these developments have taken place as part of a field of practice that, in industry, has traditionally been referred to as *technical writing* and, in the academy, as *technical and professional communication*. However it is termed, the field has changed considerably over time. Therefore, the

mediating concept of *workplace* must capture the changing nature of workplace as a part of TPC as that construct has evolved into the present; ideally, such a concept will be adaptable to inevitable future changes as well.

■ Promotes Understanding of TPC

Some of the challenges pertaining to the identity and definition of TPC as a whole relate to the differences in roles that those who practice it perform. The lack of cohesive understanding of TPC's workplace value hinders its effective application in practice and undermines efforts to assert its value among broad groups of stakeholders. For this reason, any mediating concept of workplace in TPC should strive to advance a more cohesive understanding of the field's place within work contexts.

■ Relates to Both Academics and Practitioners

The gap between academic and practitioner views of TPC is long-standing (Albers, 2016; Andersen & Hackos, 2018; Blakeslee & Spilka, 2004; St.Amant & Melonçon, 2016b). This gap is also readily apparent to anyone who has spent more than a few months in both academia and industry. Therefore, it is important to consider whether any mediating concept of *workplace* developed for use in academic settings can be relatable to practitioners. Following are some ways that scholars can help increase academic-practical relatability:

- Consider practitioner needs in the workplace.
- Involve practitioners in regular conversations about how they use or would like to use research or the types of research they would like to see done.
- Make regular efforts to be immersed in the actual practice of TPC.
- Design future studies with an eye toward practitioner perspectives.

There will indeed be developments in TPC that neither academics nor practitioners can foresee. Yet—by using developments to date as guideposts for formulating a *workplace* concept for TPC and by researching the needs of practitioners—the practitioner perspective can be productively considered in any academic definition.

The following is a working definition of *workplace* in TPC based on the analysis presented in this chapter:

> In technical and professional communication, a workplace is any context in which communicative practices or activities meeting any of the criteria below can and/or do take place. Those practices or activities
>
> - further a mission or purpose which may be implicit or may be codified in a formal statement (such as a "mission statement");
> - involve an exchange of physical materials, virtual quantities of something, and/or ideas; and

  - often, but not always, involve material or financial gain on the part
    of those conducting the communicative practice or activity or the
    individuals or organization on whose behalf they are acting.

Over time, workplaces relevant to TPC have developed to a point at which
work contexts may include any combination of the following:

- for-profit (such as privately owned or publicly traded businesses)
- not-for-profit (such as charities, foundations, or nonprofit educational
  institutions)
- community-embedded (such as food co-ops, environmental communities,
  or groups of people intrinsically tied to a given locality)
- virtual (such as work done "in the cloud" or using networked teams)
- decentralized (such as work conducted without specific oversight or with-
  out centralized management of resources)

Advancing a definitional approach to *workplace* in TPC is not intended to solve
all of the challenges that the field has—and has had for a long time—with con-
ceptualizing work contexts and connecting workplace-oriented scholarship with
realities of practice. Doing so is, of course, a gradual process. The intent here is to
contribute to an ongoing conversation about workplace research in general and,
in TPC, specifically about how *workplace* is not a monolithic concept, but an ide-
ational construct that is inextricably tied to and beneficial to TPC. The definition
proposed here is meant to provide a basis both for conceptualizing *workplace* and
for advancing studies in TPC in ways that are consistent, sustainable, and necessary.

In this definition, the literature reviewed in the metasynthesis was considered
in conjunction with the disciplinary purposes the definition would help achieve.
To help illustrate those relationships, Table 1.7 maps the concepts of the defini-
tion to concepts in the literature.

Table 1.7. Mapping of "Workplace" to Concepts Represented in TPC Literature

Element of definition	Maps to examples from corpus
In technical and professional communication, a workplace is any context in which commu-nicative practices or activities meeting any of the criteria below can and/or do take place:	
Further a mission or purpose which may be implicit or may be codified in a formal statement (such as a "mission statement")	A sense of organizational purpose can often be inter-polated from empirical studies with direct immersion of the researcher. Examples include Breuch (2010) and Hargie et al. (2003). Direct immersion studies made up approximately 65 percent of empirical sources and 49 percent of the total corpus. Studies with a "functional" focus (25% of corpus) often noted the organizational mission or purpose. Examples: Spinuzzi et al. (2019) contains detailed descriptions in the "Findings" section. Doheny-Farina (1992) discusses organizational foci at length.

Element of definition	Maps to examples from corpus
Involve an exchange of physical materials, virtual quantities of something, and/or ideas	*Physical materials:* e.g., Driskill & Goldstein (1986), manufacturing *Virtual quantities:* e.g., Pigg (2014), virtual, networked contexts in which digital contents were shared *Ideas:* e.g., Gurak (1999), online fora where ideas are shared, though the organizations studied were not those fora; Waddell (1995), a "broadly defined" environmental community where ideas were shared *Multiple exchange contexts:* e.g., Cushman (2016), automotive parts, service documents, ideas in discussions
Often, but not always, involve material or financial gain on the part of those conducting the communicative practice or activity for the individuals or organization on whose behalf they are acting.	A majority of the persons performing the communicative acts were paid (implying financial gain).
Over time, workplaces relevant to TPC have developed to a point at which work contexts may include any combination of the following:	
For-profit (such as privately owned or publicly traded businesses)	Numerous examples, including Winsor (1990a), engineering firm and Lauren & Pigg (2016), entrepreneurs in consulting and small business
Not-for-profit (such as charities or foundations)	Schneider (2002) and Friess (2011), education
Community-embedded (such as food co-ops or groups of people intrinsically tied to a given locality)	Waddell (1995), environmental community; Colton et al. (2019), co-op
Virtual (such as work done "in the cloud" or using networked teams)	Pigg (2014), virtual, networked communication
Decentralized, such as work conducted without specific oversight or without centralized management of resources	Spinuzzi (2015), "adhocracies"

Thinking About the Future of Workplace Research in TPC

One of the overarching aims of this work is to advance an important and needed conversation in TPC about concepts of *workplace* that undergird scholarly, pedagogical, and disciplinary approaches in the field. In our analysis of a representative

sample of workplace-oriented scholarship in the field, we observed a characteristic implicitness and ambiguity in notions of *workplace* over time. At the same time, we also observed tangible evolutionary features in scholarship that exemplify and, over time, have helped characterize the nature of workplaces in TPC research. Our sampling of the literature does not (and is not meant to) provide blanket generalizations applicable to every workplace-oriented study or argument in TPC scholarship. However, we assert that the methodology behind this metasynthesis has led to worthwhile contributions to this important conversation with simultaneous attention to calls for transparency in methodological explanations with iterative sustainability in research approaches (see, for example, Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019).

Part of that sustainability is providing a feasible basis for building upon this work. In the spirit of furthering the goal, we suggest several questions that scholarship in TPC should consider in future research—questions that can help advance not only the larger conversation about *workplace* as a concept, but also findings that can benefit TPC in practical, scholarly, and pedagogical terms:

- To what extent do theoreticians and methodologists in TPC conduct or gain experience in empirical workplace-oriented research?
- Are theoretical and methodological arguments for workplace-oriented research being further examined and taken up in subsequent studies (including empirical work)?
- To what extent do workplace-oriented studies in TPC build upon one another?
- How can the communicative acts taking place in workplaces be effectively studied, particularly as the scope of those acts changes with social and technological evolutions?
- How will the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on how people work (Parker et al., 2020) affect the concept of *workplace* in TPC?

There are also questions that historical developments in TPC's studied work contexts bring up. For example, what developments are associated with philosophical movements or "turns" in TPC—e.g., humanistic (Miller, 1979), social/political (Blyler, 1998; Blyler & Thralls, 1993; Lay, 1991), cultural (Longo, 1998; Scott et al., 2006a), and social justice (Haas, 2012; Walton et al., 2019)? What roles have external influences (such as the ease of access to various sites) played regarding the work contexts studied in technical and professional communication? Though outside the purview of this research, these questions are worth considering in the future.

Another question that could be considered is the extent to which the work contexts studied and written about in TPC scholarship actually reflect the extent to which technical and professional communicators typically work in those contexts—or the extent to which TPC practice actually *takes place* in a given context. There are indeed excellent arguments in academic literature about TPC and how it is incorporated into different work contexts. There are very good arguments, also, about how technical communication takes place in a given setting, even if

it is not a technical writer fulfilling all of those communicative practices, such as Jeremy Cushman's (2016) analysis of communicative practices in an automotive repair shop. All of these arguments should be considered in any conceptualization of workplace in TPC, especially as scholars work to expand the viability of TPC in various work contexts.

Yet there has to be a demarcation to this approach and the extent to which scholarship stretches the boundaries; that demarcation should actively consider current workplace realities and contexts that practitioner-engaged research shows as having future potential for practical application. Workplace-oriented research in TPC stems from a common thread in the field—both practical and pedagogical. As this chapter has demonstrated, however, workplace-oriented scholarship nonetheless often reflects different concepts and foci in that space. Navigating such an intriguing dichotomy is an imminent challenge for TPC scholars, but it is a necessary one as scholars seek to keep pace with and engage in the productive study of workplace realities.

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