2. Emphasizing Place in Workplace Research

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Abstract

This chapter seeks to understand workplace writing contexts by addressing the following questions: What happens when technical and professional communication (TPC) considers the material dimensions of context more deliberately and more specifically? Often scholarship wants to focus on the how and why, but what do we learn if we emphasize the *where?* Drawing on scholarship in TPC and geography and a two-year ethnographic study as a practical example, I inductively build the theory of *micro-contexts*—highly localized places where communication can be created and/or be used. Emphasizing the *where* of workplace writing provides TPC (and workplace communication practices) both a history and a geography and offers a much needed theoretical and practical expansion of contexts and approaching writing in place. By paying close attention to the geographic aspects of discourse production and circulation, this chapter shows the intimate connections between physical locations and the discourses produced, and in doing so, it illustrates how each place is a distinct area of knowledge making.

Keywords

contexts, micro-contexts, theory building, place

> Being informed by place involves far more than simply
> writing about this place or that place.
> It involves thinking about the implications
> of the idea of place for whatever is being researched.
>
> – *Cresswell, 2004, p. 122*

It's snowing. I grumble as I get out of my car because the Southerner in me still hates the winter, but for the last two years, I've come to this workplace often through all four seasons. At the sound of the welcome beep that greets everyone when the front door opens, the receptionist looks up. The entryway is small, with room enough for a single chair and the receptionist desk.

She smiles big, and says, "Hey, Lisa, who you need to talk to today?"

"I need to see Joe (pseudonym). He's expecting me. You want me to just go on back?" I ask as I point at the door to the right that always remains locked. Guests are usually escorted through the building.

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"Yeah, if you don't mind cause I gotta get this done." She motions to her computer and some papers she picks up. "I just buzzed you in. Come back out this way, though, so you can sign in and out!"

I smile and nod my acknowledgement of the procedures since I know they reconcile the sign-in sheet with the security camera tapes. I wave to her as I make it to the door within the short window of time so she'd doesn't have to reprogram the entry lock system.

I wind my way through the building. I know it well at this point; I've been welcomed in because everyone understands my role in trying to improve several work processes related to communication within the organization. I pass the "cube area" that consists of roughly 10-12 cubicles, although the range depends on the number of interns on site and what the tasks of those interns are. Sometimes two cube areas are collapsed into one where several folks can collaborate easier, but still not as comfortable a collaboration space as the conference room, which is the next area I pass through on the way to my destination. Once through the conference room, I'm in a kitchen. The only way to get to my destination is to go through the kitchen. At the back of the kitchen is a door that puts me down a short hallway, another turn, another door. Here I knock as I open the door, because on the other side of the door, without any notice, is a makeshift office. Joe, who is my interview for that day, is sitting at his desk. He stands up to hug me. Simultaneously, we talk over each other, saying "hello" and "how are you?" Mid-hug, his door swings open, causing us to release and step back quickly so the door doesn't hit us. Another person walks on through with a quick hello.

We look at each other and laugh. He sits down at his desk. I drag a box over next to him and take a seat. For the next hour, we talk. I lost count of the number of times the door opened and hit the corner of his desk, and someone just walked through. Because that interruption is so normal, my interviewee never blinked or even acknowledged that anything happened. It took me until the third or fourth person for my embodied memory to kick in and just block out (for the most part) the sound of the door hitting the desk and the oddity of someone walking through as we just talked as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

I have been unable to escape the memory of that conversation in that makeshift office and how it impacted the way I consider the role of place on the work that technical and professional communicators do. Without doubt, the vignette described above is an extreme example; however, the example re-emphasizes the impact of material locations of place on writing and communication. My interviewee from the vignette did much of his internal communication and report writing in the morning or late in the afternoon. He scheduled the rest of his day around that time so that he would be interrupted less when the office was less busy. In technical and professional communication (TPC), the idea of the rhetorical situation or that writing is situated within a context is so commonplace as to be nearly forgotten. In this chapter, I want to highlight *context* to better understand one of its constituent parts, *place*. I started with two guiding questions:

What happens when TPC considers the material dimensions of context more deliberately and more specifically? Often scholarship wants to focus on the how and why, but what do we learn if we examine the *where?*

I work through tentative answers to these questions by drawing on a two-year ethnographic study as a practical example. I begin with an introduction to the ethnographic case study that expands on examples of the importance of *where*'s impact on communication practices. From the ethnographic case and from existing literature in geography, rhetoric, and TPC, I move to inductively build the theory of *micro-contexts*, which are highly localized places where communication can be created and/or be used. I end with implications of this theory for TPC.

Emphasizing the *where* of workplace writing provides TPC (and workplace communication practices) both a history and a geography and offers a much needed theoretical and practical expansion of contexts. By paying close attention to the geographic aspects of discourse production and circulation, I want to show the intimate connections between physical locations and the discourses they produce, and in doing so, to illustrate how each place is a distinct area of knowledge making.

Ethnographic Case Study

Good Works Store (pseudonym) is a nonprofit with around 110 employees. Over the two years prior to my arrival, Good Works Store had doubled in size in resources, transactions, and employees. C-Suite executives and middle managers had been undergoing different types of business administration training (such as Lean and Six Sigma), and several senior managers recognized the need to start documenting internal processes. I was invited to consult on the documentation project. In our initial discussion of what information was presently documented and potential strategies to address the documentation needs of the organization, it became clear that the bigger concern, one where internal documentation of processes could reside, was to capture and find a way to manage the knowledge work of the organization. So, what initially started as a documentation project morphed into a two-year ethnographic study of knowledge management practices.[1]

When the organization grew so quickly, it expanded from a single location to three locations that I refer to as the executive building, the warehouse, and the client center. The three locations are radically different in size, purpose, and culture. All three locations are within five miles of each other. In thinking through the *where* of work*places*, one should consider the material dimensions of the places where work occurs.

The executive building housed the C-Suite, a number of middle managers, the technical staff (e.g., application developers and web designer), support staff (e.g., administrative assistants) and the entire financial division. The opening scene of this

1. As a singular case study, this project was not considered "human subjects research" and was exempted from institutional review.

chapter was at the executive building. A feature not described previously is that there are closed-door offices around the perimeter of the building to the cubicle area, and collaboration areas are in the middle of the space. This setup is not unfamiliar and aligns with terms in popular workplace discourse such as "cube farm" and "corner office." The setup of the executive building was meant to provide a "look and feel" of a "corporate entity" because, as the chief operating officer told me, Good Works Store needed to be seen differently, more professional, by stakeholders in the region. Employees from the other two locations often came to the executive office building for meetings, while those in the executive office building rarely went to the other locations. Thinking of the cubicle or the office or the conference room as a component part—a material component part—of a "workplace" emphasizes how the different locations produce the work of technical and professional communication.

The client center was a public-facing location that looked like many organizations that have public-facing areas. The main lobby had a receptionist and many chairs. On the left side of the area, there were closed-door offices, and additional offices were on two floors above the public reception area. The client center was a high-volume center that usually recorded over 100 people checking in and out in a day. Once people checked in, they went to one of the office areas for additional assistance. This was the main location for initial client interactions.

The warehouse was a reclaimed building that had a part-time administrator in the lobby area and then a group of ten employees in a cavernous warehouse area, which was likely some 8,000 square feet. The size was necessary because at times this space was also home to hundreds of volunteers. As the name implies, this building was used to store a lot of stock that had multiple daily deliveries both coming into the warehouse and leaving the warehouse. At times, the warehouse could barely hold all the materials. At other times, it stood almost empty. One of the first things I noticed when I went to the warehouse the first time was the contrast of silence when walking into the lobby area versus the noisy din in the storage area. There was a breakroom with a table and a few chairs where employees (and volunteers) could gather. Of the three locations, the warehouse had had few updates and looked worn and out of date, but unlike the other two locations, no one but employees or volunteers would ever be in this location.

This multiplicity of sites immediately became a key consideration because this material, location-based expansion directly impacted communication processes in both positive and negative ways. More so, it was difficult for employees at all levels to articulate or to even recognize how this shifting of place made such a big impact. As an outsider without prior knowledge, it took only a couple of weeks for me to identify some immediate things to improve, and by the time the larger project ended, the organization had developed a better sense of itself as a multisite organization, as well as the impact of the multiple places on how they interacted and communicated. In some ways, the descriptions of the different locations embedded within this one ethnographic case study are not surprising. It's almost a moment of "of course!" But, TPC scholarship has not codified some of the ideas that are taking place in practice; thus, the field lacks a vocabulary and appropriate theories to make sense of place and its impact on communication.

The research category that I deployed for this study was ethnographic research. As an ethnography, it was an observational study with related interviews. It follows Yin's (2003) definition of a case study that includes a study conducted in a real-life context where multiple forms of evidence are used (pp.13-14). I expanded Yin to include a distinct starting and stopping point and full description of materials included in the research (Melonçon & St.Amant, 2019, p.138). The messiness of research, particularly a research study that was done at times in tandem with a larger consulting project, made it difficult to separate information. The observational method of watching and learning an organization was often one of the first steps of any consulting project that I took on because it gave me time to watch everyday practices. The silent observations uncovered how the organization worked, what different divisions did, and how they communicated with each other. Following are the characteristics of the case study, methods used, and amount of material for this part of the research study:

- 18 one-hour interviews with key stakeholders
- 3 hours on average of time observing before and after the interviews
- observations at all three locations of the organization
- 6-month timeframe for this aspect of the study
- field notes and diagrams, as well as some insights from the interviewees

What I discuss here is a small slice of the larger research study, and the discussions of place are at times an experiential composite. I use this term in the same way as composite narratives, which use data from several interviews to provide evidence or support around a common issue or theme. (Refer to Willis, 2019 for more information.) An experiential composite combines experiences from the field, which allows for the composition of observational studies, community projects, and other types of research that may bring together experiences based on observation rather than those drawn from interviews. The experiential composite illustrates a broader importance of bringing place to the forefront in discussions of communication and writing in the workplace. Later in the chapter when I provide examples, those examples appear to be a singular, but rather, they bring together characteristics and multiple experiential moments. The examples here from one organization led to me rethinking other research that I have conducted at numerous other sites. In that rethinking, I came to the realization that technical and professional communication needs a different way to describe the impact of *where*. This case study helps with theory building specific to theorizing the place of place within the work of TPC.

Entering Existing Scholarly Conversations

Due to the constraints of the length of a book chapter, I confine my discussion of existing conversations in the scholarship to brief overviews of place from a geographic perspective and geography scholars; to perspectives of place in broader rhetorical studies; and finally, to TPC scholarship that in some capacity directly discusses issues of material places as they relate to communication creation and circulation.

Place in Geography

A well-used difference between space and place comes from geographer (and philosopher) Yi-Fu Tuan (1977): "If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause" (p. 6). Tuan argues that place is defined by a person's experience with the world. I take Tuan's approach as a key component to how I am using place. It is not only keyed to a person's experience in the world, but that experience is connected to a physical, material location.

Place as a theoretical concept has long been examined as primary tenet in geographic scholarship,[2] particularly in human geography, which, as its names implies, studies the interactions of people with the environment to include social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of that interaction.

A key concern for a human geographer is to gain deeper understandings in how a person's interactions with their surroundings (natural and built) shape those surroundings and in turn, how the surroundings reshape the person. For example, a human geographer might study how urban sprawl affects quality of life for those who live in the heart of the city as well as those who live in the suburbs. As Arturo Escobar (2008) argues forcefully, "place continues to be an important source of culture and identity" (p. 7), which would occur even in workplaces. For example, the geographic location was an important part of Good Works Store's organizational ethos. It was committed to its mission of providing a public and social good for people who resided in the region. In addition, the people who worked there were not only proud of that mission and its local impact, but they highlighted how much their own cultural differences (e.g., urban versus rural Appalachian identities) were respected and contributed to the organization's overall culture.

Moving to place as context also means incorporating the interactions of other actors, and things such as technology. Moreover, "to travel between places is to move between collections of trajectories and to reinsert yourself in the ones to which you relate" (Massey, 2005, p. 130). There is a need for a corrective theory that neutralizes this erasure of place, the asymmetry that arises from giving far too much importance to "the global" and far too little value to "place." (Escobar, 2008, p. 7). Place as context also must be critically approached in research. If scholars are ever to fully understand how technical communication reinforces, creates, or dismantles

2. I make a distinction between place and space which is fully explained in geographic literature, and space constraints do not allow a full examination and explanation in this chapter. I follow the differences set forth by scholars such as Paul Adams (2017) and Doreen Massey (2005) in geography and Edward Casey (2009) in philosophy.

inequitable systems, then we must take seriously geographer John Agnew's (2007) argument that to understand knowledge and power, scholars need to situate institutions and their knowledge in the place-specific contexts.

To get at the idea of situatedness, the specific context and relationship between reader and text, is to necessitate bringing place to the forefront of discussions of audience. Using place as a theoretical, metaphorical, and material lens requires that we expand our existing understanding of audience and consider head on as one of the most important aspects of audience analysis the impact place has on the effectiveness of discourse; thus, the need to consider place from a rhetorical perspective.

Place in Rhetorical Studies Broadly

In rhetorical scholarship, scholars can look to the work of Jenny Edbauer (2005) as a distinct moment of invoking place more materially. Edbauer (2005) brought place into the rhetorical conversation through "rhetorical ecology." In doing so, she "destabilize[d] the discrete borders of a rhetorical situation" and expanded those borders to "a network of lived practical consciousness or structures of feeling" (Edbauer, 2005, p. 5). Edbauer's theoretical expansion of the rhetorical situation emphasized the complexities of context, of place, by arguing the "rhetorical situation" was in constant flux and not self-contained as a bounded "situation." Her ecological metaphor drew attention to the relationality between the parts such as between texts, people, events, places, and contexts of use in an expansive system.

Many have taken up Edbauer's ecologies. In an overview of ecological turn in rhetorical studies, Madison Jones (2021) reviewed work specific to environmental communication (Druschke, 2019), literacies (Grant, 2009; Rìos, 2015), pedagogy (Inoue, 2015; Rivers & Weber, 2011), and ontologies (Ehrenfeld, 2020; Stormer & McGreavy, 2017). This list is by no means exhaustive, but it underscores that rhetorical studies, broadly construed, continues to situate the work of rhetoric through an ecological metaphor. Further, taking Jenny Rice's (2012) work as an inspiration or a starting place, other rhetorical scholars have tended to emphasize the vastness of the situation or context by building on the ecological model (e.g., Jensen, 2015); discussing context as network (e.g., Dingo, 2012; Rice, 2012); or examining assemblages of places, people, and things (e.g., Wingard, 2013). In trying to make more parts of the larger network (or of space) visible, researchers may lose sight of the dynamics that push and pull on those larger structures. For my own thinking, trying to make the context of the situation or context larger makes models and theories more difficult to use, particularly something so localized as a workplace setting.

One way to adequately address situated rhetoric is to find ways to physically ground theoretical concepts in the practice of workplace writing and communication, much like John Muckelbauer's (2008) offering a different type of invention, one where instead of "teaching students how to know a situation, a situated rhetoric attempts to provoke the ability to respond to the situatedness itself" (p.

121). Muckelbauer's insistence on the situatedness itself is a nice bridge between rhetorical studies and TPC since much workplace research is indeed centered on understanding the situatedness of the communication practices.

Place in TPC

While other fields have taken a "spatial turn," TPC has not yet fully engaged theoretically or practically with place as a means to understand the interrelated nature of writing and communication and the places that produce and/or impact that same work.[3] Much more is needed to bring Doreen Massey's (2005) concept that places have roles to play in the work that we do, but recent studies in TPC have begun to be more explicit in examining the role of place as a material part of writing and communication. For example, one of the best articulations is from Elizabeth Angeli (2019), who uses emergency medical services (EMS) and ride-alongs to clearly situate the communication practices of EMS technicians within specific locations of work. Meanwhile, Stacey Pigg (2020) looked to the same location, a coffee shop, to begin to understand the writing and communication practices of those who choose to work in this location. Another work related to place is from Derek Ross and his collaborators (2019), who argued for a place-based ethic that "actively acknowledge[s] the environment."

Some scholarship in user experience research has focused more explicitly on place to situate users within their locations. For example, Dan Richards and Sonia Stephens (2022) asked community members for their reactions to a video that discussed environmental risks to their community. They were seeking information on their comprehension and emotional reactions. Richards and Stephens' focus group research aligns—in some ways—to what I am trying to do with considering a theory that focuses on smaller, localized contexts. Even though Richards and Stephens did not frame their work specific to context (since their study was focused on users' reaction to information), the impact of a context on those same users deserves increased attention. Similarly, Emma Rose's (2016) investigation of homeless bus riders focused on the design of information and communication technologies, but also points to the necessity of where users would access and/or use the information.

Moving closer to an explicit connection to place, Catherine Gouge (2017) looked at patient discharge instructions and concluded that new information design approaches are necessary because current approaches need to "[let] go of the hyperstandardization as an abstract ideal" because "we need to consider

3. The extensive work on methodologies of research that are tied to place through community-based or participatory action research are not discussed here. There is definitely a connection to place in this work, but the goal of that research is about the research enterprise rather than writing and communicating in workplaces. It also gave me a boundary limit for the length of this chapter.

approaches that can recognize and work with the improvisational aspects of transitional care communication events" (p. 17). Gouge's finding that patients and caregivers are often having to improvise and adapt information to different care events underscores the need for more attention to place. While Gouge did not tie her work explicitly to context or place, I found her work compelling because it highlights what goes wrong when information design does not fully consider place. Gouge's discussion of patient discharge instructions highlighted for me the necessity that instructions for "transitional care" will take place in different locations. Thus, when Gouge encourages technical communication to let go of a hyperstandardization, she is pointing to the need to consider the effect of place more fully on contexts of use.

Finally, when looking at the TPC literature, I found a number of works that started to engage with place—the effect of *where* on the design and the use of information—but I was still left wanting. From geography, I want to bring forward that places are bounded and experienced, while research in rhetorical studies shows that expanding the rhetorical situation has brought important critical insights but leaves unexplored what happens when rhetorical situations are reduced. So I moved to a more specific question: How can TPC better account for the effect of *where* when also considering the contexts of the rhetorical situation and the material dimensions of place? In the next section, I illustrate a tentative answer to this question by offering a theory of *micro-contexts*.

Inducing a Theory of Micro-Contexts

Based on the existing scholarship within rhetorical studies and TPC, current theoretical models of context and place are insufficient, particularly as they relate to TPC and more localized needs of communication. Thus, TPC could use attention to theory building because it "should be recognized as an important methodological goal and practice" (Scott & Melonçon, 2018, p.11). Theory building should not be considered in contrast to the TPC's attention to applied research practices. Rather, theory building should be part of the invention process in research, in practice, and in teaching. Considering theory building as inventive (Scott & Melonçon, 2018, p. 12; Scott & Gouge, 2019) allows TPC to pose better questions, to allow different ways of knowing, and to expose new insights that may otherwise not be seen. And as I noted with J. Blake Scott (2018), "theory building can also be seen as a framework for imagining a better world" (p. 12). Even though imagining and changing a world takes time, good theories can help scholars and practitioners begin this arduous work. "Theory building" develops "the tools and approaches for *how* to do such work" (Scott & Gouge, 2019, p. 181). The first step to theory building is to make sure there is a shared understanding of what theory is. Here, I take theory to mean a system of ideas intended to better understand a specific phenomenon. Using this definition allows TPC to move toward a more enhanced understanding of the general principles of context by adding a material place dimension that is currently not directly explicitly in the scholarship. If TPC wants to take seriously the importance of context, then *where* needs to be theorized to broaden and deepen our understanding of rhetorical situations and the impact of place on the work TPC does.

Both Kirk St.Amant (2018) and I (2017) discussed expanding purpose to include a greater emphasis on place in specific contexts of use. St.Amant (2018) explained that prototypes of place, or the "expectations associated with a space," (p. 48) include object-, individual-, and access-related items. These items are then used to "provide UXD [user experience design] professionals with a method for identifying core variables affecting dynamics of usability and space in relation to culture and accessibility" (St.Amant, 2018, p. 51). Overall, the goal of St.Amant's article was to focus on how prototypes of place can be used to "study the expectations users associate with performing an activity in a particular setting" (p. 51). While St.Amant gets TPC started with his emphasis on the cognition and prototypes from an audience perspective, he does not fully account for changing the particular setting. This is where my own work (2017) that emphasizes smaller scales comes into play. In my initial thinking about how patients and others interact with health information, I considered the cognitive components discussed by St.Amant, while also wanting to gain a better understanding of the particular—a smaller—context. I started thinking of this smaller, localized context as a *micro-context*.

Thinking in terms of "micro" means to make smaller, to shrink the scale. When the scale shrinks, analysis of that context can be deeper to shed light on what parts of the larger systems may have more force and function. Using micro-contexts as a unit of analysis also allows for a bounded and limited object to examine. In something of a complementary move, Ashley Clayson (2018) argued for an analytic frame she called microanalysis because it is useful for when "researchers are seeking to understand deep interactions among tools, artifacts, and bodies" (p. 221). While Clayson was interested in distributed writing, she complements micro-contexts since she too wanted to examine a more particular, a smaller, context of use. In another example, Kathleen Connellan and her collaborators (2015) asked the provocative question of whether glass can speak. Their study analyzed windows in a mental health facility, and it prompted "(re)considerations of the materiality of the spaces and the impact those spaces have on the communication design of discourses" (Melonçon & Frost, 2015, p. 10). Similar to my own ethnographic case study, Connellan and colleagues (2015) wanted to consider the material effects of the building. While Connellan and her collaborators looked to glass in a place, I looked to the places themselves—the physical features of the three locations of Good Works Store—and how they effected communication practices.

Current challenges related to rhetorical situations or context were questions of scale While much of the scholarship discussed above has considered the scale of context as bigger and more complex, I want to go in the opposite direction—to scale back, to reduce to specific, localized contexts of use. The overemphasis on the vastness of context has left scholarship in TPC devoid of its inductive history that can offer valuable insights into communication practices. Thus, I follow Massey (2005), who did not want to use *place* as a stand-in for *here* (pp.138-9) by splitting apart larger contexts, to reduce them, to make them more manageable. In turn, I am using place to prioritize *where* because

> current scholarship that insists on larger and more complex contexts suggests that everything in an ecology (or network, etc.) reverberates equally from everything else. But it does not. There are parts of the ecology that have more force and function in effecting outcomes than other parts. (Melonçon, 2017, p. 22)

Shrinking of scale enables TPC to think of micro-contexts when practitioners *create* communication and information *and* to consider micro-contexts (which are likely different) for when that same communication is used. Thus, the *here* of place shifts and moves, which doesn't make a singular consideration of context—place—helpful. TPC "must be aware of and sensitive to whatever it is that writing *does* in the workplace" (Paré, 2002, p.70). Anthony Paré's (2002) assertion of action—doing—in the workplace is tied to the location, the *where*. Thinking of the impact of *where* through the theoretical lens of a micro-context enables TPC scholars and practitioners to reconsider both audience and purpose.

A micro-context can be defined as a localized and bounded context to make manageable the rhetorical situation of purpose, audience, location, delivery, and use. Limiting the rhetorical situation offers practitioners the opportunity to gain deeper insights into where the information will be produced and where it will be used. As Massey (2005) explained,

> what is special about place is precisely that throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenges of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman. (p. 140)

Massey's insistence that throwntogetherness and negotiation are what make a place a place lays the foundation for emphasizing place more deliberately when faced with information design and its subsequent use. What is thrown together in a particular place at a particular time impacts communication and forces a negotiation between user and information that is dependent on the influence of the micro-contexts. The negotiation of multiplicity exists as information moves or is used in multiple micro-contexts. Negotiation also makes available a variety of interpretations and uses of the communication. No matter the original intention, when others interact with communication in different micro-contexts, there is an unknown range of means of use and interpretation. This aspect of negotiation is keyed directly to the idea of micro-contexts because it is the places, the locations, that often shift the original meaning to a new negotiated one.

The challenge of differences found in micro-contexts illustrates the need for an expansion between a limited, one-dimensional view of context. Micro-contexts move TPC toward a multi-dimensional understanding of micro-contexts that account for the challenge and the negotiation that communication brings with it as that communication is created and moves into being used. The examples in the next section help to show how this happens.

Examples of Micro-Contexts in Action

The ethnographic study offers insights into the question of what happens when the *where* moves. While technical and professional communicators cannot control where information may be used, academics and practitioners alike need to consider the impact of place more fully than the field has done so in the past. Micro-contexts allow for movement when the *where* shifts not only in the creation, but as importantly, in its use. Let me try to operationalize this idea of micro-contexts by returning to Good Works Store and providing three specific communication problems that simultaneously show the power of micro-context in action, and the importance of thinking in terms of micro-contexts.

The first example focuses on a fund raising event. Each year, Good Works Store sponsored a large fund-raising event, the Hot Wheel race. This was a cornerstone of its ethos as an organization, as well as a large percentage of the annual operating revenue. The Hot Wheel race allowed people to buy a toy car for the race. All the toy cars were raced down a hill, and the cars that crossed the finish line first were awarded a prize, but the bulk of the proceeds from the toy car sales went back to Good Works Store and its partners. Toy car sales started months in advance of the early fall event, and the cars were sold online, at in-person events, and by partner organizations (usually student groups). Sales at in-person events and partner organizations were all manually completed so that these sales had to be combined with online sales for an accurate and complete list. The main sales list was key to coordination of race day because each car had a unique number associated with the person who bought it, which allowed for identifying the winners.

Looking at the Hot Wheel race fundraising event from a network view, such as Clay Spinuzzi's (2003) tracing genres, it would appear the event was a strength of the organization. However, micro-contexts exposed several problems, and highlighted "what part of the context has more force and function" (Melonçon, 2017, p. 22) on the larger system. First, rather than leveraging technology available and on hand to keep track of the sales, the person who had long been in charge of the toy car sales insisted on keeping manually generated paper lists of all sales, which made double-checking information or locating information if questions came up a time-consuming process. In other words, she printed out the online sales information and then added by hand the other sales information. She never went back to the technological system and updated those records with other sales. It also exposed that there was a single person who understood all the details of the system. Members of the C-Suite did not realize there were any problems in compiling or exchanging information since they only ever received updates from her at the weekly team meetings. The process of updating team members looks like a positive event of transparent communication, but in fact, it obscured the problems of information gathering and distribution. Finally, it took weeks to reconcile the accounts from the fundraising event the year I was conducting the majority of the interviews (for this and the larger project) because most of the executives assumed the information was in their accounting system when in fact it was not. For reconciliation, the manual lists created by the toy car sales coordinator were handed over to finance to then enter into the accounting and sales system. Thus, there were always unnecessary delays in paying expenses and providing revenue to partner organizations. The changes within the organization from one year to the next and the material locations of the key people for the annual Hot Wheel race had major ramifications for the event. While the problems would have been exposed eventually, I am still surprised years later that a different orientation to the change in communication practices—such as micro-contexts—may have solved the problem sooner and with less stress.

Another example shows how the micro-context and the small pressure points in the organization can have adverse, rippling effects. When the Good Works Store warehouse was purchased, it became the location for what used to be two separate and distinct divisions handled by sub-contractors. On the surface, the manager of the warehouse could see how consolidating the two divisions would ultimately save time and money, but in the short term, there was a lot of confusion about roles and responsibilities and communication processes, such as direct reporting and accountability. As the CEO reported to me, Good Works Store had increased distributions by 57 percent over the prior year, but this seemingly positive effect was, in fact, highly resented by the majority (15 of 18) of those I interviewed. Those who expressed concerns over the increased productivity reported that the productivity was accomplished at the cost of increased tension and collapsed communication and collaboration. The "family spirit" of the nonprofit had been eroded to one of "continuous improvement" and "increased productivity." The expansion to three locations intensified communication problems because of the literal move to three physical places, but it also simultaneously meant, in the words of a longtime employee, "we were just thrown together differently and it seemed like no one understood what their roles were anymore." Shrinking the context of some of the communication problems to this example from the warehouse exposed competing goals and demands and the necessity of improving communication channels at each location and across the three locations.

Without doubt, TPC has always considered issues of purpose and the desired result, but the ethnographic case study pointed to problems of information design and transmission. For example, the growth in the organization meant that it could no longer handle payroll using the paper system it had in the past. The organization needed to move to an automated system. This new system meant that all full-time and part-time employees—both hourly and salary—needed to enter their work hours into a computerized system to generate paychecks (direct deposits and actual checks). The director of HR and part of his team took the time to write instructions for the new system and distributed those instructions along with a rationale for this change to all employees. The information was posted in the internal system as an announcement only. However, it became clear early in this transition period that few people had actually read the documentation (which likely surprises few readers of this chapter). In talking with employees during this rollout, I learned that the biggest problem was in how the information was distributed. The warehouse employees were overwhelmed since many of them had never used a computer system before and hands-on training was not provided. Those working in client services were resentful because no one explained why the system they preferred was being changed, and they had trouble finding a specific place for the computer system they would all need to use. Even those in the executive building expressed frustration because they didn't realize the information applied to them as well. The three locations compounded a complex communication issue because no one considered the impact the different locations would have on how the information was received.

Prior to the move to three locations, the distribution of information about changes was easily handled because everyone was in the same location and received information in similar ways. Not only was the payroll system update a major change in functionality, but sending out information in the same way as before simply could not work because of the expansion across locations and the increase in the number of employees. The assumption that communication practices would work like they had in the past didn't come to the fore until I was able to describe to the key stakeholders not only what happened but the negative feelings that were also compounding the original problem.

Micro-contexts show technical and professional communicators how material place affects the creation and reception of information, particularly when it comes to technology. During the changes that were occurring, Good Works Store was moving a large amount of information on processes, including all the information for the large cadre of volunteers, online. Instead of going to the filing cabinet and handing new volunteers the series of forms they needed, the new process involved them logging on to the intranet and completing those same forms. The new volunteer forms had to be completed before training could take place. Two things happened, however, with this move of documentation to a different place. No one could find information because no training was given on where it was stored electronically, and while much of this occurred at the client services location, no one in that location had access to the intranet. The latter was something no one in the executive office realized until a large volunteer training event turned chaotic. In the past, these sorts of events were in a single location where all the documentation was stored. Splitting apart to different locations *and* moving information to an online place proved to be a challenge no one had fully anticipated. This challenge aligns with complementary issues of place as seen in recent research work about hybrid workplaces (e.g., Suri et al., 2022).

As described in the literature review, scholars have intermittently and recently taken up issues of material places, and micro-contexts provide a way to expand on this existing scholarship in new ways. For example, the ethnographic study described highlighted several ways the place(s) of the organization impacted the communication strategy and effectives of communication within the organization in both positive and negative ways. The actual distance between the three locations expanded and compounded already unstable communication practices. As these examples show, the physical spaces of the three different "offices" directly impacted the way communication was considered and done. Without thinking through the *where*, much of the work we did would not have been as successful because of the impact the material places had on work. This brief summary of the case should shed light on some of the background as to why material places—the *where*—consistently came to the forefront of my work with this organization.

Micro-contexts take into consideration that TPC work often occurs outside of ideal scenarios. Thus, a consideration of the expected versus the actual is often quite different. In the ethnographic case study, there were moments that illustrates the necessity of the *where* and how the actual material work conditions, the actual places, make the work of communication often more challenging than the ideal scenarios considered by academic TPC. "Thus, shifting our contextual scale and rhetorical reasoning approach enables scholars to begin to form theories and generalize knowledge on a series of 'n=1' cases" (Melonçon, 2017, p. 23). Taking my own claim a step further, what qualitative work does well is to move toward a generalization of processes or practices. The case study's three locations expose in explicit ways how and why context matters, and often small contexts, in the creation and dissemination of information. If TPC is to realize its full theoretical potential, the field should move toward testing theories as well as generating them. An area that comes immediately to mind for next steps in research is the relationship between place and power.

We cannot begin to unseat power structures and change systemic issues without a greater understanding of the relationship between power and place—the materiality of where information is created. As Tim Cresswell (2019) argued, power is "the outcome of relations between people, things, and places. . . . Power exists in and through place" (p. 198). The physical structures of workplaces offer yet another layer of the communication practice, and without understanding the impacts of place on decisions and communication, change is likely to be incomplete or unsuccessful. Raka Shome (2003), one of the leading scholars of the spatial turn in communication studies, argued that "our approaches to power may benefit from a contextual and spatial focus where contexts are understood not as static backgrounds but as dynamic relations of force" (p. 54). In the examples from the case study, there were clear moments of power dynamics between the locations and the people within them. While my study did not focus on power dynamics, I can in hindsight see how micro-contexts can illuminate power in ways that may be missed with other theoretical approaches.

The study of workplaces should not be devoid of how power works within organizational settings. My hope is that by understanding the features of places through micro-contexts, we can better identify larger structural problems kept in place through technical communication policies and procedures. Often by focusing on specific smaller situations, systemic problems can be tackled systematically and strategically. By shifting the scale smaller, via micro-context, the identification of those things that reinforce social differences and perpetuate exclusions can be more readily addressed by finding ways to implement incremental and powerful change. Technical and professional communicators need a toolkit to adapt to each situation so that they can continue to "read" places and understand the "politics" of those places.

A collection of micro-contexts can come back together to form the larger ecologies, networks, systems, or assemblages. But micro-contexts offer an alternative way to analyze the physical, material locations of bounded places that more intimately impact information design's creation and use. In consideration of user experience design, which is associated with more of a workplace methodology meant to incorporate the experience of users more directly, micro-contexts as a theory fits into those frameworks as a means to foreground even more directly the experience of the users within their own micro-contexts of use. In other words, a single user experience can be considered a micro-context since it examines in depth and in detail the experiences of a single user's interaction with information. For user experience research and technical communication, micro-contexts offers a designated way to emphasize the need to go further along the continuum of context to smaller rather than larger. Writing and communication tasks are made more manageable by the reduction of the context, by making the situation smaller and bringing it into a more exacting focus.

Micro-contexts have assuredly impacted the way I have approached recent research on information design and patient education materials. As a result, I have added to my repertoire the need to ask more specific questions during the audience analysis stage of the project as well as the need to ask questions during testing and discussions about where the information may be used. Without my being on location and walking through certain processes or sitting listening to the door hit the desk as described in the opening vignette, I would have never fully understood the impact of place on writing and communication. Theorizing place through micro-contexts became visible when I was on site to observe the physical negotiations that occurred during the creation of information and in the use of it. Micro-contexts open up the potential for TPC scholars and practitioners to more seriously consider what happens when the *where* moves.

Conclusion

Moving TPC to specific geographic study as a placed-based knowledge enterprise (as of its iterations) means that it brings places together to create an understanding of the micro-contexts within and beyond the "rhetorical situation." Micro-contexts encourage technical and professional communicators to incorporate a direct connect to the place in considerations of purpose, audience, design, and delivery. Considering spatial dimensions and material places when we think of writing and communication encourages different kinds of questions. For instance, why do things happen where they do, and what are the connections between these things? These spatially induced questions bring context into stark view and ensure technical and professional communicators do not lose focus on how the *where* of production is as important as the production itself.

To re-emphasize material place as a key to understanding communication through the rhetorical situation, I did this work through theory building and micro-contexts, which reduces the context to specific and identified places. Given TPC's acceptance that context matters, the field should consider parsing out and examining the material places, the micro-contexts, where writing and communication occur. Focusing on the micro-context allows scholars and practitioners the opportunity to move beyond ideal contexts and situations and instead provide more realistic, valuable, and usable information for audiences and purposes.

As the other chapters in this volume show, writing and work are no longer fixed. They occur in a variety of places, and scholars and practitioners in TPC should pay closer attention to the material dimensions of those *places* and the impact they make on writing and communication practices. Shifting to theorizing about micro-contexts brings to the forefront the need to take seriously the *where* of technical and professional communication and, more importantly, the impact of the where-ness, or place, on writing and communication produced.

In our position as teachers and researchers of technical and professional communication, emphasizing place in workplace writing and communication turns the field's attention back to important locations of work. Like Cresswell reminds us in the opening epigram, the place in workplaces encourages TPC scholars to consider what place can tell us about communication. Unless we take the necessary steps to know our *place,* it will be impossible for others to recognize the importance of technical communication within their own locations.

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